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Study shows JCPS, Ky. outpacing nation in academic recovery after pandemic closures

Louisville Public Media | By [Jess Clark](#)
Published February 5, 2024 at 5:38 PM EST

A study from Harvard and Stanford shows Kentucky schools squeezed more out of the 2022-2023 school year, with low-income students and students of color making the greatest strides in achievement.

Kentucky students are catching up on learning they missed during the pandemic, according to a new study from researchers at Stanford University and Harvard University.

[The study](#), released last week, shows Kentucky outpacing the nation in improving test scores in 3rd-through-8th grade math and reading. Students in Jefferson County Public Schools are covering even more ground, especially students of color and low-income students.

JCPS superintendent Marty Pollio welcomed the results at a press conference Monday. He said the study shows that the [infusion of billions of dollars in federal funding paid off](#), along with the hard work of students and educators.

"We are here to celebrate just a couple of years after the end of the pandemic in our schools that we are seeing the recovery necessary to ensure that students are achieving," Pollio said.

Each state has its own academic standards, tests and measures of proficiency, so making comparisons between states is difficult. Researchers at Stanford University, Harvard University and Dartmouth College used state testing data and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to

estimate a common metric for “grade levels” of achievement across all states and districts they studied.

The study found that overall last school year, students in grades 3-8 recovered about a third of the pandemic-related dip in math performance and a quarter of the dip in reading performance. Researchers say it means students learned far more in the 2022-2023 school year than usual.

In Jefferson County Public Schools, [researchers found schools covered even more ground](#), with Black, Latino and low-income students seeing the greatest strides.

JCPS students also have more to make up. According to the study, [JCPS students lost the equivalent of three-quarters of a school year in 3rd-8th grade math and more than half a year in 3rd-8th grade reading from 2019 to 2022](#). That’s more than students lost across the U.S. on average.

Data shows that, in JCPS, Black and low-income students had the strongest gains in 3rd grade through 8th grade reading last year. In fact, Black students have made up for all the losses in reading scores sustained over the pandemic and are now performing better than they were in 2019, according to the study.

“This just shows that our [focus on racial equity](#) is achieving the goals that we want,” Pollio said.

In 3rd grade through 8th grade math, Latino students had the strongest gains.

Students of color and low-income students are leading the recovery statewide as well. That’s the opposite of the national trend — researchers found that in most places, students from affluent households are recovering faster than their lower-income peers.

Officials say funding for extra programming prompted gains

JCPS Superintendent Marty Pollio attributed the district’s gains to the hard work of students and staff, better curriculum, expanded summer learning and investments in staff salaries.

He pointed to “incredible increases” in reading and math scores at Alex R. Kennedy Elementary School, where he said staff have gotten a handle on the new high-quality curriculum they adopted in 2019.

Kennedy’s principal Pat Sivori said he believes the scores improved as teachers became more comfortable with the curriculum. They also prioritized the social and emotional needs of kids when they returned to in-person learning, he said.

Sivori also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal pandemic relief funding to bring in retired teachers to lead interventions and tutoring sessions with students during and after school.

The federal pandemic relief funds districts have been using to pay for many of those initiatives will expire after September 2024.

Pollio said he is “committed” to continuing expanded summer learning by using monies from the district’s general fund.

It’s unclear if JCPS will be able to maintain current levels of programming next year. The district is facing an estimated budget shortfall of \$99 million. Top staff say some of the anticipated deficit will be partially mitigated by a large number of vacancies. One Jefferson County Board of Education member, Chris Kolb of District 2, has advocated for increasing the local tax rate.

Council of Great City Schools Executive Director Ray Hart said the study shows that squeezing more out of a school year takes lots of resources, and that the billions of dollars in federal pandemic relief funding helped.

“This data clearly indicates that the infusion of funds, the support for students, has made a difference,” he said.

Several Kentucky districts have fully recovered to pre-pandemic academic achievement levels in both reading and math according to the study, including Boone County Schools, Covington Independent Schools, Lewis County Schools, Wolfe County Schools, Anderson County Schools, Metcalfe County Schools and Crittenden County Schools.