

New Nation's Report Card Disappoints —but Shouldn't Surprise

THE LATEST NATION'S REPORT CARD dashed hopes that U.S. students might have finally closed pandemic learning gaps.

The results show reading scores are down nationally in both 4th and 8th grade, compounding declines on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP.

Math scores ticked upwards from 2022 in 4th grade, but not enough for students to reach achievement levels seen in 2019. And scores were flat in 8th grade after a historic drop in 2022.

Persistent learning loss is pervasive nationwide: achievement in each state lags pre-pandemic levels on at least one test.

And it's intensifying inequality. The gain in 4th-grade math reflected improvement among high-achieving students. The reading declines were largest for low achievers.

There are plenty of factors contributing to our ongoing slide, but I'm increasingly convinced a big part of the problem is that many stakeholders (from policymakers to parents to educators) are thinking about learning loss the wrong way—that if we just get kids back into classrooms and learning under normal conditions, they'll get back on track in short order.

A good metaphor for learning loss is saving for retirement. If a household emergency forces me to skip a planned deposit, the shortfall in my savings account will persist until I make up for that missed payment. In fact, that shortfall will grow over time due to the foregone opportunity to earn interest on my savings.

The savings metaphor incorporates a bedrock principle of the science of learning and development known as the “Matthew Effect”—an allusion to the biblical book's teaching that the rich tend to get richer while the poor get poorer.

The Matthew Effect pervades education, especially in the domain of literacy. Children who are strong in phonics, for example, have a systematic advantage when it comes to building their vocabularies. Students with robust vocabularies are in turn better positioned to develop the background knowledge needed to excel across subject areas—and on tests of reading comprehension like NAEP.

Even if learning conditions had been ideal when students returned to school in person, their rate of learning would have been slower than we'd have expected prior to the pandemic. But learning conditions have been far from ideal. Schools have struggled with rampant staff shortages and behavior challenges. Meanwhile, rates of chronic absenteeism—the share of students missing 10 percent or more of the school year—jumped from

15 percent in 2018 to 28 percent in 2022.

State and local school systems did receive \$190 billion in federal funds to reopen schools and address learning loss. Research by my colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education indicates those funds may have helped on the margin, but the scale of the gains fell far short of what's needed to offset pandemic declines.

While it's natural to be disappointed in these NAEP results, we really shouldn't be surprised. We should act with urgency to prevent the Covid generation from bearing scars of the pandemic far into the future.

So what can policymakers and education leaders do?

First, they must hold students to high expectations. Rather than helping them catch up, several states recently lowered grade-level standards on their tests—a cynical move that seems aimed at masking the extent of the challenge. Relatedly, rampant grade inflation at the school and district level makes it all but impossible for parents to know whether their child is on track for success.

Second, we should redouble efforts to let students make up instructional time they missed in the Covid era. Research shows increasing time-on-task is one of the most effective ways to accelerate learning. States may want to expand their instructional time requirements, and districts and schools can rethink how they use the time they have. Education leaders and policymakers can expand afterschool tutoring and summer learning opportunities, particularly for at-risk students, and work with parents to get students to attend.

Finally, there may be times when the best answer is to allow a student to repeat a grade. Grade repetition is controversial among educators, but evidence from states like Florida and Mississippi confirms that staying back can be a gamechanger for many students struggling in the early grades.

Roughly one third of the students whose K–12 careers were upended by the pandemic have since moved on to college or careers, often without being given the opportunity to make up for the learning they missed in high school. That's a national shame. But it is not too late for us to do right by the 35 million students following in their footsteps. The only question is whether we will do so.



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MISSION STATEMENT: In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.