POLICY BRIEF

Student achievement in the 2021–22 school year: Growth is up, but COVID-19 learning gaps remain

THE RESULTS

- There are signs of academic rebounding. Students are learning at a rate similar to pre-pandemic trends, with growth trends up from SY 2020–21.
- Academic achievement is still lower than expected absent the pandemic.
- Achievement gaps[1] narrowed in spring 2022 from spring 2021 for most grades. The magnitude of unfinished learning is lessening.

The latest NWEA analysis on student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is cause for hope as well as continued urgency. The nation's students are rebounding[2] academically, but they haven't recovered from the massive disruption to their education. Some students have much further to go than others.

NWEA research shows students made progress on the MAP® Growth™ assessments in reading and math in school year (SY) 2021–22 at rates that are comparable to pre-pandemic times. Students also recovered some lost ground, but the extent of the recovery varies widely by grade level and student group. That's a positive change from SY 2020–21, when student growth was significantly slowed due to COVID-19 disruptions.

The hard work of students and educators is paying off, but more progress is needed to help students fully recover and address inequities that the pandemic has exacerbated.

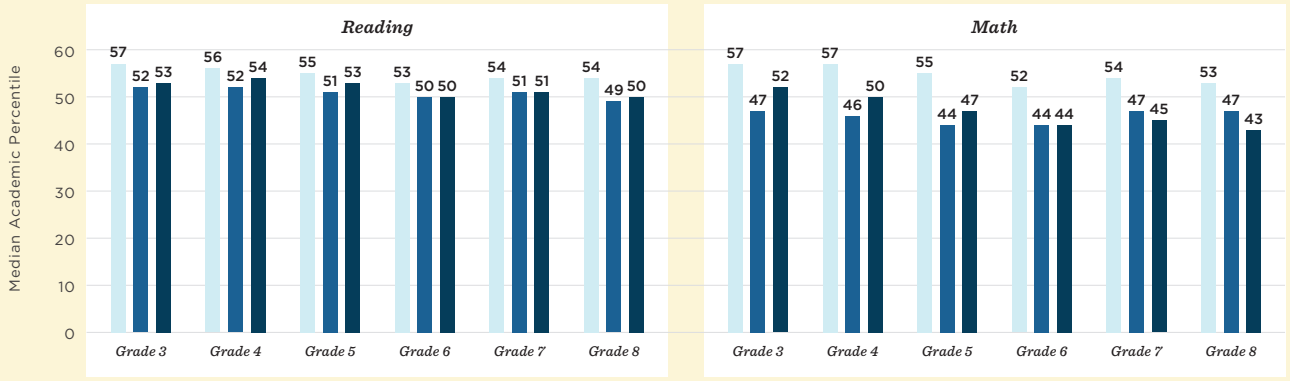
The data

NWEA researchers analyzed MAP Growth scores for more than 8 million students in grades 3–8 in about 25,000 public schools across the country. They looked at achievement and growth trends for students in school during pandemic years, from SY 2018–19 through SY 2021–22. The researchers then compared the performance of those students with that of students in school from SY 2015–16 to SY 2018–19 (non-COVID-19 years).

Signs of progress[3]

In SY 2021–22, student learning mirrored pre-pandemic rates in both reading and math. Students had lost more ground in math than reading in SY 2020–21. So while students are making important progress in math, it will take them longer to get back to pre-pandemic achievement levels in math than in reading.

Figure 1. Spring 2019, 2021, and 2022 achievement by grade using percentile ranks | 2019 | 2021 | 2022



Note: These figures were created using median percentile ranks per grade/term from Tables 3 and 4 of the technical appendix for the July 2022 report.

[1] NWEA researchers use the term "achievement gaps" to refer to differences between the sample of students in school during COVID-19 (2018–19 through 2021–22) and the sample of students in school during non-COVID-19 years (2015–16 through 2018–19). [2] NWEA researchers define rebounding as "patterns of achievement gains that mirror or exceed pre-pandemic trends. 'Rebounding' is not interchangeable with 'recovery,' but rather the former describes progress toward the latter." [3] This section includes analyses and findings from research by NWEA researchers Karyn Lewis and Megan Kuhfeld released in July 2022. For the full results and more detail on the data and analyses, please see the research brief linked at the end of this section.

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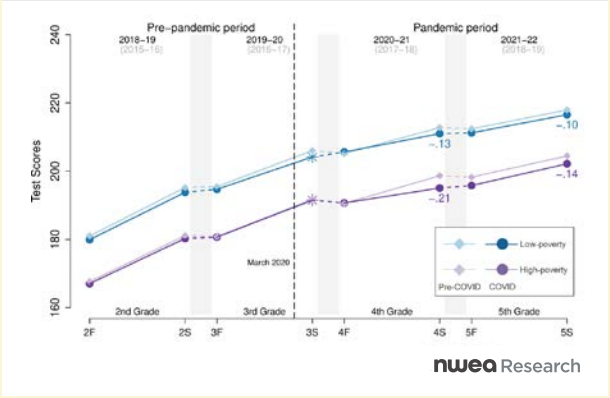
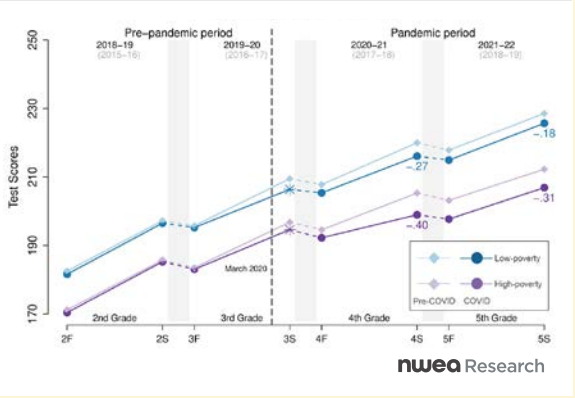
Figure 2. MAP Growth score trajectories for the grade 2–5 cohort by school poverty level

Reading — grade 2–5 cohort



Math — grade 2–5 cohort



Compared with achievement in SY 2018–19, student academic achievement continues to be lower, with students still further behind in math than reading. However, student academic achievement has improved in most grades relative to spring 2021. Additionally, historically marginalized students' achievement improved as seen through the decrease in achievement gaps in SY 2021–22 compared with SY 2020–21. However, students from marginalized groups continue to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The researchers also examined growth trends based on school poverty level as seen in figure one. They found that students in high-poverty schools continue to be disproportionately impacted. While students in both low- and high-poverty schools experienced rebounding growth rates in SY 2021–22,[4] students in low-poverty schools will likely recover faster as they have less ground to make up.

While elementary school students have been impacted most by the pandemic, they also made the most notable gains, narrowing pre- and post-pandemic achievement gaps in SY 2021–22. Middle school achievement has either held steady or decreased minimally. Researchers estimate that it will take the average elementary school student three years to catch up to where they would have been academically absent the pandemic, and much longer for older students if the rate of change continues at the same pace. However, the time it will take for students to catch up varies greatly across grade, subject, and student group, and the time most students will need to fully recover will extend past the established September 2024 spending deadline.

This brief provides a summary of some of the key findings from the NWEA research team. To explore this research in depth, please view the full research report.

Figure 3. Change in achievement gaps between spring 2021 and spring 2022

End Grade of Grade-Level Cohort	*Reading*		*Math*	
	Percentage decrease in achievement gap	Years to close achievement gap	Percentage decrease in achievement gap	Years to close achievement gap
3	16%	5+	18%	3–5
4	36%	1–2	27%	3–5
5	25%	3–5	23%	3–5
6	24%	3–5	31%	1–2
7	4%	5+	N/A*	5+
8	8%	5+	N/A*	5+

* Did not see a decrease in pandemic achievement gaps between spring 2011 and spring 2022.
Note: This figure was created using percent change and years to close the gap from Table 1 of the research report. For example, the reading achievement gap for third graders decreased by 16% by spring of 2022 and it is estimated it will take third graders more than five years to fully close the achievement gap caused by the pandemic.

[4] "Low poverty" is defined as less than 25 percent free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligibility, while "high poverty" is greater than 75 percent FRPL eligibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The nation has made critical strides in helping students get back on track, but the pandemic is having a lasting impact on student learning. Historically marginalized students continue to be most severely impacted as measured by overall learning declines, and COVID-19 continues to exacerbate pre-pandemic inequities such as racial opportunity gaps.

Fortunately, there are significant resources to help support recovery. The federal government has provided nearly $200 billion with a September 2024 spending deadline to help schools across the country address challenges associated with the pandemic, with $22 billion specifically dedicated to learning recovery using evidence-based interventions. It's vital that education leaders look at their investments, identify which programs are working in real time, and bring those to scale. Education leaders and policy makers also need to begin preparing for how they can sustain recovery efforts—while addressing persistent achievement gaps—beyond the September 2024 spending deadline as it will take some districts, schools, and students additional time to fully recover.

Over the past two years, we've collaborated with colleagues across the policy and civil rights communities to offer recommendations to support pandemic recovery. We continue to emphasize the importance of using local data on student progress to guide recovery and deploying evidence-based interventions focused on the students who are furthest behind. More specifically, we urge policy makers and education leaders to take the following steps to help students recover from the pandemic:

- **Invest in expanding instructional time for students, including high-quality summer programs.**
- **Identify and target interventions for students most impacted by the pandemic.**
- **Use data and strong data systems that provide continuous feedback on interventions to inform recovery.**
- **Support teachers with the resources and professional-learning opportunities they need to help their students succeed.**

To learn more, please visit the NWEA Policy and Advocacy site.

We welcome the chance to hear your ideas for fueling more student growth and helping students make a full recovery. Contact Katie Carroll, Director of Policy and State Engagement.

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