

Scores fall coast to coast, especially in math, under pandemic's toll

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Student test scores declined across the country, particularly in math, and not one state saw an increase, according to the most comprehensive look at the impact of the pandemic on student achievement to date.

Declines were seen among high- and lower-performing students alike, for both fourth and eighth graders in math and reading. Overall, scores fell to levels not seen in two decades.

The results, released Monday, provide the “clearest picture yet” of the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on learning, said Peggy G. Carr, the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, sometimes called “the nation’s report card.” She described the declines in math, in particular, as stark and troubling, and she said she hopes educators will use the data to plot a course toward recovery.

The portion of eighth-graders rated proficient or better in math fell to 27 percent, from 34 percent in 2019. Average math scores for eighth grade fell by eight points, from 282 in 2019 to 274 this year, on a 500-point scale, and in fourth grade, by five points — the steepest declines recorded in more than a half century of testing.

The data makes clear how steep a climb American educators face as they embark on what is likely to be a years-long effort to help students make up learning that was missed as schools struggled to operate during the pandemic.

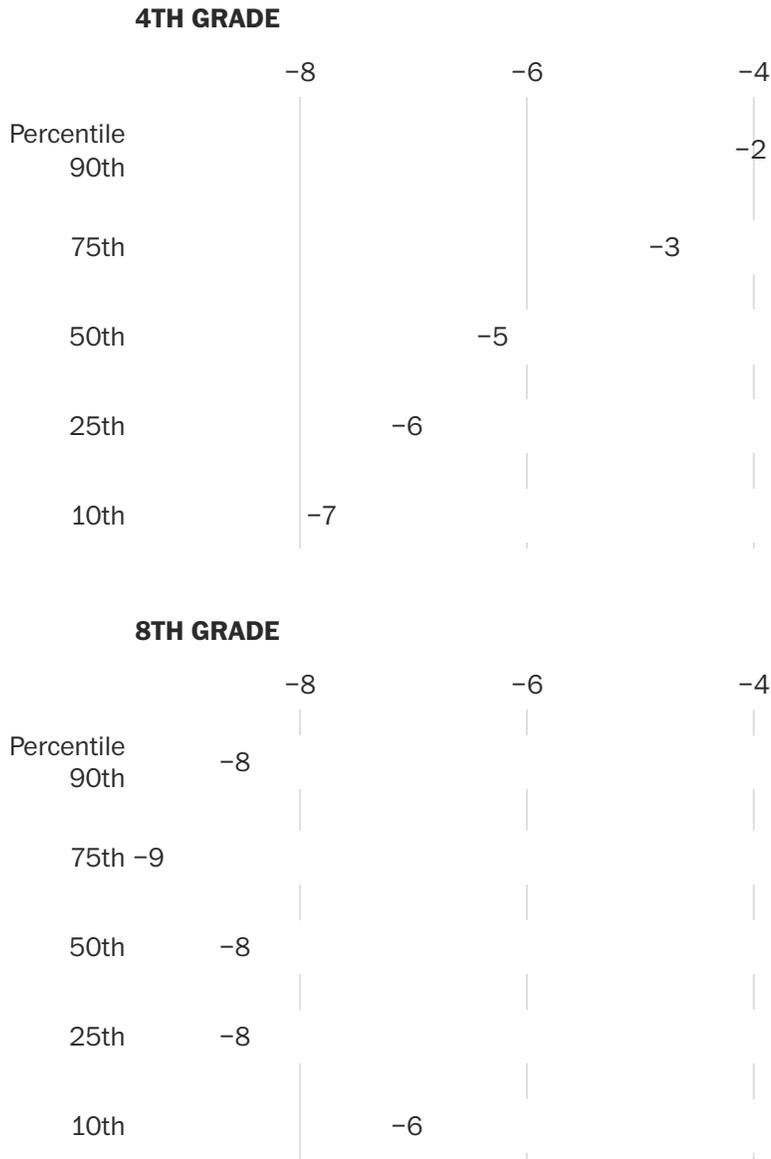
“This is a very clear indicator of the real impact on learning on our kids for the last two years,” said Eric Gordon, the chief executive of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, where scores fell sharply.

The average test score for Cleveland fourth-graders plummeted 15 points in math and 16 points in reading. For eighth-graders, the drops were eight points in math and seven in reading.

Gordon said Cleveland’s poor results are partly explained by the fact that tests were administered there soon after the area was hit by the surging omicron variant of the coronavirus.

He said Cleveland schools are working to mitigate the losses through more time with students: extended hours, after-school homework help, tutoring and an extensive summer enrichment program. “We have to find time to add time back for learning,” he said. “Time is what impacted us, and time is what it’s going to take to get us back.”

Change in average math scores from 2019 to 2022



The declines registered were particularly troubling given that American academic performance was already shaky. In early 2020, before the pandemic upended schools, NAEP test scores in both reading and math declined for 13-year-old students, the first drop registered since the tests started to be administered in 1969.

“The pandemic simply made it worse,” Education Secretary Miguel Cardona told reporters Friday.

He called the new report “an urgent call to action” for schools to work toward recovery. Congress has allocated some \$190 billion in coronavirus relief funding for schools, and a share of that must be used to address learning losses.

“We must treat the task of catching our children up with the urgency this moment demands,” Cardona said. “If this doesn’t have you fired up to raise the bar in education, you’re in the wrong profession.”

Last year, as students returned to buildings, was far from a normal year. Educators scrambled to manage coronavirus surges, quarantines, mask mandates and staffing shortages. They faced more student violence, rising absenteeism and intense mental health needs. Teacher morale sank, and schools saw significant teacher and staff vacancies.

Partisans on all sides of the education debate seized on the results to advance competing ideas about the way ahead.

Some argued that more federal and state funding will be needed to help children catch up while others said the troubling data makes clear that districts need to spend the money they already have more quickly. Several called for an all-hands reaction to support teachers as they work to climb back.

“There could not be a more urgent time for strong family-school partnerships,” said National PTA President Anna King.

Advocates for school choice policies that send tax dollars to support private schools used the data to argue the existing system has failed. Former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said in a statement that children should no longer be “hostages” in a “one-size-fits-none system that isn’t meeting their needs.”

The test results also offered fodder for those who argue bringing students back to campuses quickly was the right move, even as the pandemic was raging, and that many children were kept at home or chose to learn from home for far too long.

“We kept schools open in 2020, and today’s NAEP results once again prove we made the right decision,” Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) said on Twitter.

But the data did not establish a connection between back-to-school policies and academic performance. In California, for instance, many public schools were closed well into the 2020-21 school year, and some students never saw a classroom that year. But the declines were similar to those in Texas and Florida, where schools were ordered to reopen much sooner.

Linda Darling Hammond, the president of the California State Board of Education, credited state spending on summer school, tutoring and other initiatives with keeping the losses comparable to those seen in other states. Still, the state saw significant declines, albeit no worse than many others.

“We put billions of dollars, literally, into learning recovery,” she said. She said she hopes the report will signal to leaders that more of the same is needed. “What would be tragic is if people treat this as the pandemic is over and we don’t have to worry about investing in children’s learning and mental health anymore.”

A survey conducted alongside the tests found that students with higher test scores had more access to supports while they were in remote learning.

Top-performing eighth-graders were more likely than those at the bottom to have a desktop computer, laptop or tablet at all times; to have a quiet place to work at least some of the time; to have a teacher available every week to help; and to participate in real-time online lessons with their teacher every day or almost every day.

Math on the decline

The declines in math had the effect of erasing years of slow incremental progress, and among fourth-graders, the decreases were particularly steep for the students at the lowest academic levels.

In 2019, 19 percent of fourth-graders' scores were considered "below NAEP basic," the bottom bucket, a figure that had fallen significantly over many years. This year, that rose to 25 percent of the total. Similarly, the bottom 10 percent of fourth-graders lost seven points on average; the top 10 percent declined by two points.

In eighth grade, every state in the country saw declines in average math scores, and all but Utah were statistically significant drops compared with 2019. The declines were spread across racial and ethnic groups and among high- and lower-achievers alike.

Reading scores also fell, dropping by three points among both fourth- and eighth-graders. Still, the declines were not as steep as the math ones, and there were more bright spots.

More than half of the states, plus the District of Columbia, held steady on reading for fourth and/or eighth grade. Most of the 26 large city school districts that participated in the tests saw no change — meaning there was no improvement but also no decline, which qualifies as a bright spot given the overall results. One of them — the Los Angeles Unified School District — actually saw eighth-grade reading scores jump by nine points.

Other studies also have found steeper declines in math vs. reading. Experts surmise that it was far easier for parents to help their children with reading than with math. Discussing a book is more comfortable for most adults than helping with math formulas.

"Math is simply more sensitive to good schooling," Carr said. "You need math teachers to teach math."

In the District, reading scores dropped by eight points for fourth grade but were steady in eighth. Lewis D. Ferebee, the chancellor of D.C.'s public school system, took credit for the positive results for students in traditional schools, saying they reflect "our investments in literacy and the supports that we provided even prior to the pandemic."

Christina Grant, the state superintendent of education, expressed optimism that the numbers can improve. D.C. officials plan to spend nearly \$1 billion in federal aid for initiatives such as summer programming, tutoring and curriculum changes, and the city plans to hire more math and reading specialists. “We know what works, and we know that our recovery efforts will turn these outcomes around,” she said.

NAEP testing is conducted at both public and private schools across the country that are randomly sampled. This year, 224,000 fourth-graders participated from approximately 5,700 schools, and 222,000 eighth-graders from about 5,100 schools took part. Testing took place between January and March 2022.

Lauren Lumpkin contributed to this report.