

THE POST'S VIEW

Opinion Learning loss is a generational emergency. Here is how to fix it.

By the [Editorial Board](#)

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Like a student who knows a bad grade is coming, the country should have been prepared to receive poor marks on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, better known as the nation's report card. Indicators leading up to the results suggested historic drops in student achievement. But seeing the grade on the page is nonetheless shocking.

The results, [released Monday](#), were based on student performance on exams testing basic academic skills nationwide. Fourth- and eighth-graders recorded unprecedented declines in math and significant declines in reading between 2019 and 2022. Likely the consequence of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic that upended lives and kept children out of classrooms for months, the declines were broad-based, with all states seeing some scores drop and none seeing gains. Almost all demographic groups were affected, but Black and Hispanic students lost the most ground.

Even before the pandemic, student scores on the assessment had stalled. But the declines between 2019 and 2022 dropped scores to levels not seen in [two decades](#). Pandemic-era learning loss is a national emergency that could impoverish the country for decades. Catching up an entire generation of students is among the most pressing tasks facing leaders at every level of government.

So far, many of them are failing, too. Most of the [\\$122 billion](#) that Congress allocated last year to help schools recover from the pandemic has gone unspent. School systems across the country, [The Post's Lauren Lumpkin and Sahana Jayaraman reported](#), spent less than 15 percent of the special federal funding during the 2021-2022 school year. The sluggish rate of spending was most pronounced in some of the school districts that have showed the steepest learning losses in English and math.

Officials offer a variety of reasons for why the money has gone unspent. Teacher shortages make it hard to hire extra staff. Some school officials want to draw out their spending so that the money lasts for a long time. Some complain that the funding was delayed. These are excuses.

It is no mystery what schools should be doing; several strategies to combat learning loss have already proved effective. Key to helping children learn is giving them more time to learn. Schools should invest in high-end tutoring, aimed particularly at struggling students, as well as in after-school enrichment programs and expanded summer school. Schools should add to the school day or year. That schools are still wedded to a calendar drawn in the 1800s is educational malpractice. Schools should also hire and promote quality teachers, using some of those federal dollars to reward teachers who show results lifting student achievement or who are willing to teach in schools where vulnerable students are most in need. Teachers unions, which have traditionally fought such reforms, should get out of the way.

Even before the pandemic, the country's leaders shortchanged students. Politicians have been happy to use the classroom as a battleground for fighting about broader cultural divides or to cater to politically powerful teachers unions, while neglecting questions about whether students are learning. The nation can no longer afford their indifference.