CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

The State of the American Student: Fall 2024

Solve for the Most Complex Needs:
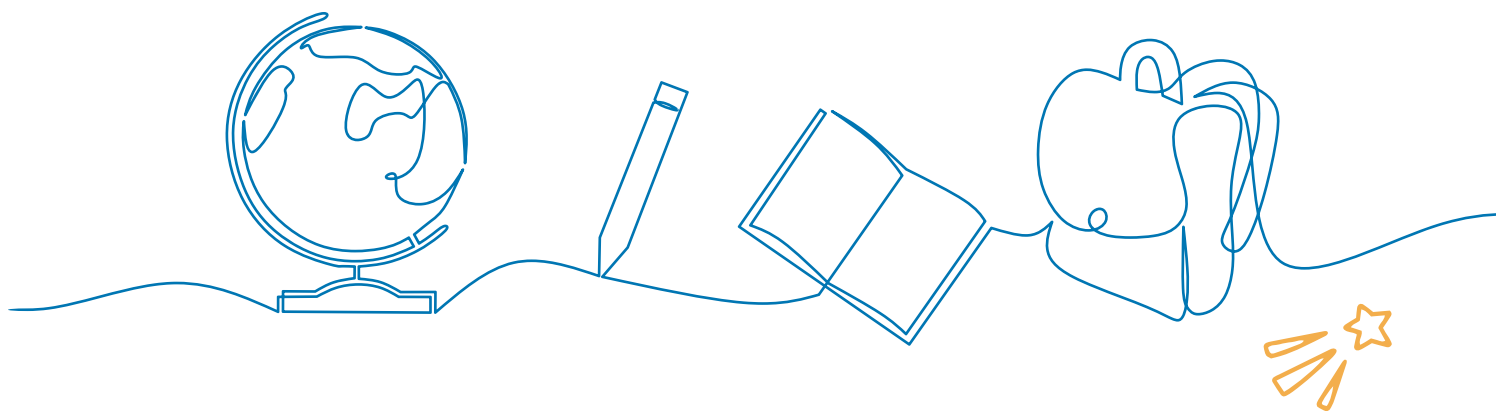A Path Forward as Pandemic Effects Reverberate

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Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

First, the good news. We are learning what works—and doing more of it.

Students and teachers are showing signs of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The average student has recovered about a third of their pandemic-era learning losses in math and a quarter in reading, according to a 30-state analysis. States and districts nationwide have implemented measures such as tutoring, high-quality curricula, and extended learning time, and more and more school systems are making these strategies permanent. Rigorous evaluations confirm the effectiveness of these interventions and point to strategies for broad accessibility.

Education systems and stakeholders across the country are recognizing the value of relationships, joy, and flexibility. As a result, more new, agile, and future-oriented schooling models are appearing. Further, there is a growing movement to help educators do their work more sustainably by collaborating in teams and using new technologies like generative AI to reduce time on burdensome tasks.

The bad news: Proven strategies are not reaching enough students.

The recovery has been slow and uneven. The average American student in school during the pandemic is less than halfway to a full academic recovery (see Figure A).

Figure A: Academic Recovery Is Happening Too Slowly
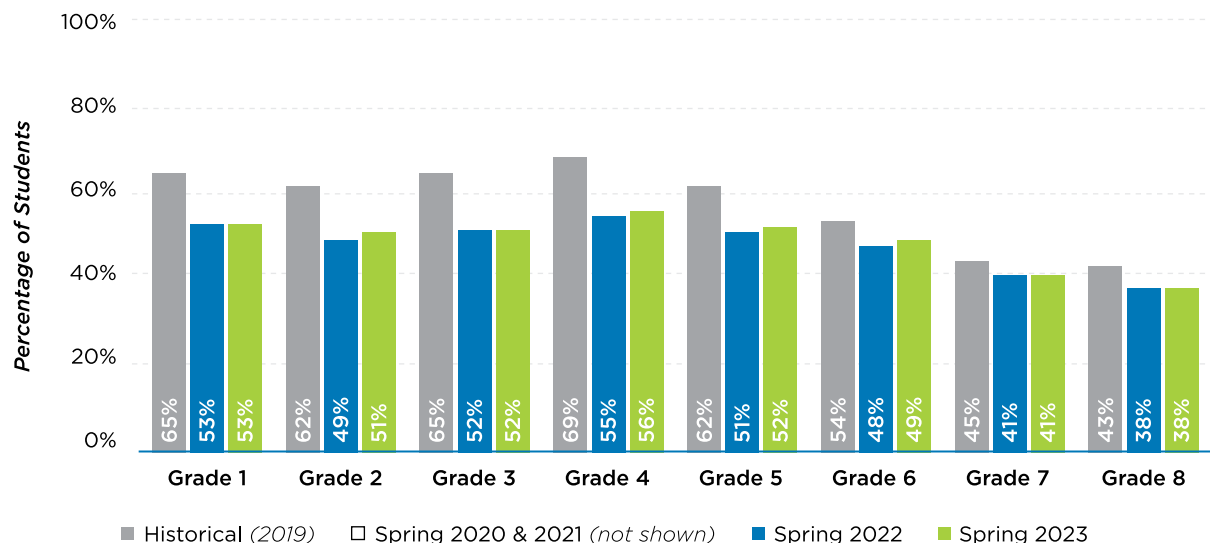
Trend in Average Test Scores, 2009-23, 30 States
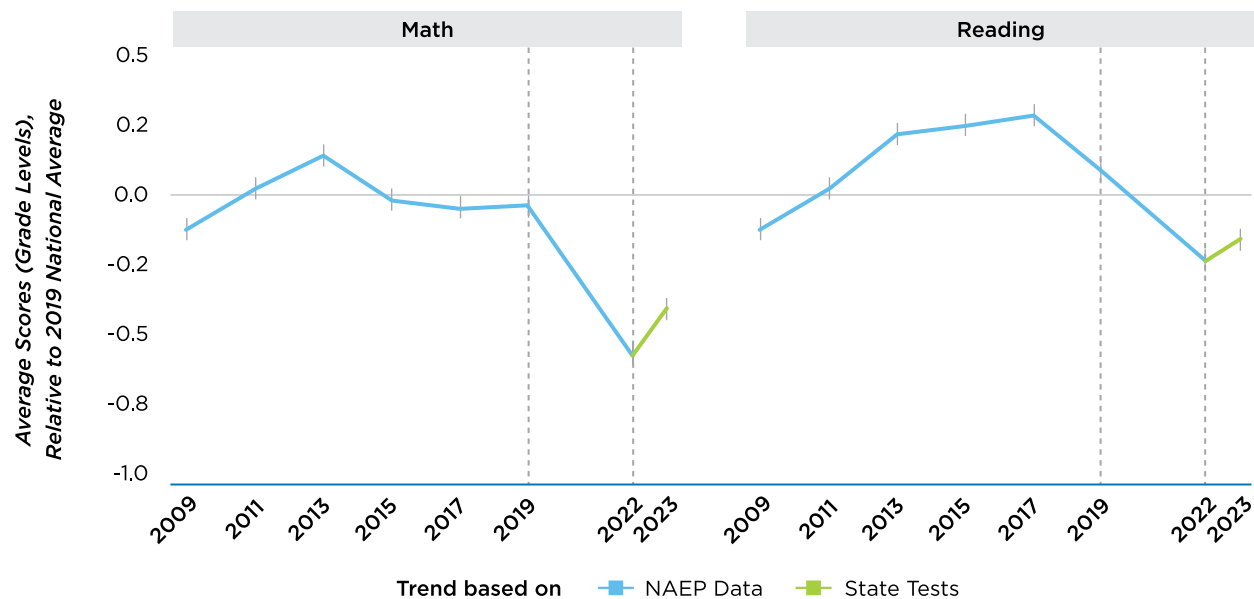
Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., "The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis," Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 7.

Too many students whose learning was most severely interrupted during the pandemic still aren't getting the support they need to recover. In Louisiana, for example, just 1% of students eligible to participate in a state literacy tutoring program actually did so. Research from the RAND Corporation found that districts across the country typically struggled to get even half of eligible students to enroll in summer programs.

As we reported last year, the slow pace of recovery is especially bad news for older students with little or no time left in the K–12 system. But younger students are struggling, too. "Covid babies" are entering kindergarten less prepared for grade-level learning. An August 2023 report from Curriculum Associates shows that while all students place at grade level in math at lower rates than before the pandemic, students in younger grades face larger gaps (see Figure B). Even more concerning, academic recovery—in the words of the report's authors—has been "slow and uneven" and "points to the persistent and unprecedented impact of the pandemic on all parts of children's lives, from preschool through their elementary school years, and likely beyond."

Figure B: Younger Students Are Struggling and Not Catching Up

Students Placing on Grade Level in Mathematics in Grades 1-8

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Historical (2019)	65%	62%	65%	69%	62%	54%	45%	43%
Spring 2022	53%	49%	52%	55%	51%	48%	41%	38%
Spring 2023	53%	51%	52%	56%	52%	49%	41%	38%

■ Historical *(2019)*   □ Spring 2020 & 2021 *(not shown)*   ■ Spring 2022   ■ Spring 2023

Source: Data from Curriculum Associates Research, "State of Student Learning in 2023: Reading and Mathematics Annual Report," Curriculum Associates Research (August 2023): 15.

Tragically, the students who were already furthest behind have fallen further behind. The gaps between the lowest- and highest-achieving students are growing wider, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The 30-state Education Recovery Scorecard found that students in predominantly low-income school districts saw more significant initial learning losses and that low-income students within school districts are making a comparably slower recovery (see Figure C). In all but three of the states included in the study (Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Virginia), poorer districts remained further behind the 2019 baseline than more affluent districts.

Figure C: Low-Income Students Have More Ground to Make Up

Test Score Decline and Recovery, 2019-23, by Subject and District Poverty Rate
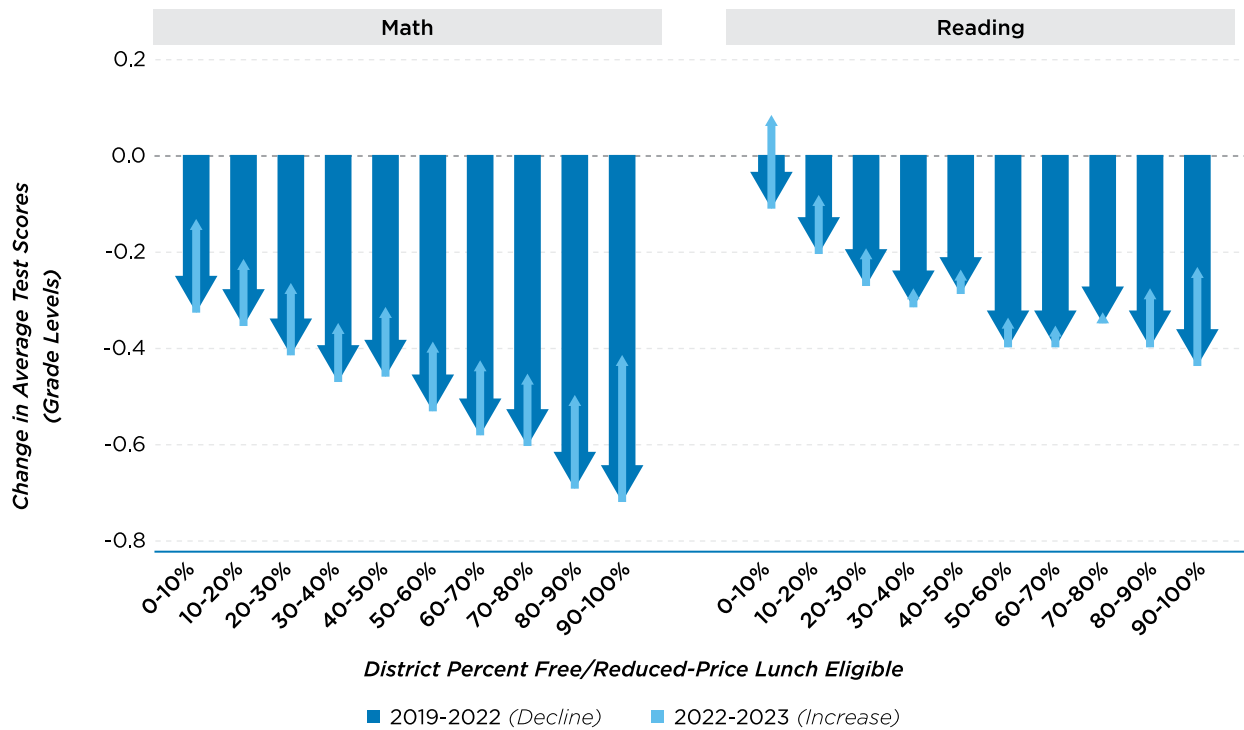
District Percent Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible

■ 2019-2022 *(Decline)*   ■ 2022-2023 *(Increase)*

Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., "The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis," Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 12.
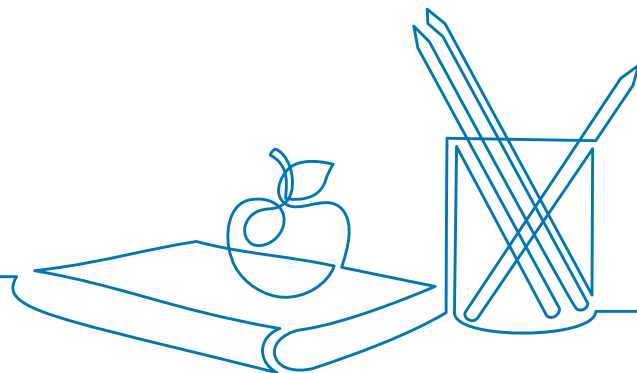
The landscape is worsening.

School districts face significant challenges that will prevent them from making more progress.

- **Teachers.** The morale of the U.S. teacher workforce is at a low point. Approximately 8 in 10 teachers said they find the job overwhelming and that the state of education has gotten worse over the past five years. According to the Pew Research Center, more than half expect conditions to worsen over the next five.

- **Mental health.** In the 2021–22 school year, nearly 40% of school principals cited "inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals" as a significant barrier to providing mental health support for their students. Teens are facing a mental health crisis. An estimated 17.4 million K–12 students had mental health needs, but schools could serve only 1.1 million, according to a McKinsey analysis.

- **Funding.** Declining enrollment augurs a new source of fiscal strain and political turmoil for districts. Federal pandemic recovery funds will expire before students have fully recovered. Thousands of schools and childcare centers nationwide are at risk of closure.

- **Shifting habits and attitudes.** Rates of chronic absenteeism (defined as "students missing at least 10% of school days") have nearly doubled since 2020, from 16% to 30% of students. There is a very concerning trend to inflate grades. Results from the ACT suggest that students are less prepared for college than they were pre-pandemic; college readiness is at a three-decade low. More than 43% of test-takers met none of the exam's four major benchmarks.

- **Lack of transparency.** Alas, few elected officials are talking honestly about the challenges or making it possible for the public to get a clear picture of the crisis. We analyzed the public report cards of all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and found that just seven states made it easy to see longitudinal performance data at the school level across the seven indicators we examined. In contrast, 16 states made it all but impossible to find and track longitudinal performance trends.

The pandemic took a significant toll on vulnerable students.

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing issues within the education system, particularly for special populations. Students with disabilities and English learners were disproportionately affected, facing higher rates of absenteeism, disrupted services, and academic and social/emotional setbacks. While some students adapted well, most faced significant challenges, revealing systemic issues that need urgent attention.

Academic declines for English learners. The WIDA Consortium, which administers English proficiency assessments for English learner–designated students, reported that average scores from

2023 remained lower than pre-pandemic averages, particularly in the early grades. In every grade span that took the test, used in 41 states and Washington, D.C., 2023 scores were the lowest since 2018, showing continued declines throughout the pandemic and no sign of recovery.

Chronic absenteeism rates among special populations skyrocketed. For example, in Los Angeles, chronic absenteeism among English learners nearly tripled between 2018 and 2022 and more than doubled among students with disabilities, homeless students, and those in foster care. In Minneapolis, chronic absenteeism doubled or nearly doubled among students with disabilities in more than a third of schools.

Special education referrals reached an all-time high. In 2022–23, 7.5 million public school students received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), according to the National Center on Education Statistics. The most recent surge in special education identifications is at least partially attributed to the compounded effects of the pandemic on young children. Anecdotally, school and district leaders nationwide report that kindergartners are entering school with significant academic and social struggles, leading to higher referral rates to special education.

Parents struggled to meet their children's unique needs and received little support.

Unsurprisingly, many parents had difficulty assuming the role of an educator in their home. For parents of students with disabilities, that struggle was even more pronounced as they had to figure out how to provide the speech services and learning support that their children typically receive from trained specialists.

> *"He was supposed to have his speech therapy because he has issues from epilepsy that cause mental delays where he's not able to fully communicate everything as most kids would his age. So, he didn't get the therapy he was supposed to. He fell further behind because my husband and I tried our best, but we can only do so much if you're not a teacher, which is very frustrating."*
>
> *-Parent of a third-grader*

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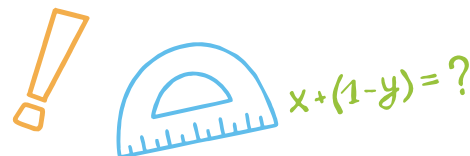
Parents not fluent in English encountered additional challenges. It was difficult for parents to teach subjects with which they were unfamiliar, especially in a language they were still learning. Many parents struggled to ensure that their children received the support outlined in their 504 or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Several families said schools didn't communicate often or well enough, and many parents felt blindsided when they found out just how far behind their child had fallen. Even very proactive parents had a difficult time getting in contact with someone at the school.

Staffing challenges worsened.

Staffing shortages were particularly acute for teachers with special education experience and multilingual teachers with bilingual specializations or ESOL endorsements. According to one national report, 40% of public schools hiring special education teachers had trouble filling the openings in 2020–21. In 2011–12, that number was 17%.

However, some students excelled amid school closures.

Families and educators have both consistently reported that some students with unique needs thrived during the pandemic. One parent said, "I feel like the whole experience made [my daughter] grow up a little bit more and mature and want to actually go back to school and do the work."

Some states and school systems are finding creative ways to leverage untapped sources of talent and support students more effectively.

Three school districts in the Midwest have tapped hundreds of immigrants and refugees with international teaching experience to work in their classrooms. Nebraska approved a policy to make it easier for para-educators to transition into teaching roles, and Pennsylvania approved a stipend for student teachers.

Improved outcomes at the D.C. Bilingual Charter School show the promise of models that view diverse student needs as an asset. During the pandemic, when schools across the country saw declines in test scores, the school made consecutive improvements every year, achieving a new high for English language proficiency after the 2022–23 school year.

In Salem, Massachusetts, one middle school reduced absenteeism and increased achievement by making school more engaging and fun with more field trips, hands-on learning opportunities, and personalized instruction. One student said, "It's actually making me excited to go to school. It's just like a happier version of school."

"Since I'm a Spanish speaker, it was harder for her. I would speak to her in Spanish and then she had to learn it in English."
-Parent of a first-grader

"I feel like because she can get by, they let her get by. They're not trying to help. She's not failing, but she's just kind of in some things just getting by."
-Parent of a ninth-grader

"I couldn't get a hold of anybody whatsoever. I didn't get any questions answered, and I couldn't go in person because everything was shut down."
-Parent of a sixth-grader

"I feel like the whole experience made her grow up a little bit more and mature and want to actually go back to school and do the work."
-Parent of a seventh-grader

We recommend a path forward: Focus on targeted support and systemic reforms.

The experiences of students with disabilities and English learners during the pandemic highlight the urgent need for targeted support and systemic reforms. The urgency of the problems and the legal rights these students hold demand immediate and, if necessary, radical solutions.

SCHOOLS CAN:

Prioritize relationships.

For example, the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) program, which targets students in the make-or-break year of ninth grade, speaks to the power of strong relationships to help any school, with existing resources, ensure no student falls through the cracks.

Partner with parents.

Family communication cannot be something tired teachers squeeze into the end of an overloaded workweek. True educator–parent partnership must be a central part of how education systems operate.

Tear down the walls.

Schools must be more flexible, redeploying staff and reconfiguring schedules to avoid creating inflexible boxes that pit academic tutoring against special education services, or supplemental "pullout" services against core academic instruction.

Plan for after graduation.

Students need a chance to start planning—early and often—to thrive in the increasingly fragmented postsecondary environment. Exposing them to many postsecondary and career options will give them experiences and skills that have meaning outside school walls and help them find the purpose and fulfillment many young people find lacking in school.

Ensure the best strategies reach children who need them most.

Tutoring and targeted small group sessions—two of schools' most powerful, evidence-based weapons in the fight against learning loss—should become intrinsic within K-12 education. Creating flexible, dedicated blocks of time for this kind of learning support will ensure accessibility to all students who stand to benefit.

POLICYMAKERS, ADVOCATES, AND PHILANTHROPISTS CAN:

Shine a light on the urgent needs of special populations.

Advocates, journalists, and government officials must hold educational institutions and the leaders of those institutions accountable for meeting their obligations to all students, especially the most vulnerable. That means reporting not just on the progress of special populations—something many states and school systems don't do adequately—but also digging deeper within data on these special populations to answer the following questions:

- How are students with mild to moderate disabilities faring?

- What about those with the most complex needs?

- How do their experiences vary by age cohort, from one school system to another, or across other student characteristics like race, income, language status, and prior achievement?

Prioritize real accountability.

State leaders must use the tools at their disposal to ensure that parents have a more accurate picture of their student's academic needs than their report card provides, that educators have the data they need to target individual support as needed, and that state leaders have a clear picture of whether the students furthest behind are making the progress they need.

Tap new sources of talent.

States can help schools identify promising practices to leverage new sources of talent (such as community groups, after-school programs, parents, and college students) and create more flexible credentialing systems with pathways to professional teaching credentials. They should also consider these groups as critical sources for tutoring, mentoring, and other initiatives essential to supporting students that are not well-delivered through traditional one-teacher, one-classroom, 30-student staffing approaches. Also, strategic staffing models like Opportunity Culture and the Next Education Workforce initiative should include a specific focus on special populations.

Provide guidance and guardrails for new technology, including AI.

While it is evident that nothing can replace human relationships when it comes to engagement and personalization, policymakers and system leaders must find ways to use technology and reorganize staffing structures to leverage better the quality teachers, aides, and tutors we do have, especially when it comes to meeting the needs of special populations. Promising new AI-powered tutoring models like Khanmigo should be actively tested with special populations and broader populations to see how they can accelerate teacher intervention efforts. However, providing guidance and policy around AI and other new technological tools is essential.

Be willing to place power and opportunity directly in the hands of families.

It should not take a lawsuit for students to gain access to the education and support they deserve. Ensure that students and their families know they may be entitled to compensatory education for instructional or therapeutic time missed during school closures and that students receive the support they need through interventions tailored to their needs. Students who aren't receiving evidence-based support, such as intensive tutoring, should be allowed to choose their tutors at school district expense. One well-implemented model is the Indiana Learns program.

The urgent work of improving public education for students with distinct learning needs will benefit all students. It will ensure that coordinated teams of adults collaborate and marshal their diverse talents to identify and address the needs of each child. It will ensure that every student has meaningful, caring relationships with people who understand their needs, value their unique gifts, and can help clear away barriers to their aspirations. It will ensure that every child progresses toward meeting high expectations.

Addressing today's challenges requires immediate and bold action. New school models and interventions can work now. There can be no excuse for failing to adopt them on a large scale. National, state, and local leadership must step up, provide targeted support, and hold institutions accountable.