

Executive Summary

At Curriculum Associates, we have been studying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic since schools first closed their buildings and moved to remote learning in the spring of the 2019–2020 school year. This report provides a snapshot of where students are as they return to school in fall 2021 relative to grade-level standards and historical averages. It is the fourth publication in a series of research papers that examine students' academic achievement during the pandemic. Using the *i-Ready Diagnostic's* criterion-referenced grade-level placement data from more than nine million students across the country, our findings are focused on students who are on grade level and below grade level as of the present fall compared to a pre-pandemic historical average. We also examine the progress made since last fall by comparing a subset of students who tested in school during fall 2020 and 2021 within a matched sample of schools.

In the current report's on-grade level analysis, we see that students in the early elementary grades who are typically still learning to read have not yet caught up to pre-pandemic on-grade level performance. By contrast, the academic achievement of students in the upper-elementary and middle school grades who are typically reading to learn is closer to where it was before the pandemic disrupted teaching and learning. In mathematics, a different story emerges. The percentage of students who are on grade level is not yet reaching pre-pandemic levels in most grades, and the gaps are largest in upper-elementary and middle school grades. This difference in mathematics performance could be attributable to the content standards as students typically shift from number sense and fluency in early grades to problem solving and algebraic thinking in later grades. Furthermore, demographic data results show that some of the historical inequities pre-dating the pandemic persist today: fewer students in schools serving mostly Black and Latino students than White students and fewer students in schools located in lower-income zip codes than higher-income zip codes are starting this school year on grade level.

However, looking at students who are on grade level does not show us the full picture of student achievement. Our below-grade level analysis reveals that more students are two or more grade levels below their actual grade level this fall than before the pandemic began. This means that teachers will not only have fewer students beginning the school year on grade level, but they will also have more students in need of intensive intervention and support. The pattern of the below-grade level results is similar to that of the on-grade level analysis: the pandemic has been detrimental for students in mathematics more than in reading, for students in schools serving mostly Black and Latino students more than White students, and for students in schools located in lower-income rather than higher-income neighborhoods.

When we compare performance in schools where students tested in school during both fall 2020 and fall 2021, we see a fair amount of variability based on subject and grade level. Overall, a similar number of students are on grade level in reading, and more students are on grade level in mathematics this fall compared to last fall. The below-grade level analysis reveals that more students are below grade level in reading in the upper-elementary and middle school grades and that fewer students are below grade level in mathematics across nearly all grades.

The findings in this paper shed light on the state of unfinished learning across the nation in a way that we hope is useful for educators as they seek to understand how to best support students in their local communities during the remainder of the current school year and beyond.

Key Findings

- In reading, the percentage of students who are on grade level in the upper-elementary and middle school grades is close to pre-pandemic levels, whereas in the early grades the percentage of students who are on grade level is lower than before the pandemic.
- In mathematics, the percentage of students who are on grade level is lower in nearly all grades than what we saw prior to the pandemic.
- Fewer students attending schools serving mostly Black and Latino students are on grade level this fall than students attending schools serving mostly White students, and these inequities predate the pandemic.
- Fewer students attending schools in lower-income zip codes are on grade level than students attending schools in higher-income zip codes, and these inequities also predate the pandemic.
- As for students who are below grade level, more students are below grade level in the early grades for reading and across all grades for mathematics; both observations are even more so for students in schools serving mostly Black and Latino students as well as for students in schools in lower-income zip codes.
- Compared to last fall, the percentage of students who are on grade level or below grade level this fall varies depending on the grade level and subject. Overall, students have made improvements in mathematics, and there are mixed results (i.e., small upticks and downticks) in reading.