

LOCAL EDUCATION

# D.C. math, reading test scores fall to lowest levels in more than 5 years

Catching students up to pre-pandemic levels could take until 2027, researchers say



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Following a two-year testing hiatus, student scores on a critical standardized exam have dropped to their lowest levels in years, new data from the District show.

The results of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test — widely known as PARCC — illustrate the dramatic academic toll the pandemic has taken on children, with students of color and at-risk youths bearing the brunt.

Students in grades three through eight and high school take the online exam in the spring, as required by federal law.

In spring 2019, the [last time students took the exam](#), 37 percent of students were reading at or above grade level. Now, 31 percent meet that standard. The share of students who passed the math exam fell 12 percentage points, from 31 percent before the pandemic to 19 percent in 2022 — the lowest ever recorded in the city.

But officials say they expected low scores, which come after two difficult years of the pandemic that took children out of classrooms. The city suspended testing during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, meaning this spring was the first time about half of the 43,000 students who participated — in either PARCC or an alternative assessment for students with cognitive disabilities — took a standardized statewide exam.

Additionally, the scores reflect national trends, as indicated in [data](#) released this week that shows elementary school math and reading performance has plunged to levels unseen for decades.

But with nearly \$1 billion in federal stimulus funds, officials in the District have set forth an ambitious plan to catch students up that includes summer programming, tutoring and curriculum changes.

“There are some widening gaps across the city, some learning loss effectively everywhere with, I think, the most harm from the pandemic done to students who have the greatest need,” said Paul Kihn, the city’s deputy mayor for education. “But interim data from [local education agencies] suggest that students are indeed on a path to recovery and have indeed been learning over the course of [the] last academic year.”

English language arts test scores in the District have not been this low since the 2016-17 school year, when 31 percent of children were reading at or above grade level. Officials noted drops in proficiency rates were most pronounced in lower grades. In 2019, 38 percent of children in third through eighth grades passed the reading exam. That number fell to 30 percent in 2022.

Reading proficiency among high-schoolers, however, dropped just one percentage point — from 34 percent in 2019 to 33 percent in 2022.

During the last round of testing, city education officials celebrated the progress made by Black and Hispanic children, who improved at a moderately faster rate than — though still testing considerably behind — their White peers. In 2019, 27.8 percent of Black children were reading at or above grade level, a 3.1-percentage-point increase from the previous year. Hispanic and Latino students made a 5.3-percentage-point gain during the same time period, from 32 percent to 37.3 percent. The share of White children who passed the reading exam rose by 2.9 percentage points, to 85 percent in 2019.

But the pandemic has chipped away at that progress. Reading proficiency rates among Black children fell nearly eight percentage points. Hispanic and Latino students fell behind by seven percentage points. The share of White students reading at or above grade level dropped about five percentage points.

The English language arts proficiency rate plunged by six percentage points for students who are at-risk, defined by the city as children who are homeless, in foster care or low income.

But the District suffered the most severe learning loss in math, recording its lowest scores since the city began administering the PARCC exam during the 2014-15 school year. Proficiency rates dropped by more than 10 percentage points for most racial and ethnic groups.

Just 22 percent of elementary- and middle-school test takers passed the math exam in 2022, a drop from 32 percent in 2019. Students in grades nine through 12 also lost ground, from 19 percent of students passing in 2019 to 11 percent this year.

Overall, a greater share of D.C. students in traditional public schools passed math and reading tests this year than those in charter schools — although students in both sectors fell behind.

About 34 percent of students in charter schools passed the reading exam in 2019; that figure dropped to 25 percent this spring. The share of students in traditional public schools who are reading on or above grade level fell about 4 percentage points over that period, from about 40 percent to 36 percent.

Sixteen percent of charter school students passed the math exam, down from almost 29 percent in 2019. In the traditional public schools, 23 percent of students met or exceeded expectations, a drop of 9 percentage points from 2019.

The scores give teachers and school leaders “a better understanding of where our students are performing well and where we need to make improvements, so our students make progress in the current and future school years,” said Michelle J. Walker-Davis, executive director, DC Public Charter School Board, in a statement.

The losses could have been greater if students hadn’t returned to — and remained in — school buildings last year, said Christina Grant, state superintendent of education. Because students were in classrooms last school year, they are on track to return to pre-pandemic achievement levels, city officials say.

At least 5,500 students received some form of tutoring this summer through programs hosted by the city. Nearly 2,200 students received tutoring this past school year, according to the Office of the State Superintendent, which is pouring about \$40 million into “high-impact tutoring.”

The agency plans to provide services to more than 8,000 students over the next two academic years.

In D.C. public schools, leaders have relied on staff to host tutoring sessions on Saturdays, before and after school. The system is also recruiting tutors and working with community-based organizations — such as DC SCORES, which incorporates soccer, spoken word and academic support into after-school programming — said Lewis Ferebee, the D.C. Public Schools chancellor.

The public school system is introducing a new math curriculum this year, called illustrative mathematics, that will allow teachers “to enhance math instruction, especially for our secondary students,” Ferebee said.

And, testing data from NWEA MAP and i-Ready, other standardized tests students take throughout the year, show students in elementary and middle school have started to rebound to pre-pandemic growth rates, according to [EmpowerK12](#), an education research firm in the District.

“The spring semester’s growth was better than average,” said Josh Boots, the organization’s founder and executive director. If the rate of improvement from the spring continues, the city could regain the achievement levels seen before the pandemic for most students by 2027.

The rate of improvement for at-risk students, English learners and children with disabilities, however, is slower than their peers.

“This is a multiyear recovery effort,” Grant said. “We believe that these targeted investments are going to continue to bear fruit in the education of our children in light of the results that we have today.”

