

Falling Test Scores Confirm COVID Learning Loss, Now Let's Fix it!

By Raheem Williams & Marty Dannenfelser

As the country continues to recover from the devastation of the COVID pandemic, the wounds it inflicted will take time to heal. There are few places the harm done is more evident than education. As schools shuttered and moved to online education, overall achievement fell, and historic inequities grew. A study from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University analyzed 5.4 million American students grades third through eighth and found a decline in both math and reading test scores during the COVID-impacted school years. The declines were more substantial than losses associated with past natural disasters. Likewise, the researchers also noted a wider gap between low-poverty and high-poverty elementary schoolsⁱ.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the nation's report card, released its first post-pandemic report on fourth and eighth-grade test scores in October of 2022ⁱⁱ. The nation moved backward as reading and math scores fell nationwide. Only 33% of fourth graders and 31% of eighth graders read at or above grade proficiency, this is down from 35% and 34% in 2019. Similarly, only 36% of fourth graders and 26% of eighth graders are at grade level with regard to math proficiency, which is down from 41% and 34% in 2019. The latest 2022 figures confirm the largest decline ever recorded for fourth and eighth-grade math.

Unsurprisingly, the NAEP analysis shows that poor students of color were hit the hardest. For example: In Memphis, Tennessee, where almost 80% of K-12 students are poor, students lost the equivalent of 70% of a school year in reading and more than a year in math. The city's Black students lost over a year in math and 2/3rds of a year in readingⁱⁱⁱ. As the evidence of learning loss grows, it is clear something needs to be done.

Combating Learning Loss

Harvard economists Roland Fryer Jr. and Will Dobbie studied 35 high-performing New York City (NYC) charter schools to determine what makes some schools outperform others. The economists found that frequent teacher feedback, the use of data to guide instruction, high-dosage tutoring (measured by how often a student receives tutoring and the size of the tutoring group), increased instructional time, and high expectations explained approximately 50 percent of the variation in school effectiveness between high-performing charters and other schools^{iv}.

Although insightful, a limited subset of NYC charter schools is not representative of most educational environments. American schools enjoy a wide range of organizational types nationwide, from magnet programs to special-purpose charter schools. Understanding this, Dr. Fryer expanded upon the previously mentioned research to determine if implementing the techniques observed in high-performing NYC charter schools could help traditional public schools improve educational outcomes.

In a follow-up study, Dr. Fryer designed a field experiment consisting of 20 low-performing traditional public schools in Houston, Texas (over 12,000 students). The experiment utilized increased instructional time by extending the length of the school day and adding days to the school year. It also tied school hiring and retention to the individual performance records of teachers and principals, leading to the removal of 19 out of 20 incumbent school principals, while 46 percent of the incumbent teachers left or were removed. Dr. Fryer found that math scores improved significantly particularly amongst Black and Hispanic students, putting those students on track to close the racial achievement gap. Unfortunately, reading scores showed little change, as is common in the empirical literature. An examination of similar interventions in Denver and Chicago public schools lends support to the results Dr. Fryer found in Houston schools^v.

Understandably, there are limitations to the research. Expanding instructional time, changing hiring practices and raising expectations come with higher financial costs. In his Houston field experiments, Dr. Fryer estimated the annual per-pupil marginal cost of extending the school day to be \$550 in 2014 or \$685 inflation adjusted to 2022.

Financing Change

The Federal Government allocated \$122 billion for public education in the American Rescue Plan to help combat the spread of COVID in K-12 schools. According to an analysis by *The Washington Post*, only 15% of these funds have been spent^{vi}. Nonetheless, a substantial portion (if not all) of the funding needed to finance extended instructional times has already been allocated to K-12 education. Congress can and should reallocate this funding with the specified goal of increasing instruction and tutoring in key areas such as math, reading, writing and science.

We should be mindful that there is more than one way to bring about effective change. COVID orders affected all our kids and a plan to combat learning loss should be inclusive of all K-12 educational institutions. School districts, charter schools and private schools should have the flexibility to decide how to extend instructional time in key subject areas. Schools can spend less time on breaks, add more time to the school day, add more school days to the calendar year, or employ a combination of methods. We need to allow flexibility to innovate at the local level to scale up approaches that work and scale down practices that don't.

Conclusion

The research cited above can help inform the development of guiding principles for policy makers, administrators, and educators as they devise restorative strategies for their respective educational environments. We still have a lot more to learn, but we know enough to get started down the right path today. The longer we wait the more likely we are to doom an entire generation to permanent educational losses^{vii}.

End Notes

ⁱ Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., & Lewis, K. (January 2022). Test score patterns across three COVID-19-impacted school years. EdWorkingPaper: 22-521, 37-62.

ⁱⁱ “NAEP Report Card 2022.” The Nation's Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Toness, Bianca, Sharon Lurye (October 2022). “Massive Learning Setbacks Show Covid's Sweeping Toll on Kids.” *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/health-education-covid-46cb725e08110f8ad3c1b303ec9eefad>.

^{iv} Dobbie, W., & Fryer Jr, R. G. (2013). Getting beneath the veil of effective schools: Evidence from New York City. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 5(4), 28-60.

^v Fryer Jr, R. G. (2014). Injecting charter school best practices into traditional public schools: Evidence from field experiments. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129(3), 1355-1407.

^{vi} Lumpkin, Lauren, and Sahana Jayaraman (October 2022). “Schools Got \$122 Billion to Reopen Last Year. Most Has Not Been Used.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/10/24/covid-spending-schools-students-achievement/>.

^{vii} Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., ; Viruleg, E. (July 2021). Covid-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>

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