

Michigan test results show big COVID-era learning loss

Struggles in early grades signal trouble in later years

By Molly Macek | September 2023

Michigan public school students recently performed below pre-pandemic levels in reading and math, according to the latest statewide standardized tests. This happened even though schools received record funds to help students recover learning losses incurred during pandemic-era school closures.

Students in grades three through seven performed worse on the 2023 M-STEP in both English language arts and math, compared to 2019. There are not enough data to talk about 2020 or 2021, because the state did not require schools to administer the M-STEP those years.

But we can now use the 2023 data – combined with results from previous years – to paint a more complete picture of student performance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2023 M-STEP results suggest that most students in the tested grades are not where they should be in either English or math. Third grade is a key milestone for English language arts because reading

proficiently in third grade is necessary to master the more advanced subject material introduced in fourth grade. Yet third-grade ELA scores have dropped precipitously since 2019.

“Unfinished learning during the COVID and post-COVID years” is to blame for the 2023 results, said Sen. Dayna Polehanki, as quoted by Bridge

Michigan. Polehanki chairs the Senate Education Committee.

Third-grade students were especially hurt by the pandemic, said State Superintendent Michael Rice.

“**These early grades are critical to a child’s literacy development, so the focus on learning loss for young students is understandable.**”

“This past year’s third graders were perhaps the most adversely affected of any age cohort,” Rice told Bridge, “as they had pandemic-influenced school years during grades kindergarten through second grade, a challenge that was particularly noticeable in reading.”

These early grades are critical to a child's literacy development, so the focus on learning loss for young students is understandable. Performance of sixth and seventh graders in both English and math gets less attention. The share of seventh graders who scored proficient or advanced on the ELA test dropped from 43% in 2019 to 37% in 2023, a difference of six percentage points. This was the single greatest decline in the tested grades.

Sixth graders lost nearly as much as seventh graders. The share of sixth-grade students scoring proficient or better fell from 42% to 38% over the same period. Fewer than one-third of sixth and seventh graders scored proficient or advanced in the math M-STEP in 2023, with proficiency rates in both grades decreasing by about five percentage points since 2019.

The downward trend in test scores was largely the same across family income levels, suggesting that school-related factors, not family socioeconomic status, contributed most to the change in M-STEP performance.

The elementary and middle school M-STEP results predict student performance in high school and beyond. They also provide schools with key data they can use to fill gaps in students' learning.

Unfortunately, several programs that would have helped students recover learning lost during the pandemic-era school closures were struck down by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. She vetoed legislation that would have provided families with reimbursements for summer enrichment programs, tutoring grants, and scholarships to cover the cost

of learning supports. If the governor had agreed to the legislation, it would have empowered parents to secure more personalized services tailored to their children's unique needs.

Instead, the state is allocating unprecedented levels of funding to school districts in the hope they can turn things around. While the school aid budget provides some funds for tutoring, it is unlikely to be enough to meet the vast and significant learning needs of the state's 1.4 million public school students. Under the governor's direction, the state is also expanding access to pre-K and post-secondary programming. Doing this won't help the school-aged kids who need help with their reading and math skills now.

Schools can better ensure students' success by directing funds to evidence-based programs in core subject areas. They can enhance teacher quality by adhering to robust evaluation and feedback cycles. They can improve the curriculum's alignment with state standards assessed by the M-STEP. They can provide professional development in research-based strategies for teaching reading and math.

And by partnering with parents, they are more likely to reverse the downward trend and focus on interventions that work.

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