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Texas is increasing Black students' reading scores more than any other state

Despite bright spots, data on national learning loss is gloomy



Texas schools still have a long road to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. (Ben Torres / Special Contributor)



By [Talia Richman](#) and [Meghan Mangrum](#)

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Update: This story has been updated to add comments from Huntsville school officials

Texas boosted reading scores for Black students more than all other states over the past three years.

That bright spot comes out of overall gloomy testing data that researchers from Harvard and Stanford universities analyzed to reveal the extent of post-pandemic learning loss across America.

Overall, the average U.S. public school student in grades 3 through 8 lost about a half a year of learning in math and a quarter of a year in reading, the study found. But the losses vary widely between districts and states.

This newest data — shared exclusively with the Associated Press — builds upon a painful picture painted with [the release of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), often referred to as the nation's report card.

“The pandemic was like a band of tornadoes that swept across the country,” said Thomas Kane, faculty director of Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research. “Some communities were left relatively untouched, while neighboring schools were devastated.”

Related: ‘Appalling and unacceptable’: Texas students struggle, test results reveal widespread loss

The new data from the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) includes results from students who took state standardized tests in grades 3-8 as well as detailed data for 3,760 school districts and the recently released 2022 NAEP scores.

The researchers looked at state test scores from 2019 and 2022 and converted them to a common metric to compare learning loss despite states using different tests and uneven standards for what is considered “proficient.”

The analysis found several Texas districts — including Huntsville, which has a significant number of students in virtual schools — recorded some of the biggest increases in reading scores when compared to schools across the majority of states.

Black students still lag behind their white peers in key metrics, but Texas' progress is a hopeful sign.

More must be done to recover from the pandemic's impact. The researchers found nearly 70% of students were in districts where recovery was likely to cost more than the schools' federal pandemic aid allotment.

Where Texas stands

Texas [held mostly steady in reading](#), echoing the takeaway of other data, [including the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness](#). But students lost about half a year in math.

Overall, the study found that learning losses were greater, on average, in high-poverty districts. Though many communities nationwide were working to close such gaps before the pandemic, many of those gains were wiped out, researchers found.

Texas schools opened up for in-person learning faster than several other states. But the connection between remote learning and achievement is not a simple, straight line.

“While we see evidence that achievement losses were larger, on average, the longer districts remained remote, there was still a ton of variation in achievement losses among districts that had the same amount of time remote,” Kane said. “Clearly, remote learning was not the only factor driving achievement losses.”

Top five school districts with largest gains in reading

Gains in average reading scores for third through eighth graders from 2019 to 2022, in grade levels

| | |
|--|------|
| Huntsville ISD, Texas | |
| Pleasanton ISD, Texas | 0.88 |
| Perryton ISD, Texas | 0.84 |
| Mohave Valley Elementary District, Ariz. | 0.83 |
| Somerset ISD, Texas | 0.67 |

The rankings only include the 29 states that had district-level standardized test data. ISD stands for Independent School District.

Source: [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) / Graphic: Sharon Lurye

Even before the pandemic, Texas leaders made a concerted effort to improve literacy. The state required early-grade educators to attend reading academies and study the science behind how students learn to decode language.

The Legislature has also mandated extensive tutoring for students who failed the state's standardized tests. Much of the tutoring effort was devoted to literacy.

But the state still lags behind others when it comes to reading achievement, with students now nearly half a year behind the national average, according to the analysis. In math,

Texas students are lagging about one-third of a school year behind the national average.

Black students' progress

While Texas topped the list of states when it came to increasing reading scores for Black students, much work remains to ensure Black children get a fair shot at academic success, experts say.

Black students have long lagged their white peers on standardized tests. For example, on NAEP, Black students in Texas had an average math score that was 26 points lower than white students.

And despite this year's increase, Black students in Texas are still performing more than a grade level behind the national average in reading, according to the new data. Black students gained the equivalent of nearly 30% of a school year between 2019 and 2022.

Hispanic students — which make up a majority of Texas public school students — are also behind by more than a year.

Pre-existing achievement gaps, which experts tie to the lasting impacts of segregation, were exacerbated during the pandemic. [Many Black and Latino communities](#) were hard hit by the early waves of COVID-19, which triggered more housing instability and trauma for children.

Related: COVID's 'untold story': Texas Blacks and Latinos are dying in the prime of their lives

After historic protests in 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd, many schools doubled down on promises to address historic disinvestment in Black students.

In Dallas, the district is working to expand the number of reading interventionists working at campuses serving predominantly Black students.

The new data can help pinpoint variabilities in recovery, researchers said.

“The better they know about the patterns of learning loss, the more they’re going to be able to target their resources effectively to reduce educational inequality of opportunity and help children and communities thrive,” said Sean Reardon, of the Stanford Graduate School of Education.

Dallas scores

The new data shows Dallas still lags in reading when compared to the rest of the nation and the state.

On NAEP, Dallas' reading scores held steady at about 18% proficiency in fourth grade and roughly 12% in eighth grade. DISD officials note that the district didn't decline as much as many other urban areas, many of which also serve fewer students living in poverty.

"We've got a lot of work to do in literacy," Superintendent Stephanie Elizalde said.

Faced with data outlining the scope of learning loss, Elizalde said it's important not to make knee-jerk reactions. The information must prompt questions about what teachers and students really need and where.

"We've got to peel back some more onions. ... What does comprehension look like? Or what does decoding look like?" she said.

Persistent racial gaps are a focus area for the district, where Elizalde acknowledged Dallas is seeing better results, though she conceded not fast enough. The administration is working to analyze what specific interventions have the most impact for children.

"What is it going to take to get those students to get a year-and-a-half or two years of growth in one year?" she said.

The Education Trust, a nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps, [recently highlighted Dallas ISD's approach](#) to spending its federal pandemic aid money to promote equity.

DISD's "high-priority schools"— which are often in low-income communities and serve many families of color and immigrants — were prioritized for robust, free after-school programming. The activities there included tutoring and other enrichments that are more often available to wealthier children.

Looking ahead

With a clearer picture of the impact of the pandemic on student learning, researchers say it is incumbent on district and state leaders to reevaluate whether their plans to catch students up align with actual needs.

Huntsville ISD Superintendent Scott Sheppard said he was proud of the work district staff did to help students catch up, but acknowledged that not all students saw the same reading

gains.

“We are excited to be where we are, but we know we still have much work to do,” Sheppard said in an email.

Texas [received \\$18 billion in federal funding](#) to tackle the consequences of the pandemic. As of July, schools across the state had tapped less than a third of the cash with only two years left to spend it all.

Many districts are using their funding to [provide tutoring or summer programs to students](#). However, the researchers say some of those efforts may not be big enough to capture every student who needs them.

“We cannot wait for the spring 2023 state test results next fall to tell us that we underinvested in recovery efforts,” Kane said.

The DMN Education Lab deepens the coverage and conversation about urgent education issues critical to the future of North Texas.

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