

Learning setbacks coming into focus with new testing results

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Fifth-grade teacher Amanda Cardona talks with 9-year-old Ray Urias about an assignment, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, in her classroom at St. John's Episcopal School in Odessa Texas. As the nation closes out a school year marred by the pandemic, some states are now starting to release new standardized test scores that offer an early glimpse at just how far students have fallen behind—with some states reporting that the turbulent year has reversed years of progress across every academic subject. Credit: Ben Powell/Odessa American via AP

The scores from the first U.S. standardized tests taken during the pandemic are offering an early glimpse of just how far students have fallen behind, with some states reporting that the turbulent year has reversed years of academic progress.

Texas education officials offered a grim report Monday as the state became one of the first to release full results from its spring exams. The percentage of students reading at their grade level slid to the lowest levels since 2017, while [math scores](#) plummeted to their lowest point since 2013. In total, about 800,000 additional students are now behind their grade level in math, the state said.

"The impact of the coronavirus on what school means, and what school is, has been truly profound," said Mike Morath, the state's education commissioner. "It will take several years of change and support in order to help kids catch up."

Other states have shared previews of alarming results.

In Florida, officials said reading scores dropped by 4 percentage points compared to 2019, the last time the statewide tests were administered. In Indiana, [state officials](#) are warning of a drop in reading scores and a "significant decline" in math.

Experts warn that [low participation rates](#) in some regions could leave entire states with unreliable data, and that even within states there are pockets where many families opted out. In Texas, 86% of students took the tests this spring, down from a typical rate of 96%.

Still, the early results provide some of the firmest data yet detailing the effects of the March 2020 school shutdowns, the switch to virtual learning and related disruptions. They also line up with trends seen in national studies over the past year: Students are behind in reading and

even farther behind in math.

Setbacks are sharpest among students of color and those from low-income families. Across all [student](#) groups, those who spent more time learning in-person had better exam scores.

"It's a little sickening to see the bottom drop out for so many kids," said Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. "Clearly remote learning has been hitting the most vulnerable kids the hardest. It's what we were expecting, but it's still tough to see."

Morath said the results underscore the need for a strong return to in-person learning this fall. In districts with many students learning online, the share who failed to meet math standards grew by 32 percentage points. In districts with more in-person learning, by comparison, the failure rate increased by 9 points.

That divide was wider than the gaps between students based on race or income, but the data also found that white students had higher scores than their Black and Hispanic peers, and students from wealthier families had much higher scores than those from poverty.

"These are not numbers, these are children," Morath said, "and this represents how well we have supported them in their continued academic growth."



In this May 18, 2021 file photo, fifth graders wearing face masks are seated at proper social distancing during a music class at the Milton Elementary School in Rye, N.Y. As the nation closes out a school year marred by the pandemic, some states are now starting to release new standardized test scores that offer an early glimpse at just how far students have fallen behind—with some states reporting that the turbulent year has reversed years of progress across every academic subject. New York, Georgia and some other states pushed to cancel testing for a second year so schools could focus on classroom learning. Credit: AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, File

He called out school districts that were slower to return to in-person learning, including in El Paso, saying they saw steeper learning setbacks compared to rural schools that reopened classrooms quickly. In El Paso Independent School District, 64% of eighth-graders fell short of math

standards this spring, compared to 20% in 2019, according to state data.

The president of the El Paso Teachers Association, Norma De La Rosa, said teachers did the best they could with virtual instruction although the model prevented them from giving extra attention to children who might have needed it.

The El Paso district kept instruction online until January, when the state threatened to pull funding from schools that did not offer in-person learning. During remote learning, some families spent long stretches in Mexico and many others struggled with internet access. Given those challenges, De La Rosa said, the [test](#) results are not surprising.

Clay Robison, spokesperson for the Texas State Teachers Association, said the data show there's no replacement for in-person learning. But he also said that giving families opportunities to learn remotely probably prevented more deaths from COVID-19.

"We were in the middle of a deadly pandemic and we are sure it saved the lives of some students, it saved the lives of some school employees, it saved the lives of some members of their families and it was necessary," Robison said. "Fortunately, most Texas students and teachers lived to learn another day."

In typical years, Texas uses its annual tests to rate schools and determine whether students can move to the next grade. But state officials suspended those measures during the pandemic and said tests should be used to identify students who need the most help. All students who fell short of testing standards will be entitled to intensive tutoring next school year under new legislation passed by lawmakers last month.

In Indiana, which is expected to release test results this week, lawmakers passed a "hold harmless" bill so that poor test results won't be used

against teachers or schools. The state also set aside \$150 million to address learning loss, much of which is being spent on grants to expand summer learning programs.

Students across the U.S. had a year off from the federally required tests last year after the Trump administration suspended exams while the coronavirus raged. But the Biden administration ordered states to resume exams this year with new flexibility. States were told not to order students to come to [school](#) just to take tests, and the Education Department granted some states additional leeway to modify exams or test fewer students.

Some [states](#) continued to push for a full cancellation of tests, including in New York, Michigan and Georgia. The Education Department denied their requests but allowed Washington, D.C., to skip exams because 88% of students were still learning remotely.

The uneven flexibility drew criticism from testing advocates who say it created a patchwork of state testing plans. With so much variation, they say, it will be difficult to get a clear national picture of the pandemic's impact.

Education experts are especially concerned about students who won't appear in the new results. Those who opted out of exams are more likely to have been learning remotely, researchers say, and may be among students who will need the most help.

Lake, of the University of Washington, said she's worried about homeless students, along with students who are learning English and those who have special needs. She fears they may be among the "missing kids" who didn't take tests.

"This is the tip of the iceberg," Lake said. "These numbers are the very

start of what we're beginning to understand. And there's potential for these kids to continue to decline if there aren't quick interventions."

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