

# 'Learning Loss, in General, Is a Misnomer': Study Shows Kids Made Progress During COVID-19



By Sarah Schwartz — April 22, 2021

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Students listen to their teacher at Hawthorne Scholastic Academy in Lakeview on March 1, 2021. A new study shows that students have continued to make gains in math and reading during the pandemic.  
Anthony Vazquez/Chicago Sun-Times via AP

Even though the pandemic has interrupted learning, students are still making progress in reading and math this year, according to a new analysis from the assessment provider Renaissance.

The company looked at a large sample of students—about 3.8 million in grades 1-8—who had taken Star Assessments, which are interim tests, in either math or reading during the winter of the 2020-21 school year.

(Because they were comparing these scores to fall 2019 and fall 2020, only students who had taken Star tests in each of those three periods were included in the analysis.)

Overall, the analysis found, students' scores rose during the first half of the 2020-21 school year. In other words, children did make academic progress during COVID-19. Even more encouraging, the amount of progress made was similar to what Renaissance would expect in a non-pandemic year.

“Learning loss, in general, is a misnomer. Kids' scores are going up,” said Katie McClarty, the vice president of research and design at Renaissance.

For the most part, the gap between where students' scores are now and where Renaissance would estimate them to be in a “normal year” is shrinking. But, the company found, that gap still exists.

Using past results, the researchers made an estimate of how well students would have done on these tests had the pandemic not hit. Then, they compared this estimate to students' actual scores from this winter. They looked at students' percentile ranks—a norm-referenced score that compares a student's performance to that of other students in the same grade nationwide. The scale was last updated in 2017, pre-COVID-19.

In math, on average, students were 6 percentile rank points below their expected performance. This means that a student whose past performance would have indicated that they should have been average by winter, at the 50th percentile in math based on pre-pandemic norms, could now be at the 44th percentile in math on that same scale.

The difference was smaller in reading, where students were two percentile rank points below the predicted level. But in middle school reading specifically, grades 6-8, this gap is widening.

“The reason why you're still seeing those gaps is because we had really profound differences from where the school year started,” said McClarty.

The COVID-19 impact was greater for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students than for their white and Asian peers, and for English-language learners and students with disabilities. Students in these groups also saw a slower rate of score growth during the first half of the 2020-21 school year compared to the overall sample.

“When you think about some of those communities, there have been other really hard impacts of COVID,” she said. “Education importantly is one of those, but so are higher death rates, infection rates, rates of essential workers.”

## **There's a limit to what the data can show**

The data from Renaissance echo other large-scale analyses of interim assessments from earlier this fall, showing that the pandemic interrupted students' academic growth—and that these interruptions have had a greater effect in math.

In December 2020, the Northwest Evaluation Association published a study showing that students in grades 3-8 performed 5 to 10 percentile points lower in math than their peers had in 2019. Student performance was similar across years in reading, though. Curriculum Associates, a curriculum and assessment company, also found that math performance was further behind than reading performance on its formative tests for students in grades 1-5 in fall 2020.

Ideally, information like this, from Renaissance and other assessment providers, can help districts plan how best to allocate resources to help students catch up—putting money and time where students have the greatest needs, McClarty said.

Still, there's a limit to what data like these can show, said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, an organization that consults for states and districts on testing issues.

For example, he said, the absence of a big dip in performance in early grades reading doesn't necessarily mean that students won't need extra support in reading this summer and fall.

It's possible that scores that look good on average could be hiding a lot of variability—some students who are doing very well and others who are really struggling. “We have a saying in New England: You can have one foot on a wood stove, and another on a block of ice, and on average you're pretty comfortable,” Marion said.

Another consideration is that students who are able to take these interim tests—either because they attend in-person classes or have a reliable internet connection—may be qualitatively different than those who aren't included in these samples. The most vulnerable students with the least access to instruction may not be present in these numbers, a concern that NWEA discussed in December with its data.

“It's the kids not represented that we really have to worry about,” Marion said.