Student Achievement Growth During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Spring 2022 Update

It has been over two years since the COVID-19 pandemic led to school closures and an abrupt shift to remote learning in March 2020. We continue MAPLE’s research agenda analyzing how the pandemic has affected student achievement in math and reading in three metro-Atlanta school districts. We focus on how students fared in school year 2021–22, the first full year of in-person instruction for students since the pandemic began.

What did we learn?

The return to near-universal in-person learning in SY 2021–22 did not yield substantial improvements in average math or reading achievement growth.

Students who were in Grades 1–3 when the pandemic hit have fared worse in math than students who were in middle school. Variation by grade level is much less pronounced in reading.

In SY 2021–22, national percentile rankings for students in south Fulton trended upward in math and reading, which led to a narrowing in average achievement differences between students in north and south Fulton.

Differences in achievement by race and ethnicity and economic status have grown in some districts but not in others. English learners and students with identified disabilities have not lost significant ground.

What are the policy implications?

Recovery efforts ought to target students who experienced the greatest declines in national rankings and have been the slowest to recover.

Extending learning time through summer school or after-school programs can boost student achievement, but getting students to participate is a major challenge.

The most promising strategy for promoting academic recovery is high-dosage small-group tutoring, but finding and training tutors can be difficult and costly. An alternative is virtual tutoring; studies of virtual tutoring during the pandemic show positive impacts on achievement.

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What questions did we answer?

1. What has been the effect of the pandemic on students’ achievement growth in math and reading through spring 2022?
2. How have changes to student achievement growth varied by grade level?
3. How have changes to student achievement growth varied by geography, race and ethnicity, and economic disadvantage?

What data did we use?

We used administrative data from three metro-Atlanta school districts: Clayton County Public Schools, DeKalb County School District, and Fulton County Schools. Our outcomes of interest were math and reading scores on the i-Ready and MAP Growth formative assessments. We used national percentile rankings to measure student progress, comparing student achievement during the pandemic to that of students throughout the United States from before the pandemic.

Why is this issue important?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had very uneven impacts on students in the metro-Atlanta area. Some students weathered the disruptions and are now at or near their pre-pandemic national achievement rankings. For many others, however, the pandemic significantly dampened their academic progress, and they remain substantially behind their pre-pandemic national rankings in math and reading achievement. Identifying the impacts of the pandemic on students is a critical first step toward directing recovery efforts to the students with the greatest needs.

What will we study next?

First, we will continue to provide our district partners with rapid-response research about their students’ academic performance during the pandemic. Second, we are conducting analyses of the pandemic’s impact by student gender, for English learners, and on the supply of teachers in metro- Atlanta districts. Third, we stand ready to assist our partners in developing and implementing recovery strategies and to rigorously evaluate the impact of those strategies so that limited resources can best be used to help students get back on track academically.

Want to learn more?

A report is available at gpl.gsu.edu/gpl-publications

The Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education (MAPLE) is a component of the Georgia Policy Labs (GPL), a research collaboration between Georgia State University and a variety of government agencies committed to leveraging the power of data to drive policy and programmatic decisions that lift children, students, and families—especially those experiencing vulnerabilities.

Suggested citation