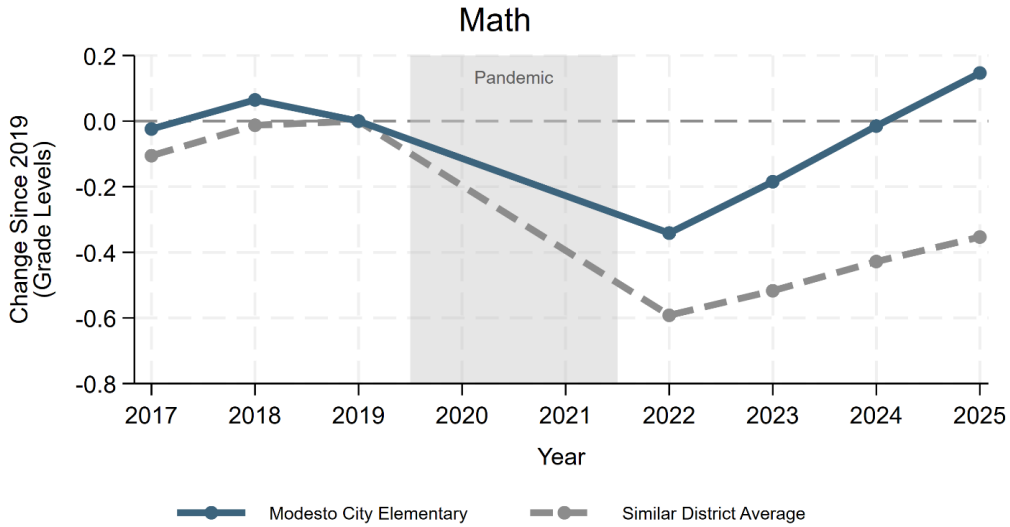


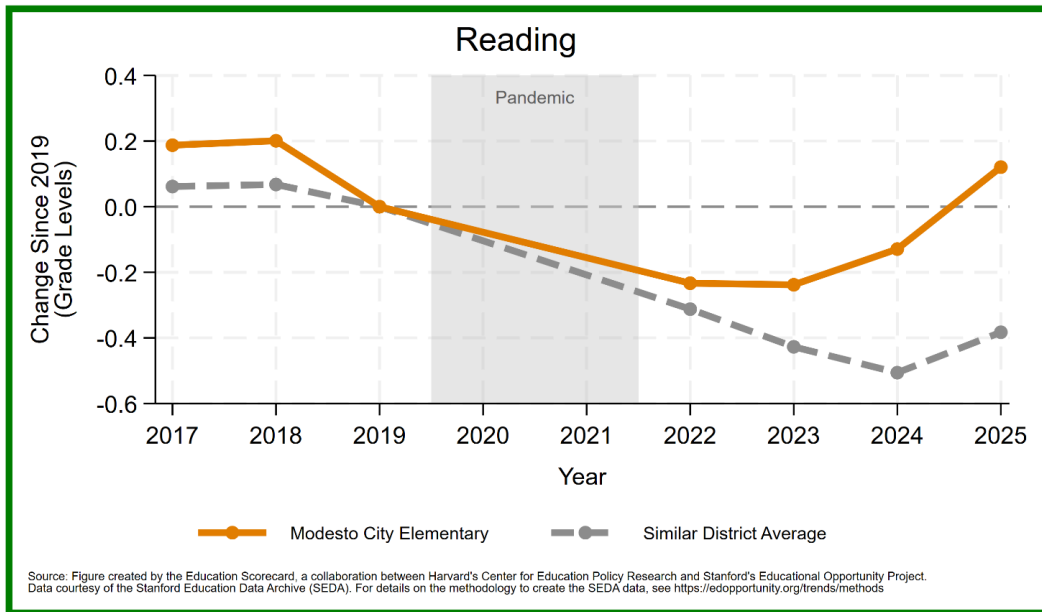
[Modesto City Schools](#)  
Modesto, California

## Modesto City Elementary, CA

### Rising Faster than Similar Districts in Reading



Source: Figure created by the Education Scorecard, a collaboration between Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research and Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project. Data courtesy of the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA). For details on the methodology to create the SEDA data, see <https://edopportunity.org/trends/methods>



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Similar Districts: Visalia Unified, San Bernardino City Unified, Greenfield Union, Hanford Elementary, Merced City Elementary

### Student Demographics:

Total student population: 16,851

Economically Disadvantaged: 83.9%

Three largest racial demographics:

Hispanic/Latino: 72.1%

White: 14.3%

Two or more races: 4.3%

Vanessa Buitrago Superintendent: July 1, 2025 - present

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- “The improvement in math and reading scores is a reflection of focused work by our teachers and school administrators. Beyond just monitoring patterns in achievement data, our educators closely adhere to our instructional core, a teaching model that emphasizes support for all learners and ensures equitable access for all students to rigorous content standards. We are very proud of these achievements, but we also know that there is far more to do. While test scores are just one way to measure learning, they are an important metric, so we want test scores to rise further in the years to come, across all grade levels.” – Dr. Vanessa Buitrago, Superintendent, Modesto City Schools

### **Background:**

In 2018, Modesto City Elementary School District faced a set of structural challenges that had accumulated over the years: attendance data took 30 days to reach principals and was still kept on spreadsheets; there was no English Learner department despite an EL enrollment above 30%. Elementary classrooms lacked a consistent standards-aligned curriculum with some teachers running instruction off in-house PowerPoints rather than adopted materials.

Over the following seven years, the district rebuilt its underlying operating system: a three-year Instructional Core Framework with literacy as a throughline, a direct-instruction K-8 math program with sustained coaching, an overhauled data infrastructure that made performance visible at every level, and deliberate investment in the principalship. Modesto City Elementary has now posted three consecutive years of gains on California's Smarter Balanced assessments in both English language arts and mathematics. Among similar high FRPL California districts, it is one of the few whose students are now performing above their 2019 baseline in both subjects.

### **Strategies for Success**

Instructional Core Framework and district-wide literacy focus

- The district convened approximately twenty influential teachers and principals to co-develop a three-year [Instructional Core Framework](#), giving Modesto City Elementary

a coherent, predictable plan for how instruction would evolve year over year and where staff could expect support.

- The district funded [LETRS](#) (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training for [teachers](#), paying approximately \$5,000 per teacher to complete the program. LETRS was introduced just before the pandemic and gave even veteran teachers a foundation in science-of-reading practices that shaped classroom instruction district-wide.

#### SWUN Math and a built-in sustainability plan

- For K–8 mathematics, the district adopted [SWUN Math](#) (now published under Paradigm Math and state-approved in California). The program provided a direct-instruction curriculum, [monthly on-site coaching and model lessons](#) at every elementary school, and quarterly principal convenings focused on what effective math instruction should look like in practice, including structured classroom walkthroughs.
- Anticipating the expiration of ESSER funds, the district hired and trained in-house math coaches in the second year of the SWUN partnership. The MCS coaches work alongside the SWUN team during the transition period and will increasingly carry the program on the district's own budget.
- The district pairs SWUN with a novel staffing move (see below) to route additional math instructional time to students without adding to general-fund costs.

#### Dedicated math-support substitutes at each elementary school

- Modesto City Schools used ESSER funds to fund itinerant substitutes at the lowest performing elementary schools whose sole assignment, for the entire school year, was to provide math pull-out support to students informed by ongoing formative assessment data.
- Unlike traditional substitutes who rotate in and out of classrooms to cover absences, these staff members stayed at the same site all year and moved between classrooms on a set schedule, freeing up the classroom teacher to pull small groups for targeted math instruction one hour at a time across the day.
- The substitute designation was intentional, allowing the district to withstand the role up quickly under California's collective-bargaining rules and to wind it down when funds expired without triggering layoffs of permanent staff.
- The model gave every elementary school a dedicated adult whose only job was to facilitate small-group math support, a resource typically reserved for the most well-resourced schools across a high-FRPL district.