



**PRESS RELEASE**

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New Education Scorecard Finds “U-Shaped Recovery”: High- and Low-Income Districts Improve Most Since 2022, While Middle-Income Districts (30–70% Federally Subsidized Lunches) Lag

The Education Scorecard Highlights the Progress of Over [100](#) Districts Improving Faster Than Their Peers in Both Math and Reading

“Learning Recession” Started in 2013: The Rate of Learning Loss in Reading Was Similar Before and After Pandemic as During It

“Science of Reading” Policy Linked to First Signs of a Turnaround in Literacy

Chronic Absenteeism Still a Headwind (Losing Equivalent of 1-2 Weeks of Learning per Year)

(May 13, 2026) In its fourth year, the Education Scorecard (a collaboration between the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, and faculty at Dartmouth College) provides a mixed picture of American education: a post-pandemic math rebound and early signals that comprehensive literacy reforms are beginning to pay off, but signs that middle-income districts are lagging behind.

The Scorecard uses data from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), which links state test results for roughly 35 million grade 3–8 students in 2022–2025 to a common national scale to track district-level changes in achievement across the country. This year’s [findings](#) draw on data through the 2024–2025 school year.

**1. A U-shaped recovery suggests the middle has been left behind.**

The post-pandemic recovery has been U-shaped, with larger improvements among the highest-income and the lowest-income school districts in the country. Middle-income districts (those with between 30 and 70 percent of students receiving federally subsidized lunches) have seen the least improvement on average.



The recovery in achievement in the highest-poverty districts seems largely driven by the federal pandemic relief funding. Without that relief, the average high-poverty district would have remained at its 2022 level of achievement.

**2. The “learning recession” began before COVID.**

The U.S. entered a “learning recession” in 2013—years before the pandemic—as student progress in math and reading stalled and began to decline. In reading, the average annual loss in achievement in the years leading up to the pandemic (2017–2019) was just as large as the loss sustained during the pandemic itself (2019–2022). Grade 8 reading scores in NAEP are now at their lowest point since 1990 and Grade 4 scores are at pre-2003 levels.

The slowdown in learning coincided with a dismantling of test-based accountability in schools and a dramatic rise in social media use among young people. Although it remains unclear whether and how much each factor caused the decline in scores, both are likely candidates.

**3. Although math began rebounding in 2022, reading continued to decline. The 2025 scores offer the first signs of a turnaround in reading.**

After the pandemic, math achievement rebounded immediately, with the annual rate of improvement returning to pre-2013 levels in 2022–2024. In reading, however, achievement continued to decline through 2024. In 2025, we see the beginnings of a turnaround in reading.

**4. “Science of reading” reforms are making a difference—but not everywhere.**

The recovery in reading appears to be related to state early-literacy reforms. All of the states which improved in reading between 2022 and 2025 were implementing comprehensive “science of reading” reforms (DC, IN, KY, MD, MN, MS, LA, and TN). None of the states which had eschewed literacy reforms as of January 2024 improved in reading between 2022 and 2025 (CA, GA, HI, MA, NH, NJ, RI, SD, WA, and WI). Nevertheless, many states which were implementing multiple elements of “science of reading” reforms have yet to turn around (e.g., AZ, FL, and NE). Evidence-based reading reform may be a necessary but insufficient path to improvement.

**5. High student absenteeism continues to be a headwind for learning.**

High student absenteeism continues to slow academic progress. 23% of students were chronically absent in 2024–2025, down from the post-pandemic peak, but still higher than the 15% before the pandemic. If student absence rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels, the recovery would have been meaningfully larger (0.03–0.05 grade equivalents) for districts at all income levels.

**6. We identify over 100 districts that are improving substantially faster than their peers in reading and math.**



There has been dramatic variation in the pace of recovery even among districts with similar student characteristics. This year, the Education Scorecard identifies 108 districts that have had large improvements in reading and math relative to matched peers in their own states: districts of similar size, socioeconomic composition, racial demographics, and urbanicity. To qualify, a district must:

- Serve more than 1,200 students in grades 3–8,
- Have at least four peer districts in their state, and
- Have experienced an increase in achievement of at least 0.3 grade levels in reading and math from 2022–2025 and 2019–2025.

To ensure that improvement was not driven by a changing student population, districts with large changes in enrollment or demographics did not qualify. Despite facing similar circumstances to their neighbors, these “Districts on the Rise” found a way to accelerate recovery.

“The pandemic was the mudslide that followed seven years of erosion in student achievement,” said Professor Tom Kane, faculty director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. “The ‘learning recession’ started a decade ago, after policymakers switched off the early warning system of test-based accountability and social media took over children’s lives. In this report, we highlight the work of a small group of state leaders who have started digging out by changing how students learn to read, and 108 local school districts that are finding ways to get students learning again. The recovery of U.S. education has begun. But it’s up to the rest of us to spread it.”

Professor Sean Reardon, faculty director of the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University and developer of the Stanford Education Data Archive, said, “From the early 1990s through 2013, public elementary and middle school students’ math and reading skills improved dramatically—by more than two grade levels in math, for example—and racial/ethnic achievement disparities narrowed. That shows that we *can* improve our public schools and equalize educational opportunity. But we haven’t been doing much of that for the last decade. It’s time now to make our public schools once again the engine of the American Dream.”

The report highlights four priorities for education leaders:

1. **Direct resources to districts with lingering pandemic-era learning losses.** Now that federal relief has expired, states should consider achievement losses since 2019 when identifying schools for comprehensive support and improvement. The federal relief dollars were heavily concentrated in the lowest-income districts (with more than 70 percent of students receiving federally subsidized lunches) and higher-income districts (those with less than 30 percent of children receiving lunch subsidies) had greater financial and social capital to draw on. But many middle-income school districts—those with 30–70 percent of students receiving federal lunch subsidies—received little federal aid and remain far behind 2019 levels of achievement.
2. **Lower student absenteeism.** If absence rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels, recovery would have been meaningfully faster. Getting students back into the habit of reliable attendance will continue to pay dividends for years to come.



**3. The federal government should focus its research dollars in three areas.**

It is crucial to learn more about the factors that have led to declining scores and the potential of different strategies for improving student performance. To that end, the federal government should support research in three areas:

- a. **The role of social media.** The pre-pandemic decline in achievement was likely partially driven by social media exposure. In the next year, researchers across the country will be reporting on the impact of cell phone bans. The federal government should coordinate efforts to reach consensus and reconcile any differences in findings. Early results suggest positive—but small—impacts on student achievement. There is also evidence of unintended increases in disciplinary actions, especially among minority students. If further research confirms these results, we should be evaluating new approaches to reducing cell phones in schools as well as social media use outside of school.
  - b. **Early literacy reforms.** As of March 2026, 42 states, plus the District of Columbia, have passed laws or policies related to evidence-based reading instruction—often referred to as the “science of reading” ([Schwartz, 2026](#)). But not every state’s efforts are succeeding. The federal government should provide funding to evaluate specific aspects of state policies—such as literacy coaches or third-grade retention policies—and share lessons learned.
  - c. **Lowering absenteeism.** Although there is evidence on effective methods for lowering absenteeism, most of those effects are small. The federal government should support and evaluate new approaches to lowering absenteeism.
4. **Pair “Districts on the Rise” with peers.** The Scorecard calls on states to pair each of the “Districts on the Rise” with one or more comparable districts in their state to share recovery strategies. Facilitating partnerships between districts could yield significant dividends if districts successfully share ideas for improvement.

“The 108 ‘Districts on the Rise’ are proof that leadership matters and demographics are not destiny,” said Tom Kane. “In districts with high poverty and persistent challenges, local leaders are finding ways to accelerate recovery. We owe it to our children to understand what they are doing and help spread it.”

\*Due to data limitations, Alaska, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont are not included in the 2026 Education Scorecard findings.

### **About the Education Scorecard**

The Education Scorecard is a collaboration between the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, and faculty at Dartmouth College. The Scorecard provides high-resolution, district-level analyses of academic recovery across the United States, using state test results for roughly 35 million grade 3–8 students in 2022–2025 linked to a nationally comparable scale.



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*The findings and opinions expressed in the research reported here are those of the authors and do not represent views of EDC, NCES, NAGB, or any of the aforementioned funders.*

#### **About the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University**

The Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, seeks to transform education through quality research and evidence. We clear the way to progress by testing conventional wisdom. Learn more at [www.cepr.harvard.edu](http://www.cepr.harvard.edu).

#### **About the Educational Opportunity Project**

The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, based at Stanford Graduate School of Education, harnesses data to help scholars, policymakers, educators, and parents improve educational opportunity for all children. The EOP built the Stanford Education Data Archive—the first comprehensive national database of academic performance from every public school in the United States, and its research team produces tools to explore patterns and trends in communities across the country and by race, gender, and socioeconomic conditions. Learn more at [www.edopportunity.org/trends/](http://www.edopportunity.org/trends/).

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