

Curriculum Associates RESEARCH

State of Student Learning in 2023: Academic Recovery Remains Slow in Most Grades

Reading and Mathematics
Research Summary | August 2023

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Summary

At the end of the third full school year after initial school closures in March 2020, academic recovery remains stalled. The latest research from Curriculum Associates on the state of student learning in 2023 describes reading and mathematics achievement based on the results of the *i-Ready Diagnostic* assessment, which is administered to more than 11 million students in Grades K–8 in the United States. Results are from a nationally representative sample across three school years—2018–2019, 2021–2022, 2022–2023—and show that at the end of the 2022–2023 school year, academic achievement in Grades 1–8 in both reading and mathematics has been slow to rebound to pre-pandemic levels.

Introduction

At the end of the third full school year after initial school closures in March 2020, academic recovery remains stalled. Research shows that academic achievement dropped after schools closed, and since then, recovery has been slow, or in many cases, stagnant since the initial drop. The latest research from Curriculum Associates shows that at the end of the 2022–2023 school year, academic achievement in Grades 1–8 in both reading and mathematics has been slow to rebound to pre-pandemic levels. While there is a small glimmer of hope in early-elementary reading where students in Grades 1 and 2 showed a slight increase in grade-level attainment from 2022 to 2023, achievement levels at the end of the 2022–2023 school year remain far below pre-pandemic levels.

The *State of Student Learning in 2023* describes reading and mathematics achievement based on the results of the *i-Ready Diagnostic* assessment administered to more than 11 million students in Grades K–8 in the United States. The results in this report are from a nationally representative sample of students who took the *i-Ready Diagnostic* in the 2022–2023 school year compared to nationally representative samples of students who took the *i-Ready Diagnostic* in the 2021–2022 school year and the 2018–2019 school year, the last full academic year prior to the pandemic.

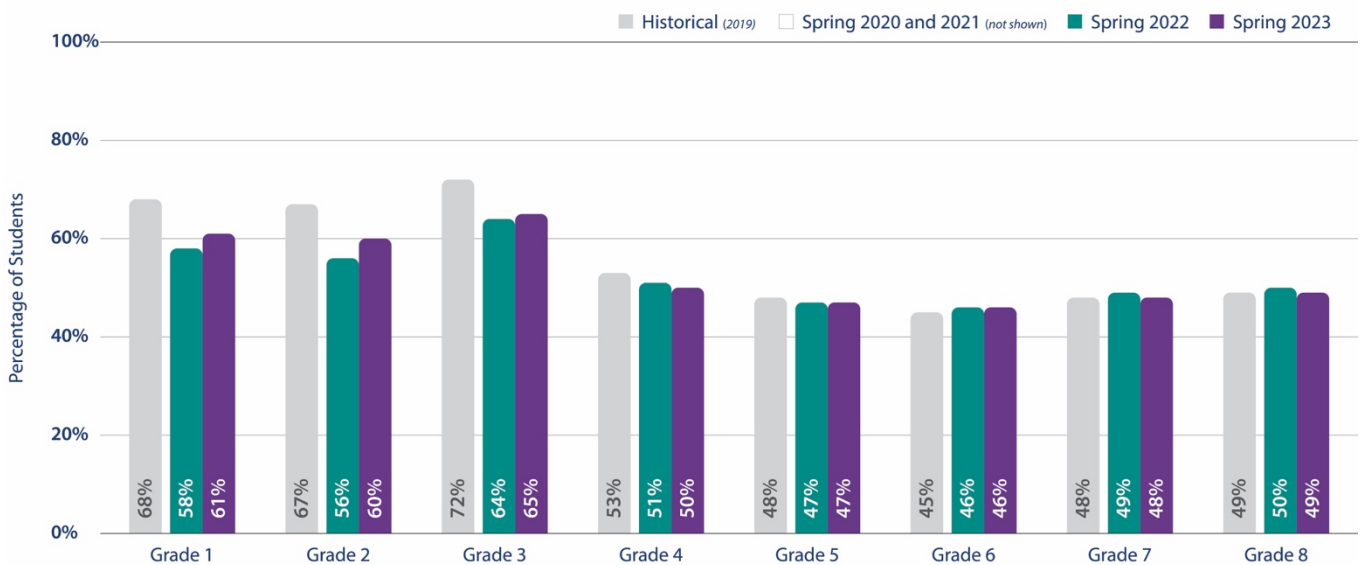
Read the full report—[The State of Student Learning in 2023: Academic Recovery Remains Slow in Most Grades](#)—to learn more.

Students in the early-elementary grades (i.e., Grades 1 and 2) did not experience the same academic disruptions during the pandemic, but reading results remain persistently lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Though Grades 1 and 2 students were not yet in school when the pandemic first shut down schools in March 2020, we still see an impact on academic achievement. Achievement levels in the 2022-2023 school year among Grades 1 and 2 students remain persistently below cohorts in those grades prior to the pandemic. In spring 2023, 61% of Grade 1 students and 60% of Grade 2 students placed On Grade Level on the *i-Ready Diagnostic*. While these results are slightly above achievement levels in spring 2022, they are seven percentage points below achievement levels in spring 2019.

In upper-elementary and middle school grades, achievement levels in reading did not drop after the pandemic and have remained stagnant, with fewer than 50% of students reading on grade level. The one exception is Grade 4. In 2023, 50% of Grade 4 students placed On Grade Level, a three-percentage-point drop from 2019. This is notable because Grade 4 students were in Grade 1 when schools initially closed—a crucial year for the development of foundational reading skills.

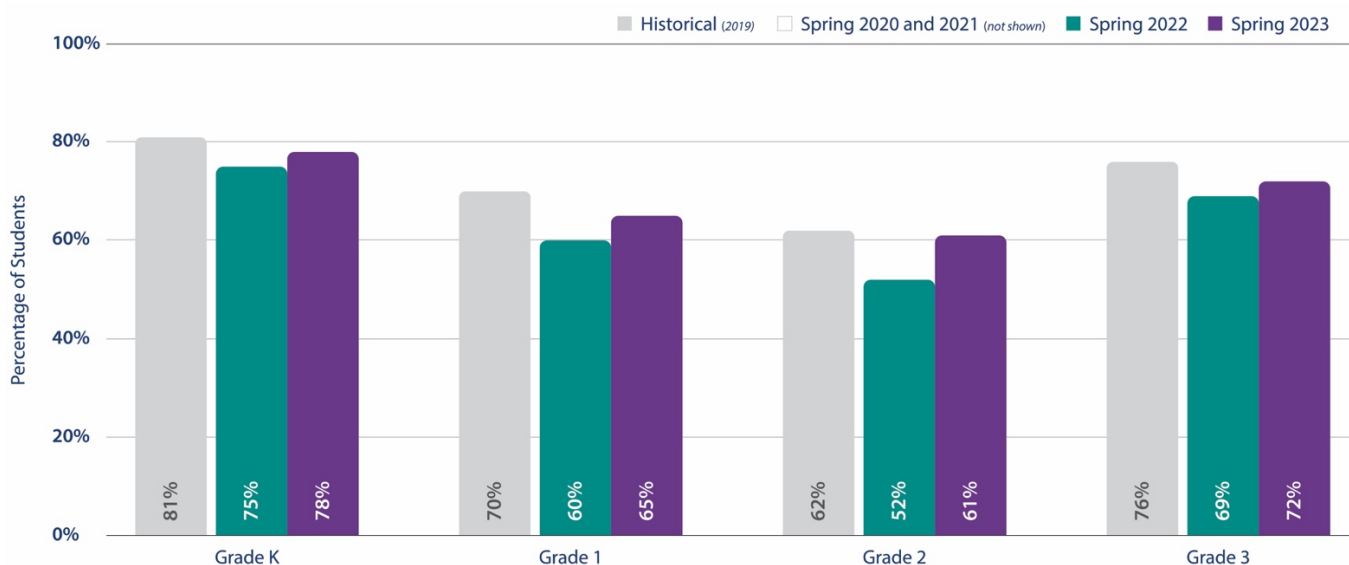
Figure 1: Students Placing On Grade Level in Reading in Grades 1-8



Early-elementary students show stronger results in Phonics than in 2022. However, achievement remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Overall, early-elementary students show a small increase in grade-level attainment in reading between spring 2022 and spring 2023. Examining the Phonics domain, specifically, there are more promising results for early readers. The percentage of students placing On Grade Level in Phonics is within one to five percentage points of pre-pandemic levels in Grades K-3. Though fewer students placed On Grade Level in Phonics in spring 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels, there was an increase in every grade, K-3, from 2022 to 2023. In Grade 2, the percentage of students placing On Grade Level in Phonics is nine percentage points higher in 2023 than in 2022, and only one percentage point below pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2: Students Placing On Grade Level in Phonics in Grades K-3



In mathematics, compared to pre-pandemic cohorts, fewer students are on grade level and more students are below grade level across all grades.

Achievement in mathematics is more concerning. The percentage of students placing On Grade Level in mathematics decreased substantially after the pandemic and remains stalled in spring 2023. Across all Grades 1-8, there are fewer students placing On Grade Level in mathematics than there were prior to the pandemic. At the same time, more students are placing Below Grade Level in mathematics than before the pandemic. The results from spring 2022 to spring 2023 remained flat.

Figure 3: Students Placing On Grade Level in Mathematics in Grades 1-8

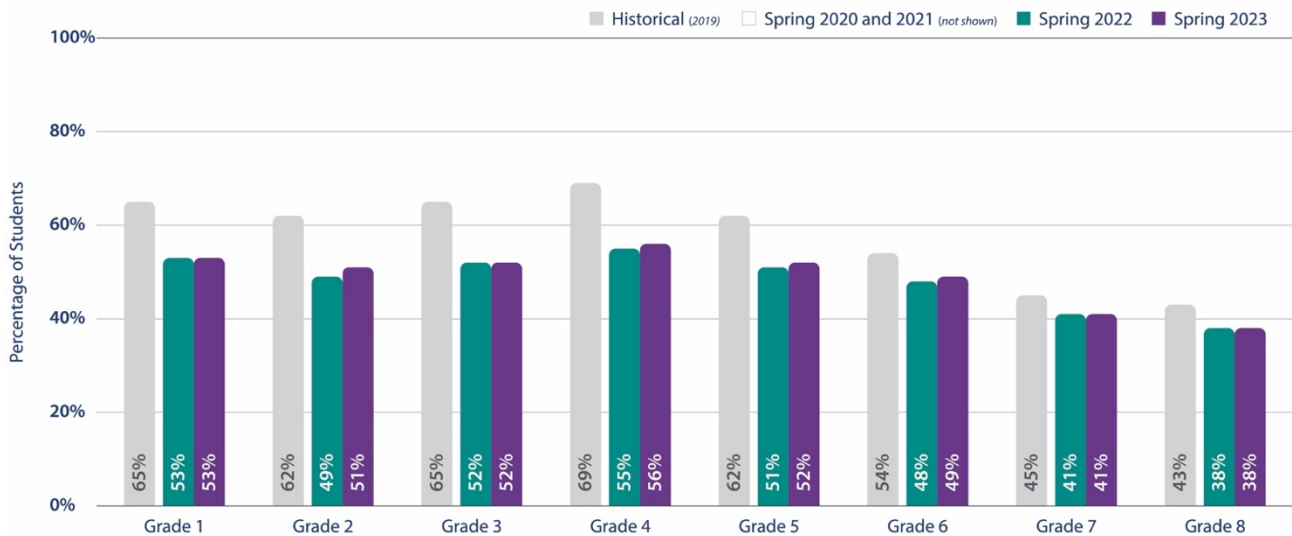
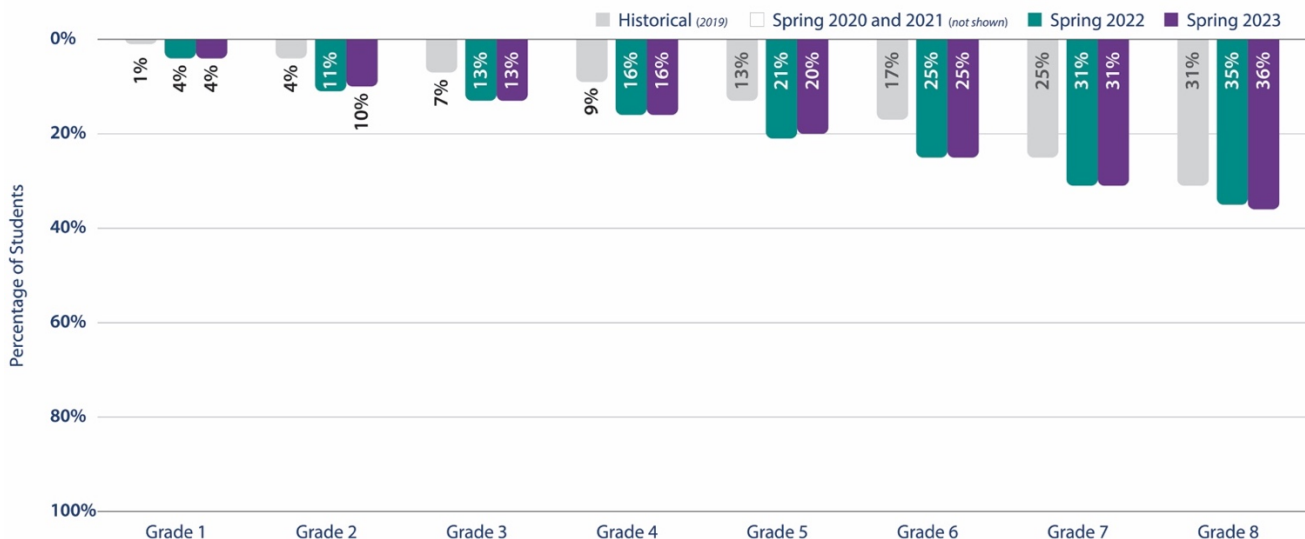


Figure 4: Students Placing Two or More Grade Levels Below Their Chronological Grade in Mathematics in Grades 1-8



Across all grade levels, there is a decline in fall and spring scale scores from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic cohorts.

We also examined the average scale scores at each grade level and growth from fall to spring. In 2021–2022 and 2022–2023, elementary students in reading and all students in mathematics scored lower on the fall Diagnostic and on the spring Diagnostic at the end of the school year. Fall-to-spring growth increased in Grades 1 and 2 in reading and in Grade 1 in mathematics from the 2021–2022 school year to the 2022–2023 school year. Across Grades 3–8, fall-to-spring growth remained flat in both reading and mathematics.

Figure 5: Fall-to-Spring Growth in Scale Score Points in Grade 3

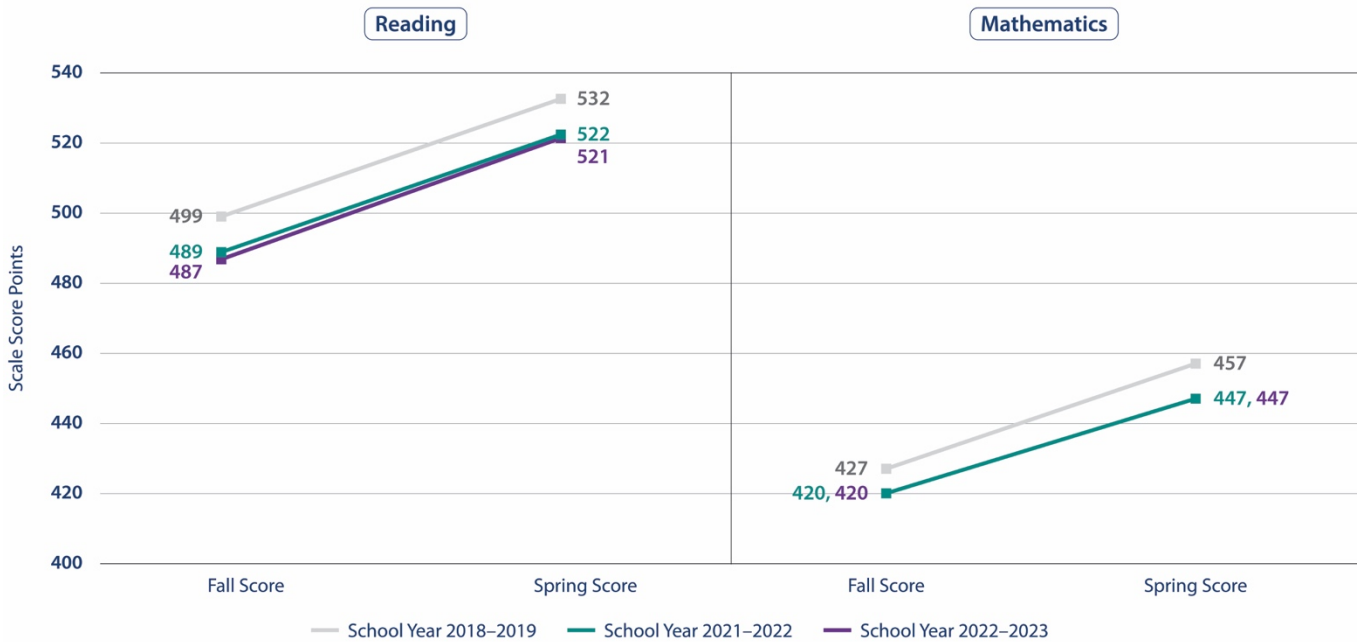


Figure 6: Fall-to-Spring Growth in Scale Score Points in Grades 1–8

Grade	Reading			Mathematics		
	2018–2019	2021–2022	2022–2023	2018–2019	2021–2022	2022–2023
1	55	49	53	33	29	32
2	42	43	46	29	27	28
3	33	33	34	30	28	28
4	25	26	26	26	25	24
5	21	21	21	19	20	20
6	16	15	15	16	17	17
7	13	13	12	12	13	13
8	11	12	12	11	12	13

Historical inequities persist between schools serving majority Black and Latino students and schools serving majority White students.

Schools serving majority Black and Latino students had larger drops after spring 2019 than schools serving majority White students. In 2023, early-elementary students in schools serving majority Black students saw the biggest increases from spring 2022. Despite this trend, achievement levels in schools serving majority Black and Latino students remained far below achievement levels in schools serving majority White students.

Figure 7: Students Placing On Grade Level by School Demographics in Grade 3



Historical inequities persist between schools in low-income communities and schools in higher-income communities.

The historical inequities between schools serving students from lower-income communities compared to schools serving students from higher-income communities increased in the years following the pandemic. The percentage of students on grade level declined following the pandemic in all median household incomes; however, the decline was slightly greater in households earning less than \$50,000 and \$50,000 to \$75,000, compared to those earning more than \$75,000. As a result, historical inequities increased following the pandemic and have persisted with stagnant results from spring 2022 to spring 2023.

Figure 8: Students Placing On Grade Level by Income in Grade 3



Assessment results in spring 2023 show that academic recovery is slow and will require more support and more time.

The spring 2023 results from the *i-Ready Diagnostic* tell a story that is consistent with results seen on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, on some state assessments, and in other research. Despite the significant and unending efforts of devoted educators across the country, academic recovery has been slow and inconsistent. Even cohorts entering elementary schools in 2021 and 2022 remain below academic achievement levels seen in Grades 1 and 2 cohorts prior to the pandemic. This points to the persistent and unprecedented impact of the pandemic on all parts of children’s lives, from preschool through their elementary school years and beyond.

These results are disheartening, but we know from other research that students can reach grade-level proficiency despite falling behind. [Research](#) released by Curriculum Associates in August 2023 tracked student growth across multiple cohorts and found that setting ambitious but attainable growth goals, alongside classroom instruction and supplemental academic support, is a viable pathway to achieving grade-level proficiency (Rome & Daisher, 2023).

Reference

Rome, L., & Daisher, T. (2023). *i-Ready Stretch Growth in the pandemic context*. Curriculum Associates.

https://cdn.bfldr.com/LS6J0F7/at/k4fhxpkpkf8bmhtcvqpt737g/Stretch_Growth_Technical_Doc_-_2_Year.docx