Curriculum Associates RESEARCH

Pathways to Success: How Stretch Growth® Goals Support Learning Recovery

Reading and Mathematics
August 2023

i-Ready®

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Summary

Given pandemic-related unfinished learning, accelerated growth is needed to recover lost instructional time. *i-Ready*'s Stretch Growth offers a metric for quantifying the growth needed to reach grade-level proficiency. To better understand how these targets may help chart a path to proficiency, we explored growth patterns across consecutive years and ending grade-level placements for all students with a focused examination of students well below grade level. Students who achieved Stretch Growth targets two years in a row were much better positioned to achieve proficiency, with at least three times the proportion of students reaching grade level compared to students who demonstrated Typical Growth year over year. We discuss the broader implications of these findings, highlighting practices that may support achieving Stretch Growth targets and eventual grade-level proficiency.

i-Ready®

Introduction

Accelerating student learning is more important than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unforeseen disruptions that have resulted in unfinished learning for students across the country. Reading and mathematics scores are dropping, and learning gaps between students in the most privileged and underserved communities are growing increasingly wider (Curriculum Associates, 2022; NAEP, 2022).

Helping students recover unfinished learning is a necessary next step to begin to address the ever-growing gaps in learning. Average growth rates are not enough to address unfinished learning, particularly for those students furthest behind (Dawson, 2022). Dawson (2022) found students who are already behind in reading and mathematics show slower growth than those students who are on grade level. Learners who need support will continue to fall further behind and learning gaps may exponentially increase.

Educators who are working every day to help students succeed in grade-level work need metrics that identify where students are, the amount of growth needed to reach grade level, and can be used to set individual goals for students.

This report is one in a series on Stretch Growth being released by Curriculum Associates in 2023, examining students' achievement of grade-level placement in relation to growth targets. Overall, our research shows that across Grades K–8, the proportion of students who started two or more grade levels below and reached grade level in two years was at least three times larger among students who achieved Stretch Growth compared to Typical Growth.[1]

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[1]Only students who met 100% of Stretch Growth targets for two consecutive years are categorized as reaching Stretch Growth.

What is Stretch Growth?

Curriculum Associates developed Stretch Growth to chart a path to proficiency for every student. Stretch Growth is an individualized target for student learning intended to provide an ambitious, yet attainable, pathway to grade-level proficiency that goes beyond a Typical Growth trajectory (i.e., Figure 1). Stretch Growth targets are personalized, potentially multiyear targets aligned to the level of growth needed to reach grade-level readiness. Stretch Growth targets can be defined in goals and tracked toward progress. Students who are further behind have larger growth targets to help them catch up, and it will take many students more than one year to achieve proficiency.

Stretch Growth offers quantifiable targets, and when combined with educational practices and principles proven to create better classroom experiences for students and teachers (i.e., high expectations, personalized instruction, and access to ongoing data to inform instruction), can support students in reaching grade-level readiness.

Figure 1: *i-Ready*'s Typical Growth and Stretch Growth Targets Provide an Individualized Path to Proficiency
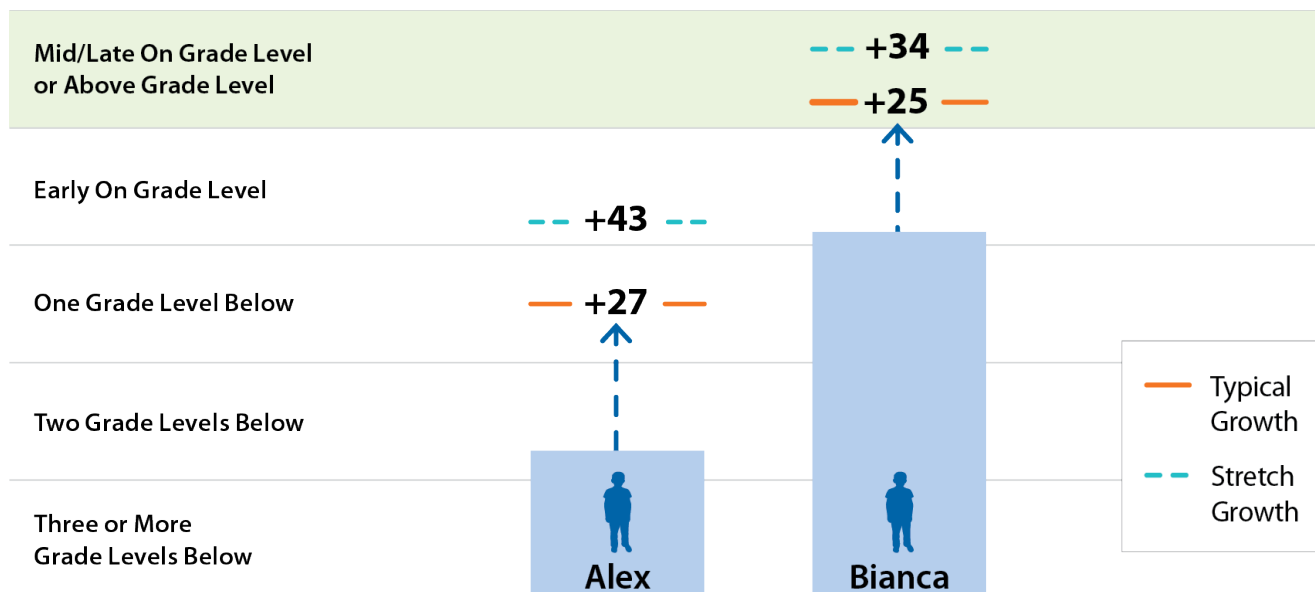
Findings

This research evaluated trends in student growth patterns and subsequent grade-level placement. Initially, this work offered further validity evidence for the impact of Stretch Growth as a pathway to grade-level proficiency for all learners (Rome & Daisher, 2023). To further explore what this meant for students requiring the most support to reach grade level, we offered a focused examination of these trends for students at least two grade levels behind their chronological grade. This research compared placement level at the end of two years to determine if Typical Growth was sufficient to accelerate students who are the furthest behind to grade-level understanding, and explored if Stretch Growth improved these outcomes. We found that Stretch Growth targets can be a pathway to helping students achieve grade-level placement: Students who are multiple grades behind in their learning than their chronological grade can reach grade level by setting and meeting Stretch Growth targets two years in a row. Though these ambitious goals may be challenging to meet, even the practice of striving for Stretch Growth targets can support students in accelerating their learning.

The findings from this study are based on data from more than 2.4 million students who completed the *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Reading and more than 3 million students who completed the *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Mathematics in Grades K–7 in the 2021–2022 school year and Grades 1–8 in the 2022–2023 school year. For full details of research methodology, sample, and findings, see the technical report (Curriculum Associates, 2023a).

## More Students Reached Grade Level If They Met Stretch Growth Targets

Comparing Stretch Growth targets (i.e., ambitious goals beyond average student growth) and Typical Growth targets (i.e., goals consistent with average student growth) over two years, at least three times the percentage of students reached grade-level placement when meeting Stretch Growth as opposed to Typical Growth. While this trend was consistent across all grades, Grades 2–3 reading and Grades 4–5 mathematics offer important insight into the growth potential and systemic impact of Stretch Growth.

Reading

In reading, across all grades, we saw, proportionally, more students reach grade level after two years of Stretch Growth compared to any other growth pattern (i.e., Figure 2). Focusing on Grades 2–3 students, we saw 89% of students who began Grade 2 two or more grade levels below and met their Stretch Growth targets year over year ended Grade 3 having reached grade-level placement. Figure 3 shows how proportionally more students reach grade level each year after achieving Stretch Growth.
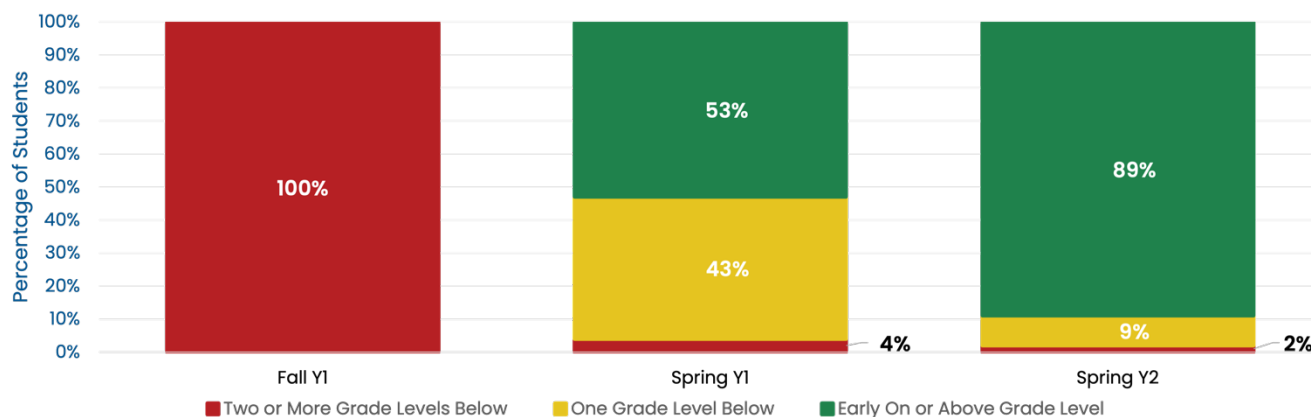
Of students who met Typical Growth targets, only 31% placed on grade level at the end of Grade 3, and a full 26% of those students remained two or more grade levels behind. That is, the percentage of students ending Grade 3 on grade level was about three times greater among those who met their Stretch Growth targets than those whose learning grew the typical amount.

Figure 2: Percentage of Students Reaching Grade Level Based on Growth Targets Achieved Over Two Years—Reading
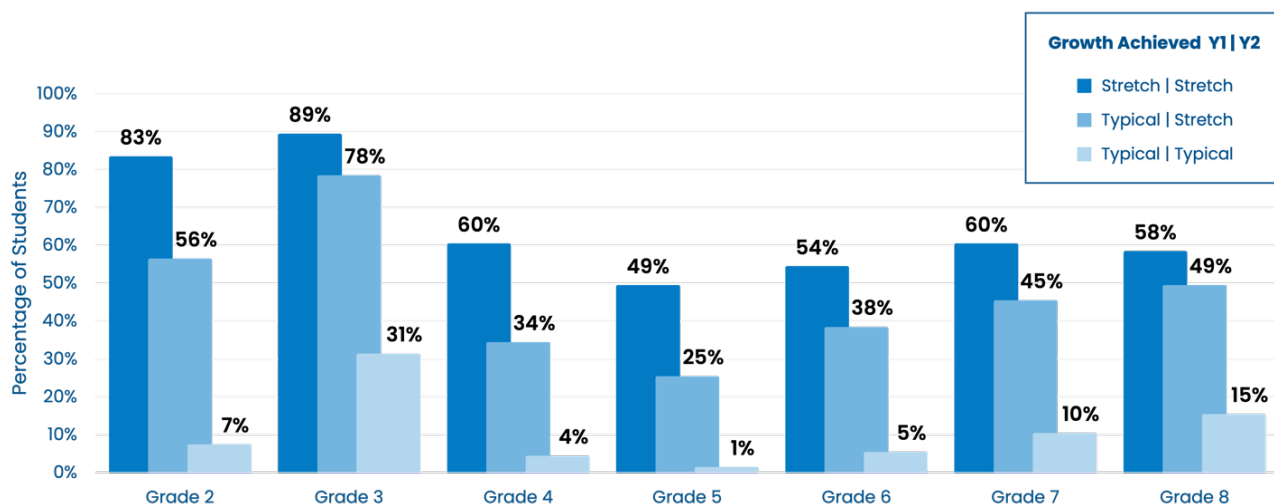
Note: All students began Year 1 (i.e., Y1) two or more grade levels below. Stretch Growth represents ambitious growth. Typical Growth represents average growth.

Figure 3: Ending Placement Levels for Students Starting Two or More Grade Levels Below and Meeting Stretch Growth Each Year—Reading, Grades 2–3

Mathematics

In mathematics, we again see, proportionally, more students reach grade level after two years of Stretch Growth than students demonstrating any other growth pattern (i.e., Figure 4). Focusing on Grades 4–5 students, we see 75% of students who started Grade 4 two or more grade levels below and met their Stretch Growth year over year achieved grade-level placement by the end of Grade 5 (i.e., Figure 5).

Of students who met Typical Growth targets, 15% placed on grade level at the end of Grade 5. That is, the percentage of students ending Grade 5 on grade level was five times greater among those who met their Stretch Growth targets than those whose learning grew the typical amount.

Figure 4: Percentage of Students Reaching Grade Level Based on Growth Targets Achieved Over Two Years—Mathematics
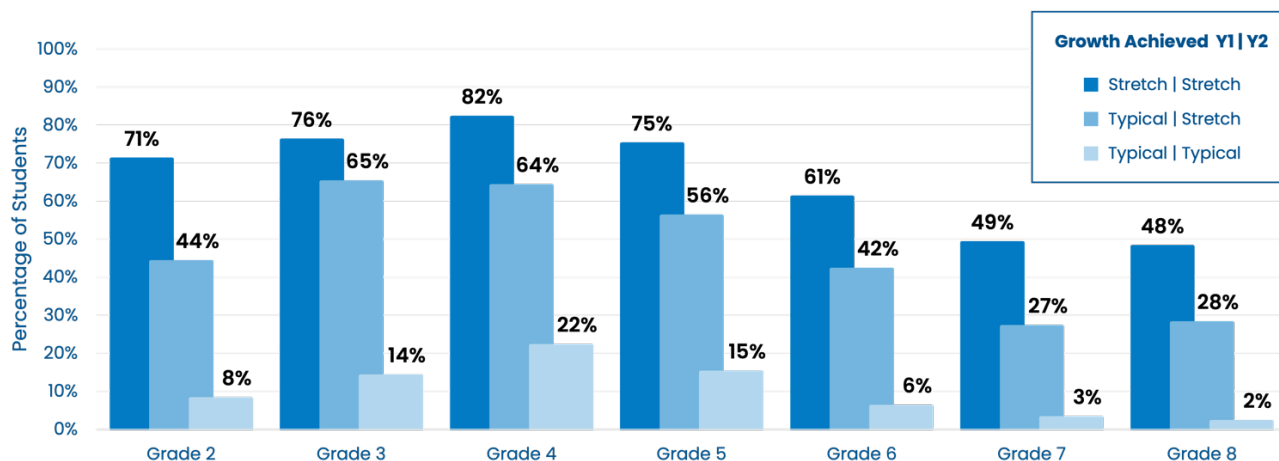
Note: All students began Y1 two or more grade levels below. Stretch Growth represents ambitious growth. Typical Growth represents average growth.

Figure 5: Ending Placement Levels for Students Starting Two or More Grade Levels Below and Meeting Stretch Growth Each Year—Mathematics, Grades 4–5
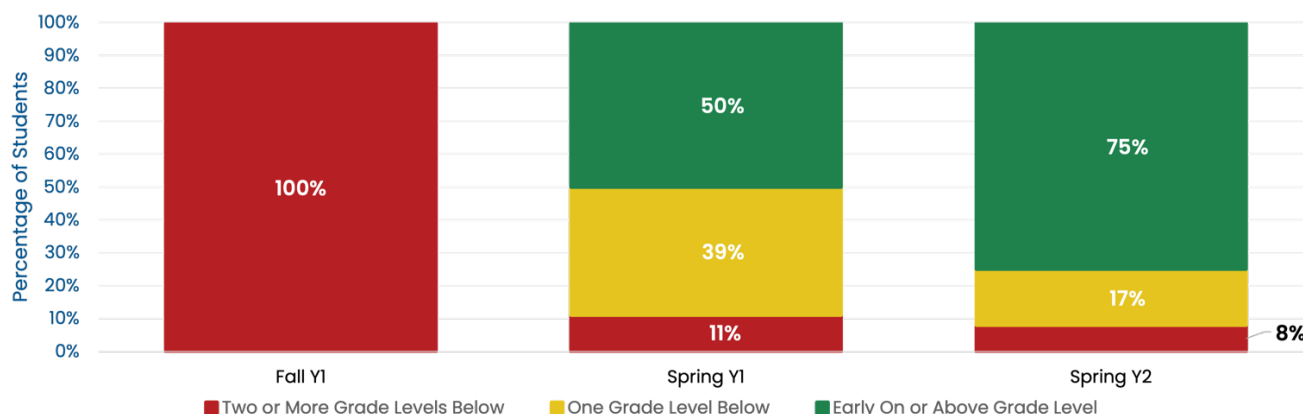
Striving for Stretch Growth Targets Can Create a Path to Grade Level

Even if growth targets are not completely achieved, setting ambitious expectations through Stretch Growth can be an impactful practice that can accelerate student learning toward grade-level proficiency.

Students who met some, but not all, of their Stretch Growth goals still showed significant gains in their learning. In Grades 2–3 reading, students who began below grade level and reached grade level after two years of Typical Growth (as seen in Figure 2), met 82% of their Stretch Growth goals on average. In mathematics, students in Grades 4–5 following that same growth pattern met an average of 81% of Stretch Growth goals (as seen in Figure 4). Though this did not qualify as "meeting Stretch Growth," it demonstrates that even approaching Stretch Growth targets may be enough to scale students to grade level.

Examining this another way, students who met Stretch Growth for even one year, rather than two years consecutively, still demonstrated higher proportions of students reaching grade level than among those who only met Typical Growth. The percentage of students reaching grade-level placement after a year of Typical Growth and then Stretch Growth was at least 1.5 times greater than students who reached after two years of only Typical Growth.

Fewer Students Meet Stretch Growth Targets in Later Grades

Fewer middle school students reached grade level (when starting two or more grade levels below) compared to elementary school students. This trend was especially pronounced in mathematics— in Grades K–5, at least 70% of students reached grade level after meeting their Stretch Growth goals for two years; however, in Grades 6–8, this decreased to approximately 60% or lower. Examining Typical Growth, we see only a small percentage (i.e., 6% or less) of middle school students achieved grade-level placement in mathematics, compared to up to 22% of elementary school students. These data may demonstrate that skill gaps compound year over year, and attaining grade-level proficiency becomes more challenging. Intervening early is critical to bring students to grade level; once there, we see a high proportion of students remain on grade level (Rome & Daisher, 2022).

Even so, around 50% of middle school students who began two or more grade levels below were able to attain grade-level placement after two years of meeting Stretch Growth, compared to 2%–6% (depending on grade and subject) of students who achieved only Typical Growth targets. Though the data indicate that it may be more challenging for middle school students to achieve grade-level placement when starting significantly behind, reaching Stretch Growth targets still provides a strong pathway for doing so.

Implications

Our findings present two compelling implications for the practices and policies that drive student learning: 1) setting high expectations through ambitious and attainable growth targets, and 2) identifying and addressing gaps in learning early with individualized learning supports. Remedying unfinished learning requires not only quantifying just *how much* growth is needed to reach proficiency, but also qualifying *what* growth is needed (i.e., in what areas, on which standards) to effectively scale students to grade level. Supporting our younger learners in addressing gaps in their learning with individualized instruction may help prevent these skill deficits from compounding across time.

High-Expectation Strategies

Our research confirms that even if growth targets are not completely achieved, setting ambitious expectations through Stretch Growth is crucial. Creating a culture of learning that places a value on high expectations for all learners is a powerful and necessary approach to assist students in achieving reading and mathematics proficiency.

The findings of this study demonstrate the remarkable growth of students who showed steady progress and worked toward Stretch Growth targets, enabling them to bridge the gap and reach grade-level placement in their reading or mathematics skills within a relatively short period. Further, approaching Stretch Growth targets may be sufficient to support and increase student understanding to grade level. Once students reach grade-level proficiency, they are positioned for further academic success.

Addressing Gaps Early with Individualized Learning Supports

The current research demonstrates there were proportionally far fewer students reaching grade level in middle school than elementary school. Addressing gaps in learning and bringing students up to grade level early may be very impactful to future learning as unfinished learning compounds and as students are promoted to the next grade unprepared for grade-level content. Supporting students to reach grade-level readiness effectively and at scale requires learning tools and supports for educators and students.

Individualized learning supports, in a variety of formats, can be an effective tool for addressing these gaps. Students receive personalized instruction, targeting their most needed skills, placing them on a path to meeting grade-level expectations and long-term academic success. In additional research released alongside this report, we found students who met Stretch Growth or grade-level placement completed more hours and lessons on *i-Ready Personalized Instruction*, providing further evidence for individualized learning support as a practice that may help in attaining Stretch Growth goals and eventual grade-level placement (Curriculum Associates, 2023b).

Helping Students Accelerate Their Learning

Results from this study underscore the importance of finding effective, feasible strategies to help students achieve ambitious growth. Stretch Growth can be a powerful metric for helping educators quantify the growth needed for their students—even those furthest behind—to reach grade-level proficiency. Achieving accelerated growth requires the education community to identify both the amount and specific areas in which growth is needed. It is important educators and administrators have access to evidence-based interventions that can accomplish both and aid in accelerating student learning.

- **States and school districts** should be investing in immediate and scalable solutions that can support those students most in need and who have suffered the most from pandemic disruption and lost learning.

- **Educators** need access to and training on tools to measure and assess student learning and identify and quantify the amount of growth needed to bring students to grade-level proficiency.

- **Parents and families** need more insight into their child's growth, learning plans, and the skills they need to build to reach grade level. Families can reiterate high expectations for their children, give them the confidence to pursue ambitious goals, and encourage them to persist, as the pathway to grade-level learning may take multiple years.

As the nation continues to focus on the how and when of learning growth and recovery, the only certain way to effectively and equitably close gaps and accelerate learning is to empower teachers and classrooms with the tools to gather, assess, and respond to data to set their students on accelerated growth pathways to success. In doing so, we can ensure sustainable and scalable solutions to a persistent and growing problem by taking advantage of the incredible resources already available—the expertise of our educators and the potential of our students.

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