

Historic Negative Scholastic Impacts of Social Distancing

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the “nation’s report card,” tests fourth and eighth graders across the U.S. to measure student achievement
- › The results are in from the 2022 NAEP Mathematics Assessment, which was last given in 2019, before the pandemic
- › The results show a staggering decline in test scores – the largest drop in mathematics scores seen since the initial assessments were given in 1990
- › Among eighth graders, the average math score decreased by eight points since 2019 and was lower than all previous assessments dating back to 2003; a 10-point decrease is considered equivalent to about a year of learning
- › Average reading scores for fourth graders declined by five points in the Northeast region, three points in the Midwest and South, and two points in the West
- › In the U.K., the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has also warned about declines in speech and motor skills in children since the pandemic

Detriments to children’s social, mental and emotional health weren’t considered as the U.S. and other parts of the world plunged into lockdown-mode in early 2020. Only now, years later, are we beginning to see the negative effects play out in the form of historic learning setbacks, falling test scores and developmental delays.

Keeping millions of children away from school and isolated from normal social interactions for periods of weeks, months and years was an unprecedented experiment. As were mask mandates that forced children to cover their faces for entire schooldays – during a time in their lives when observing facial expressions is key to social and emotional development.

In December 2021, a systematic review of peer-reviewed journal articles revealed one precise reason why COVID-19 measures like mask mandates shouldn't have happened – no one knows how they affect crucial elements of childhood, including psychological development, language development, emotional development, social behavior and school success.¹ The data that are coming in, however, are alarming.

'Nation's Report Card' Reveals Historic Learning Setbacks

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the "nation's report card," tests fourth and eighth graders across the U.S. to measure student achievement. It's usually given every two years between January and March, and tests students in all 50 states as well as 26 of the largest U.S. school districts.²

The results are in from the 2022 NAEP Mathematics Assessment, which was last given in 2019, before the pandemic. The results show a staggering decline in test scores – the largest drop in mathematics scores seen since the initial assessments were given in 1990.³

Mathematics scores declined for fourth and eighth graders in nearly all the states and jurisdictions tested. For fourth graders, the average math score declined by five points and was lower than all assessment years since 2005. Among eighth graders, the average math score decreased by eight points since 2019 and was lower than all previous assessments dating back to 2003.⁴

To put this into perspective, a 10-point increase or decrease is considered equivalent to about a year of learning. Peggy Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, told news outlet Breitbart:⁵

“It is a serious wakeup call for us all. In NAEP, when we experience a 1- or 2-point decline, we’re talking about it as a significant impact on a student’s achievement. In math, we experienced an 8-point decline – historic for this assessment.”

Some areas, such as Cleveland, had even greater declines, with fourth-grade reading dropping 16 points and fourth-grade math falling 15. Across the U.S., only 26% of eighth graders were proficient in math, a decline from 34% in 2019.⁶

Reading Scores Dropped From 2019 to 2022

Average reading scores also dropped since prepandemic times. Average reading scores for fourth graders declined by five points in the Northeast region, three points in the Midwest and South, and two points in the West.

Average reading scores at fourth grade declined in 30 states/jurisdictions compared to 2019, which was the largest number of states with score declines in this age group since the assessment began in 1992.

Further, 37% of fourth graders performed below the NAEP Basic level, a cutoff that measures knowledge of fundamental skills. Eighth graders also suffered from declining performance in reading, with scores going down in three of four U.S. regions and in 33 states/jurisdictions. According to NAEP:⁷

“In 2022, the average reading score at both fourth and eighth grade decreased by 3 points compared to 2019. At fourth grade, the average reading score was lower than all previous assessment years going back to 2005 and was not significantly different in comparison to 1992.

At eighth grade, the average reading score was lower compared to all previous assessment years going back to 1998 and was not significantly different compared to 1992.”

Speaking with The New York Times, Miguel Cardona, the U.S. secretary of education, stated, “I want to be very clear: The results in ... [the] nation’s report card are appalling and unacceptable. This is a moment of truth for education. How we respond to this will determine not only our recovery, but our nation’s standing in the world.”⁸

Inequities Highlighted, Gaps Widen

Differences were highlighted not only among regions but also across races and performance level. Black and Hispanic fourth graders had greater declines than white students, while test scores fell the most among lower performing students, compared to higher performing students.⁹

The effects are being felt not only in the U.S. but worldwide. Prior to the pandemic, 57% of 10-year-olds in low and middle-income countries could not read properly, but this has increased to an estimated 70%. In Latin America, 10-year-olds unable to read rose from 50% to 80% during that time. The effects could be lifelong, leading to \$21 trillion lost due to lower lifetime earnings.¹⁰

Around the world, schools closed for an average of 95 school days from March 2020 to February 2021,¹¹ but while many schools in western countries continued to teach remotely, those in lower income countries often did not. There were also significant differences in how long full and partial shutdowns persisted. Schools in sub-Saharan Africa were closed for 32 weeks, compared to 73 weeks in South Asia.¹²

In short, existing education inequalities have only worsened due to the closures. Lower-educated parents in the Netherlands reported they felt less able to help children with schoolwork during the closures, for instance, while middle class parents in the United Kingdom spent more time homeschooling their children than parents from the working class.¹³

Further, Breitbart reported, surveys conducted as part of NAEP’s 2022 test highlighted the divide between struggling students and higher achievers: “When schools shifted to

remote learning, higher performing students were far more likely to have reliable access to quiet spaces, computers and help from their teachers, the survey found.”¹⁴

“If this is the case, and these learning losses persist, they can be detrimental for development of skills in the long run, and in turn lead to an increase of the existing inequalities in opportunities in education and on the labor market,” researchers wrote in PLOS One. Indeed, using data from 300,000 students in the Netherlands, they uncovered large inequalities in learning losses during the COVID-19 pandemic based on parents’ education and income.¹⁵

Lockdowns Disrupted Toddlers’ Ability to Play, Speak

In the U.K., the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) has also warned about declines in speech and motor skills in children since the pandemic.¹⁶ Members report that the number of toddlers in need of communication help has skyrocketed. Kamini Gadhok, the chief executive of the RCSLT, told The Telegraph:¹⁷

“The bigger the gap by the time the child is 5, the more difficult it is to close. Our members tell us that growing lists and waiting times for speech and language therapy are dramatically impacting on their ability to provide the support which children need for the best start in life.”

Fewer children reached the expected standard for communication skills, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, problem-solving and personal-social development, falling to 85.3% from 88.1% over the last 14 quarters.

“The pandemic reduced the opportunities for children to play with other children and highlights the importance of nurseries and early years settings for language development,” Doug Simkiss, Ph.D., chairman of the British Association for Community Child Health, told The Telegraph.¹⁸

RCSLT also noted that demand for speech and language therapy was double that of pre-COVID levels. Alison Morton, the executive director of the Institute of Health Visiting, explained:¹⁹

“The latest national child development data highlight a worrying picture with fewer children at or above the expected level of development at 2 to 2.5 years. While the majority of children are developing as expected, a significant and growing minority are not.

The pandemic and its impacts are not over. In many areas, despite health visitors’ best efforts, they are now struggling to meet growing levels of need, vulnerability and a backlog of children who need support.”

It's likely that masks also played a part in children's delays. A 2021 psychology report²⁰ stated masks are likely to be causing psychological harm to children and interfering with development.²¹ “The extent of psychological harm to young people is unknown,” the report stated, “due to the unique nature of the ‘social experiment’ ... in schools, and in wider society.”²² Other reported adverse effects of masks include:²³

Increase in headaches and sweating	Decreased cognitive precision
Removal of visual cues, which is detrimental to people with hearing loss	Interference with social learning in children
Obscured nonverbal communication	Distorted verbal speech

Will 2019 Be the Pinnacle of US Education?

The silver lining may be that 75% of countries have made some plans to help children catch up from the disastrous effects of COVID-19-related school closures. Tutoring, increased focus on reading and math, and return to in-person learning may help some children to close the gap on the learning they lost during the pandemic.²⁴

However, schools in one-quarter of countries have no plans to help students catch up, and many aren't even tracking if students have returned to school. Speaking with the Economist, Jaime Saavedra, global director for World Bank's education division, called

school closures perhaps “the worst educational crisis for a century, and certainly since the world wars,” adding:²⁵

“My fear is that 15 years from now people will be writing papers documenting consistently lower earnings, productivity and well-being for people who are now between six and 20 years old. I don’t see societies taking this seriously.”

Even within the U.S., it’s unclear how, or when, students will recover. In 2021, the U.S. government invested \$123 billion in schools. Districts were required to spend at least 20% of the funding on academic recovery, but, The New York Times reported, it’s a “threshold some experts believe is inadequate for the magnitude of the problem.”²⁶

The reality is that no one knows if these gaps in learning can be closed – or what further damage could be inflicted if lockdowns are imposed again during a future pandemic.

For now, efforts must focus on helping to undo the academic and social damage that’s been done. Without it, education may continue to suffer. As noted by Kevin Huffman, chief executive of Accelerate, a nonprofit tutoring organization, “We cannot, as a country, declare that 2019 was the pinnacle of American education.”²⁷

Sources and References

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