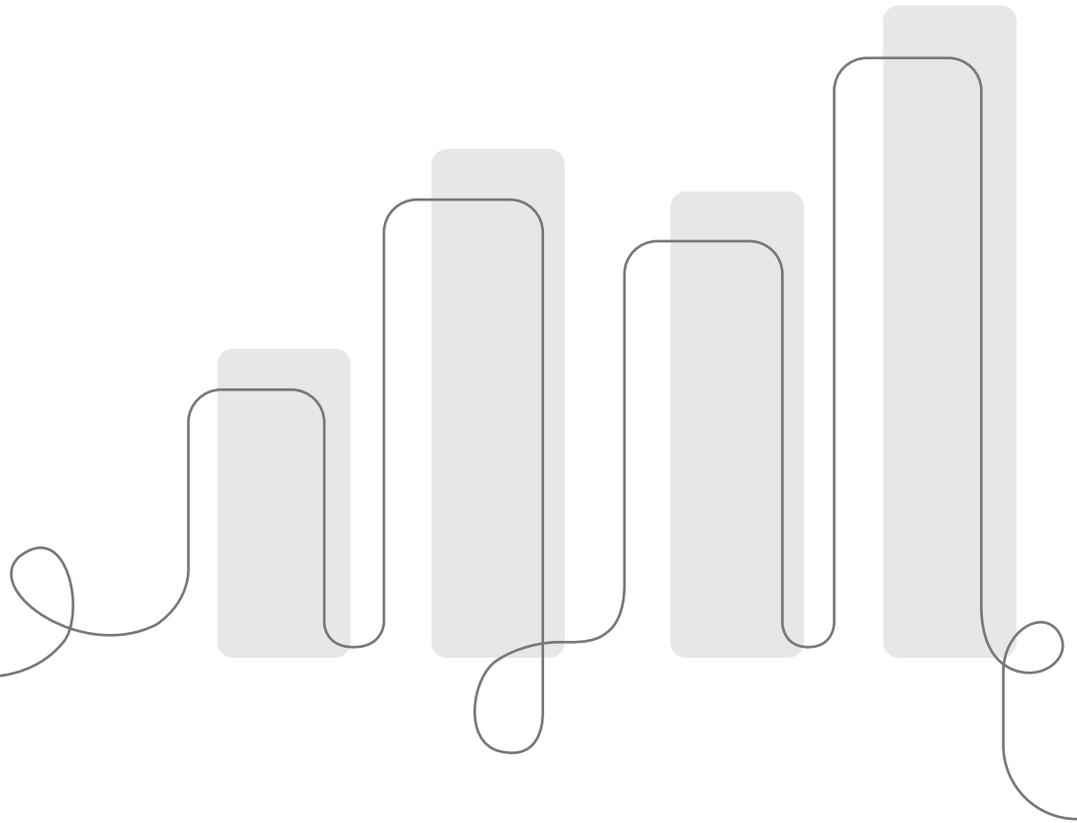


RESEARCH BRIEF

# Students start to recover from COVID instructional loss.

July 2021



# But more students still at risk for not learning to read than pre-pandemic

End-of-school-year data show that many of the nation's youngest students have begun to recover from the school disruptions caused by COVID-19. But there are still more students at the highest risk of not learning to read than there were 18 months ago, before the pandemic disruptions began. The nation's Black and Hispanic students are increasingly the ones with the greatest remaining COVID-related learning losses.

Over the past two school years, elementary schools across the United States have been periodically assessing 1.2 million students on their early literacy skills with Amplify's mCLASS®. This DIBELS® 8th Edition data, collected by teachers interacting directly with students one on one, either live or over video, reveals learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

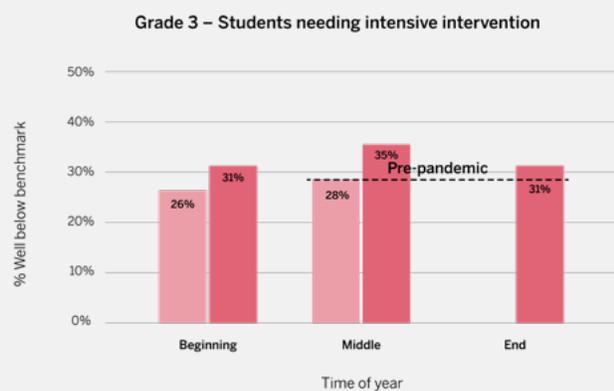
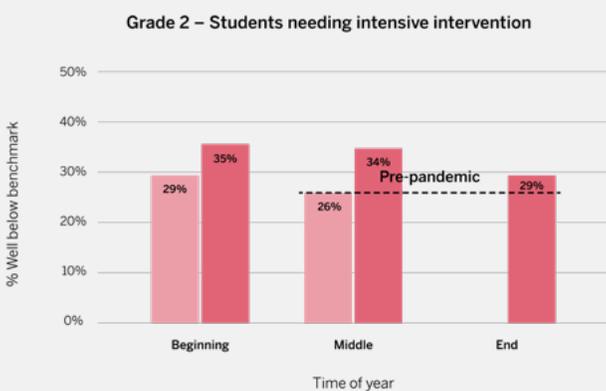
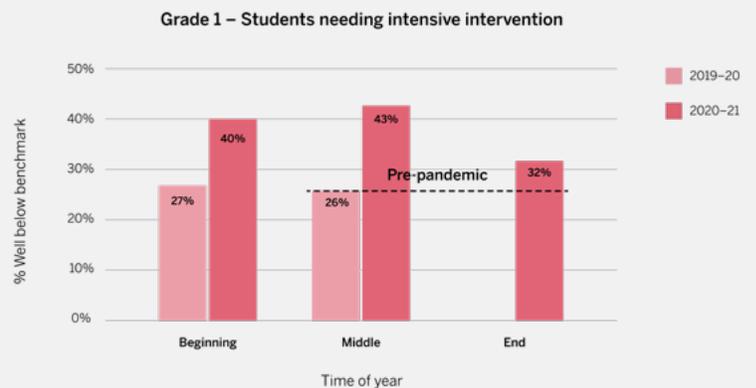
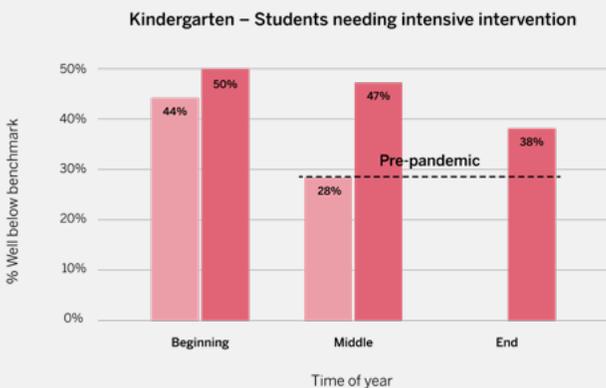
The good news: In the spring semester, many elementary students returned to the classroom, and schools across the country made meaningful progress in reducing the percentage of students in the earliest grades (kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2) who are at the greatest risk for not learning to read. However, the percentage of grade 3 students at the highest risk was the same as it was at the beginning of the school year.

The bad news: Across all grades, these percentages are still worse than they were at the middle of the 2019-20 school year, before the pandemic disruptions began. Moreover, these remaining learning losses have widened the national gaps in early reading skills between Black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts.

## How many of our country's students are still at greatest risk?

The following four tables show the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being in the highest risk category for not learning to read (“needing intensive intervention”), and includes the most recent data from the end of the school year that just finished (2020-21). The data show:

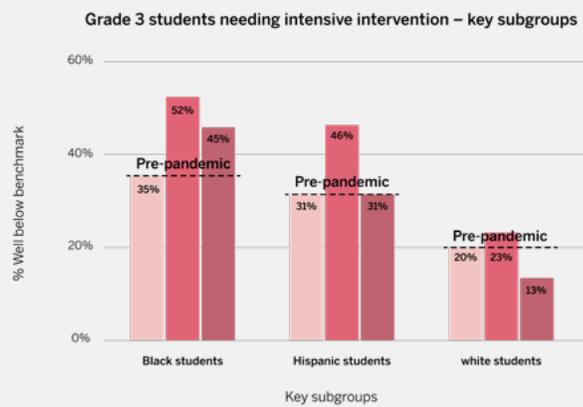
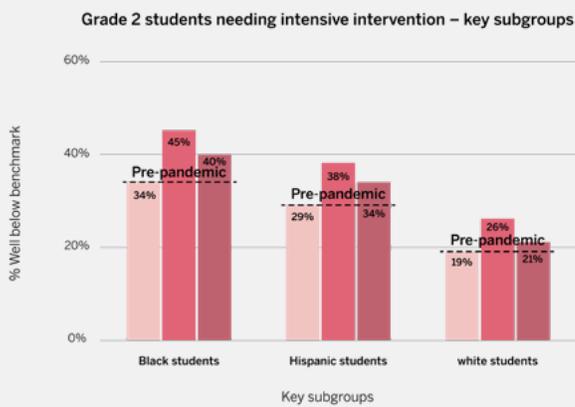
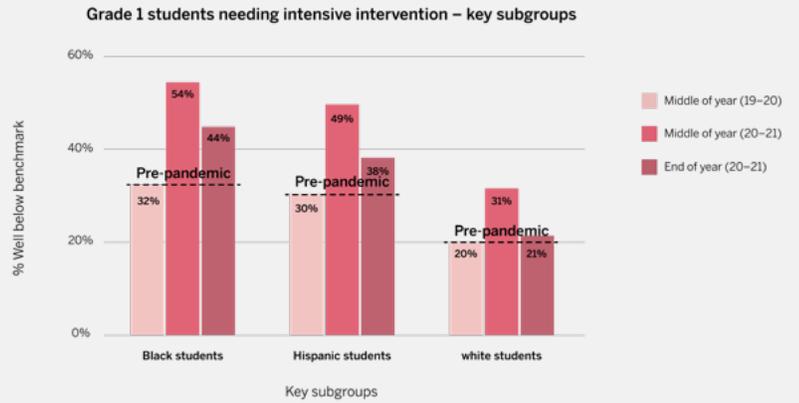
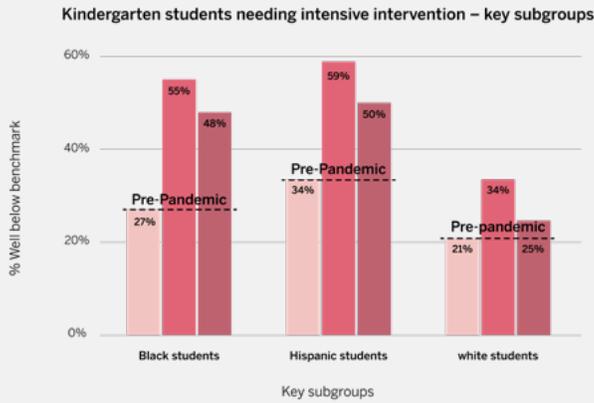
- Compared to the middle of this school year (2020-21), there were fewer students in each grade in the highest risk category at the end of the year.** This reflects that in many places, in the final months of the school year, students were able to finally return to classrooms where teachers could work with them in person. The biggest improvements were in kindergarten (where the percentage of students in the highest risk category fell from 47% to 38%) and grade 1 (where the percentage of students in the highest risk category fell from 43% to 32%).
- Compared to the middle of the previous school-year (2019-20), which was the last data collected before the pandemic disrupted schools, there were still more students in each grade in the highest risk category at the end of this year (2020-21).** In kindergarten, the percentage of students at greatest risk rose from 28% to 38%; in grade 1 from 26% to 32%; in grade 2 from 26% to 29%; and in grade 3 from 28% to 31%. Even with the substantial gains made by many schools and students in recent months, there is still unfinished instruction.



## The COVID instructional losses that remain have disproportionately impacted Black and Hispanic students.

The following four tables disaggregate the student data by race/ethnicity. They show the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being in the highest risk category for not learning to read (“needing intensive intervention”), and include the most recent data from the end of the school year that just finished (2020-21). The data show:

- **Compared to the middle of this school year (2020-21), there were fewer students in each grade in the highest risk category in each demographic category at the end of the year.** The biggest improvements in these recent months have been among Hispanic and white students. For instance, in grade 1, the percentage of Hispanic students in the highest risk category fell from 49% to 38%, and the percentage of white students in the highest risk category fell from 31% to 21%. In grade 3, the percentage of Hispanic students in the highest risk category fell from 46% to 31%, and the percentage of white students in the highest risk category fell from 23% to 13%. The percentage of Black students at greatest risk fell in all grades as well, but not as much.
- **The gaps nationally between Black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts are now much greater in every grade (kindergarten, grade 1, grade 2, and grade 3) than they were before the pandemic.** For instance, before the pandemic (middle of year 2019-20), 32% of Black grade 1 students and 30% of Hispanic grade 1 students were in the highest risk category, compared to 20% of white grade 1 students. But according to the most recent data (end-of-year 2020-21), 44% of Black grade 1 students are now in the highest risk category, and 38% of Hispanic grade 1 students, as compared to 21% of white grade 1 students. So in grade 1, there was an increase of 12 percentage points for Black students, eight percentage points for Hispanic students, and only one percentage point for white students.
- Grade 3 tells a similar story. Before the pandemic (middle-of-year 2019-20), 35% of Black grade 3 students and 31% of Hispanic grade 3 students were in the highest risk category, as compared to 20% of white grade 3 students. But according to the most recent data (end-of-year 2020-21), 45% of Black grade 3 students are now in the highest risk category, and 31% of Hispanic grade 3 students, as compared to only 13% of white grade 3 students. So in grade 3, there was an increase of 10 percentage points for Black students, no change for Hispanic students, and a decrease of seven percentage points for white students (meaning there were fewer white grade 3 students in the highest risk category at the end of the current school year than there were before the COVID school disruptions).



This analysis highlights the effects of COVID-19 disruptions by comparing mCLASS with DIBELS 8th Edition benchmark data from the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years. Approximately 400,000 students in a matched set of over 1,400 schools in 41 states are represented.

The schools in the source data are more likely to be in large urban metropolitan areas. Demographically, the source schools serve approximately 19% Black/African American, 52% Hispanic/Latinx, and 24% white students, compared with 15% Black/African American, 27% Hispanic/Latinx, and 47% white students nationally.

The number of students assessed in the 2020–21 cohort is similar to the number in the 2019–20 cohort; as a percentage of the prior cohort, the current year’s numbers are approximately 90%, which implies an attrition rate of 10%, assuming that enrollment for both years was identical. That said, the differences could reflect changes in enrollment, attendance issues at time of assessment, and changes in assessment practices (some students, excluded here, have received only partial assessments).

## Insights

### The areas of most urgent need

It is no surprise that we are seeing gains in the final months of the school year, when many students were back in school buildings. Student learning is a delicate process in the early grades. Indeed, students are impacted negatively by disruptions like the ones we experienced across the country during the last two years, but they are also resilient. When they receive evidence-based instruction, students in the earliest grades can make incredible strides.

A close look at the data surfaces two pressing issues:

- We know gaps are easiest to close (and less costly) in grades K–2. Persistent issues among grade 3 students affirm that left unaddressed, students facing challenges will have a more difficult time acquiring the critical literacy skills they need, and will face greater challenges moving into middle school.
- While significant reading gaps that pre-date COVID persist in districts across the U.S., we can see how disruptions to in-school learning have disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic students. This crisis requires our collective and urgent response.

We are renewing our **call to action** from the winter of 2021. **Schools and districts must be proactive in seeking out which students are at highest risk and organize resources to accelerate their learning.** Of all of the initiatives schools undertake to support students through recovery from the pandemic, they must align literacy instruction to data. It is impossible for educators to understand student needs without a benchmark assessment program, ideally administered three times per year. Additionally, schools should:

- Be creative and flexible with scheduling and staffing in order to **prioritize evidence-based literacy instruction**. Schools should organize the daily calendar to include time beyond grade-level instruction.
- Support K–3 instructional staff in **gaining knowledge about the science of reading** through high-quality professional development and evidence-based curriculum. Teachers serving grades K–3 will need continued support and professional development as they help students who are at risk.
- **Identify opportunities for academic success, particularly in reading.** Especially for students who are struggling, help young readers build not only skills but confidence in their ability to read. Help them track their growth and be proud of what they have achieved.

For more information on mCLASS,  
visit [amplify.com/mclass](https://amplify.com/mclass).

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