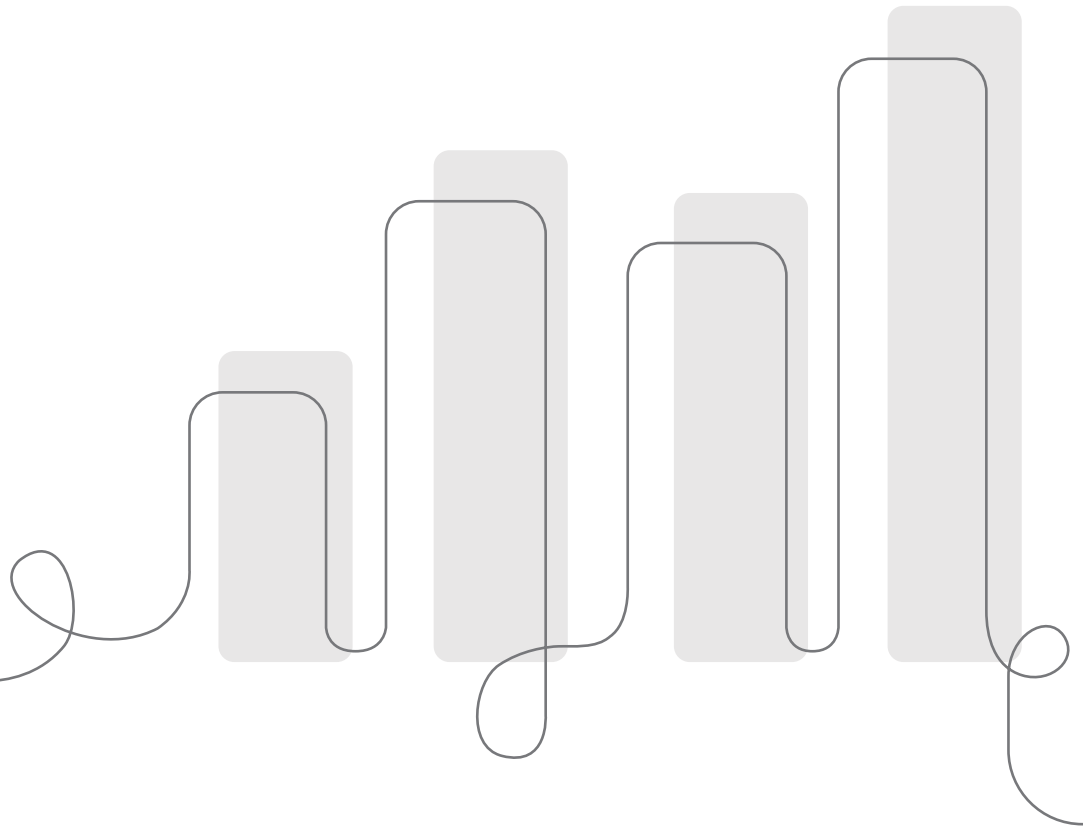


RESEARCH BRIEF

Amid academic recovery in classrooms nationwide, risks remain for youngest students with least instructional time during critical early years

February 2022



More students are at risk for not learning to read than pre-pandemic, especially in grades K–2

The latest middle-of-school-year data show that American students have made great progress in recovering from the school disruptions caused by COVID-19. But, in every elementary grade, there are still more students at risk of not learning to read than there were two years ago, before the pandemic disruptions began. The data show that remaining COVID-related instructional loss is especially great in kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2, and that Black and Hispanic students in those three grades have been disproportionately impacted.

Over the past two years, elementary schools across the United States have been assessing students on early literacy skills with Amplify's mCLASS®. The DIBELS® 8th Edition data, collected by teachers interacting with students one on one, either live or over video, reveals instructional loss due to the pandemic, and the extent to which students have recovered from those losses.

The good news

Throughout the spring and fall of 2021, as more elementary students returned to the classroom, schools across the country made meaningful progress in reducing the percentage of students at risk for not learning to read. These instructional successes are especially evident in the upper elementary grades (grades 3–5).

The bad news

Across all grades, the percentages of students at risk, and at greatest risk, are still worse than they were at the middle of the 2019–20 school year, before pandemic disruptions began. Moreover, the pandemic-related learning losses in early literacy are now disproportionately concentrated in the early elementary grades (K–2). In these three early grades, persistent learning losses have widened the national gaps in early reading skills between Black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts.

About the data

The report highlights the effects of COVID-19 disruptions by comparing Amplify mCLASS with DIBELS 8th Edition benchmark data from the 2019–20, 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. Approximately 400,000 students in a matched set of more than 1,300 schools in 37 states are represented. The schools in the source data are slightly more likely to be in large urban metropolitan areas than the nation overall.

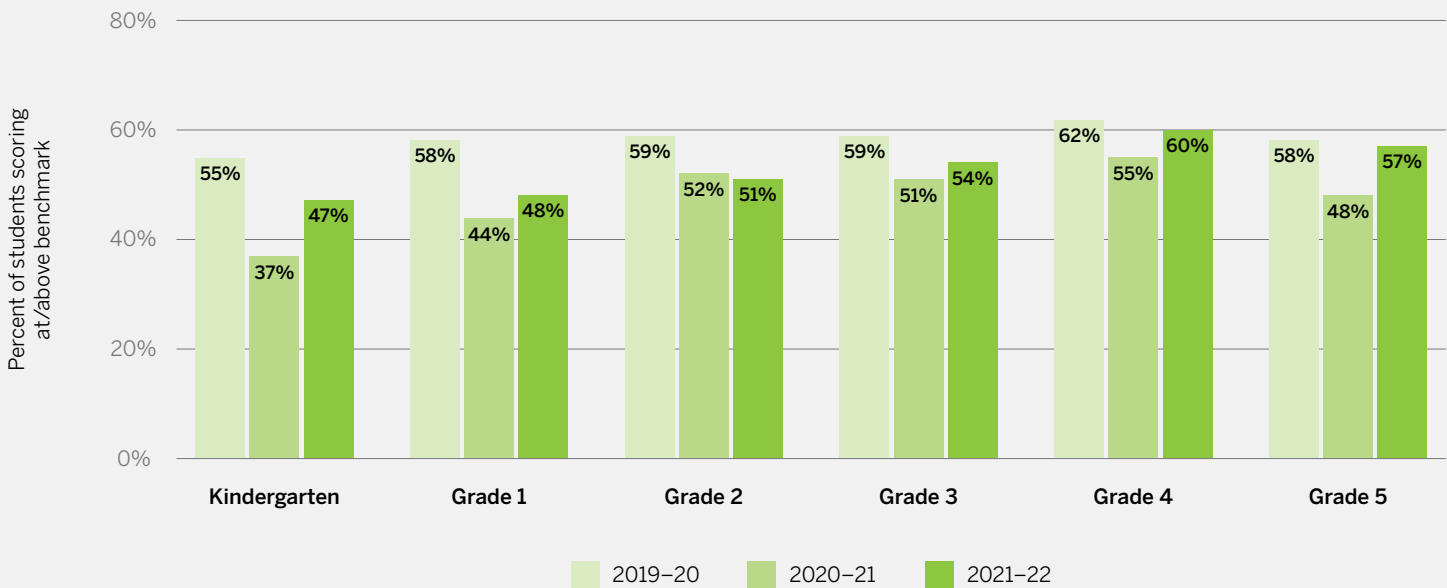
The data was collected using the mCLASS platform, which automates the data collection of DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). DIBELS is a widely-used series of short tests that assess K–8 literacy developed by the University of Oregon. DIBELS is an observational assessment collected by teachers interacting with students one-on-one, either live or over video. DIBELS is typically administered three times a year (beginning, middle, and end of year), and is used to identify reading difficulty, monitor progress, and inform instruction, especially for struggling readers.

Insights

How many students are on track to learn to read?

The following table shows the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being on track (ready for core instruction) in early literacy skills. They include the most recent data from the middle of the current school year (2021–22), as well as data from the middle of the two previous school years (2019–20 and 2020–21).

Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



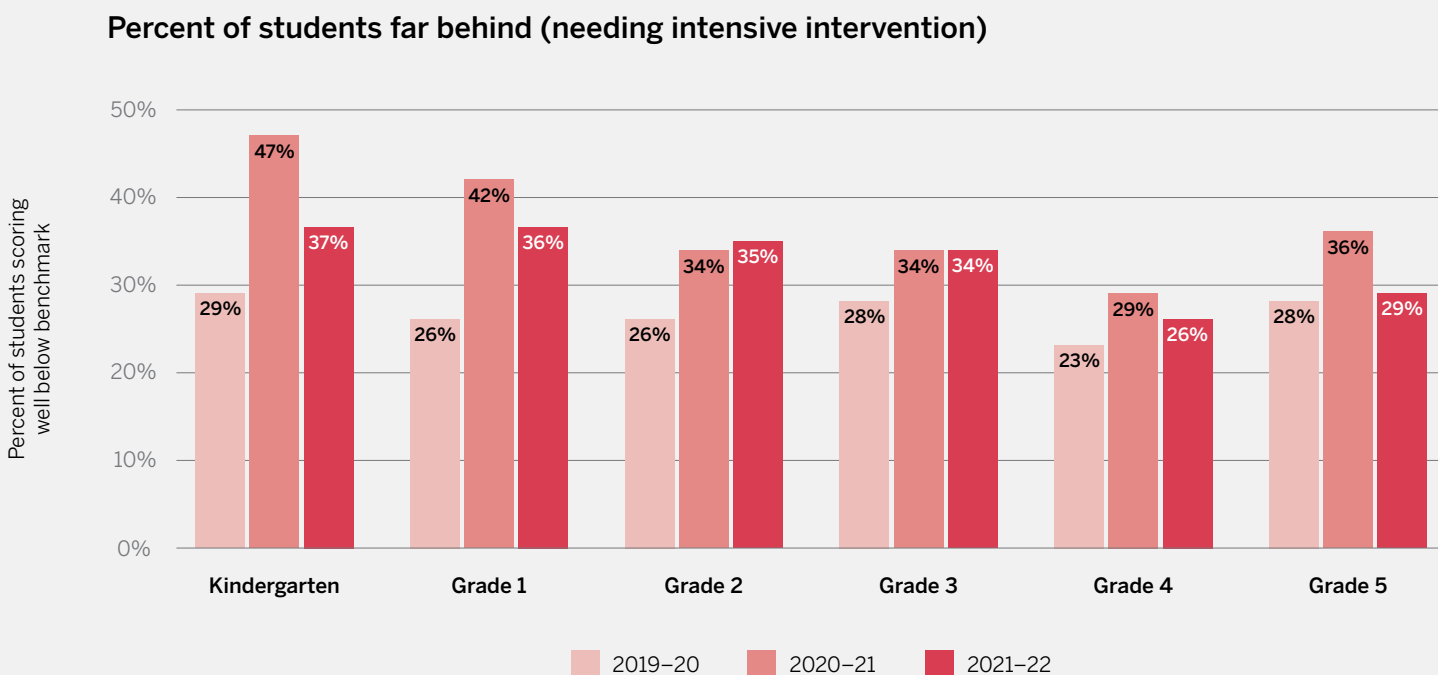
The data show that there are now (mid-year 2021–22) more students on track for learning to read than there were last year (mid-year 2020–21), but not as many as there were two years ago (mid-year 2019–20) before the pandemic.

The progress from last year reflects that in many places, in the final months of the spring 2021 semester, and in the fall semester of the current school year, students were able to return to classrooms where teachers could work with them in person. The data is especially good news in grades 4 and 5, where the most recent on-track percentages are close to where they were in the middle of school-year 2019–20, which was the last data collected before the pandemic disrupted schools.

The more discouraging data is from kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. In kindergarten, the percentage of students on track for learning to read fell from 55 percent in the middle of 2019–20 to 47 percent in the middle of 2021–22. In grade 1, it fell from 58 percent to 48 percent; in grade 2, it fell from 59 percent to 51 percent. In kindergarten and grade 1, there are signs of recent progress, because there are more students on-track now than there were a year ago (mid-2020/21). Students in these grades have made up for some of their initial COVID-related learning losses thanks to the return to the classroom. But that is not the case in grade 2, where the percentage of students on track is the same as it was a year ago.

How many students are still at greatest risk?

The following table shows the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being far behind (in need of intensive intervention) in early literacy skills. It includes the most recent data from the middle of the current school year (2021–22), as well as data from the middle of the two previous school years (2019–20 and 2020–21).



The data show that there are now (mid-2021–22) fewer students far behind in learning to read than there were last year (mid-2020–21), but more than there were two years ago (mid-2019–20) before the pandemic. The exception is 2nd grade, where there were even more students in the greatest risk category than there were last year.

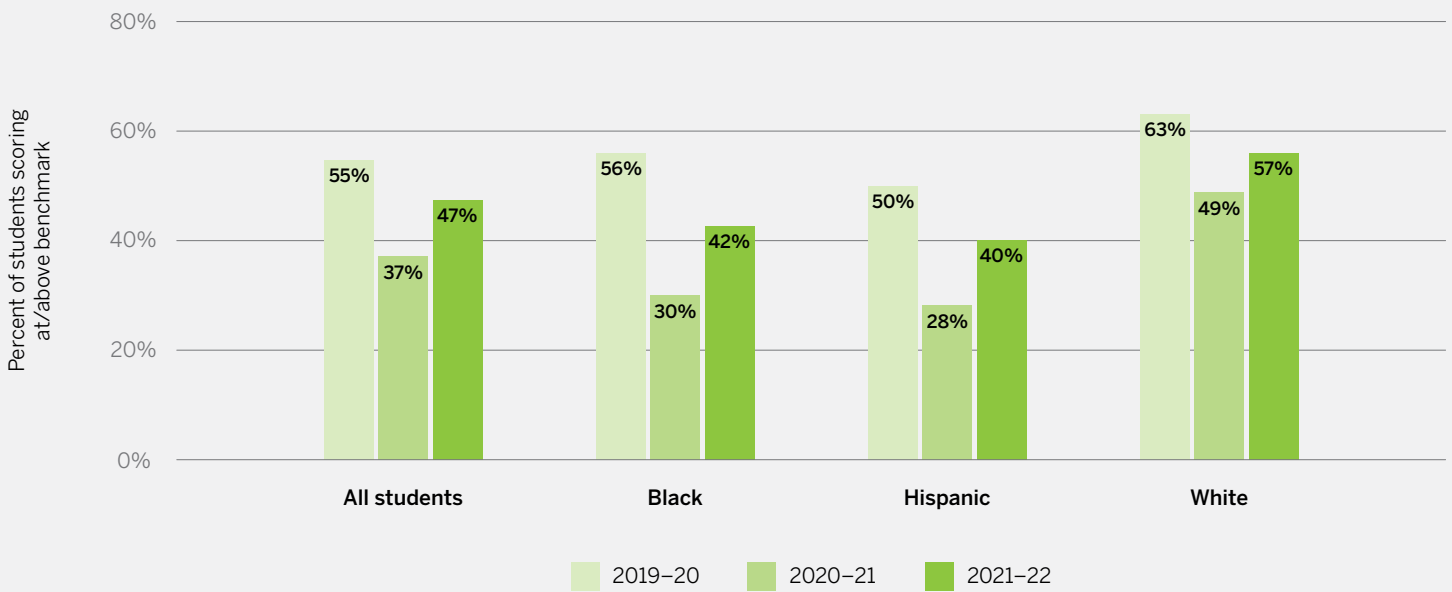
The progress from last year reflects that in many places, in the final months of the spring 2021 semester, and in the fall semester of the current school year, students were able to return to classrooms where teachers could work with them in person. The data is especially good news in grades 4 and 5, where the most recent far-behind percentages are close to where they were in the middle of 2019–20, which was the last data collected before the pandemic disrupted schools.

The more discouraging data is from kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. In kindergarten, the percentage of students at greatest risk for not learning to read rose from 29 percent in the middle of 2019–20 to 37 percent in the middle of 2021–22. In grade 1, it increased from 26 percent to 36 percent; in grade 2, it increased from 26 percent to 37 percent. In kindergarten and grade 1, there are signs of progress: fewer students are far behind now than there were a year ago (mid-2020/21). Thanks to the return to the classroom, students in these grades have recovered some COVID-related learning losses. But that is not the case in grade 2, where the number of students at greatest risk of not learning to read is slightly higher than it was a year ago.

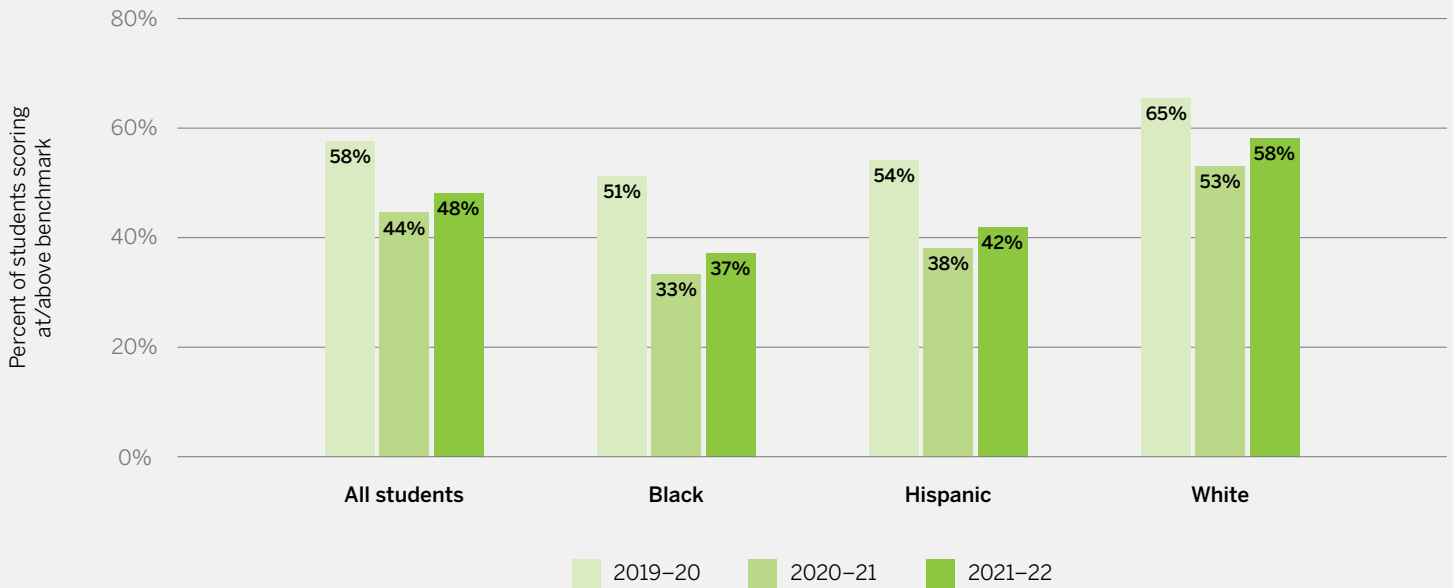
Has the pandemic disproportionately impacted the number of Black and Hispanic students who are on track to learn to read?

The following six tables disaggregate student data by race/ethnicity. They show the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being on track (ready for core instruction) in early literacy skills. They include the most recent data from the middle of the current school year (2021–22), as well as data from the middle of the two previous school years (2019–20 and 2020–21).

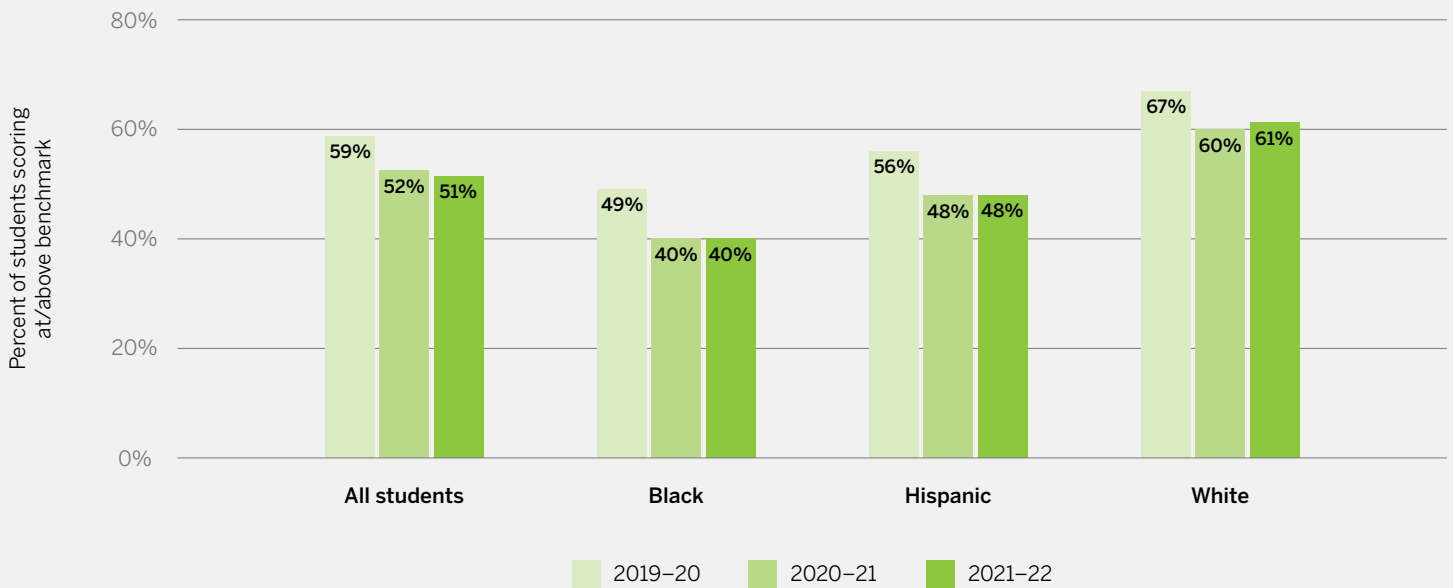
Kindergarten: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



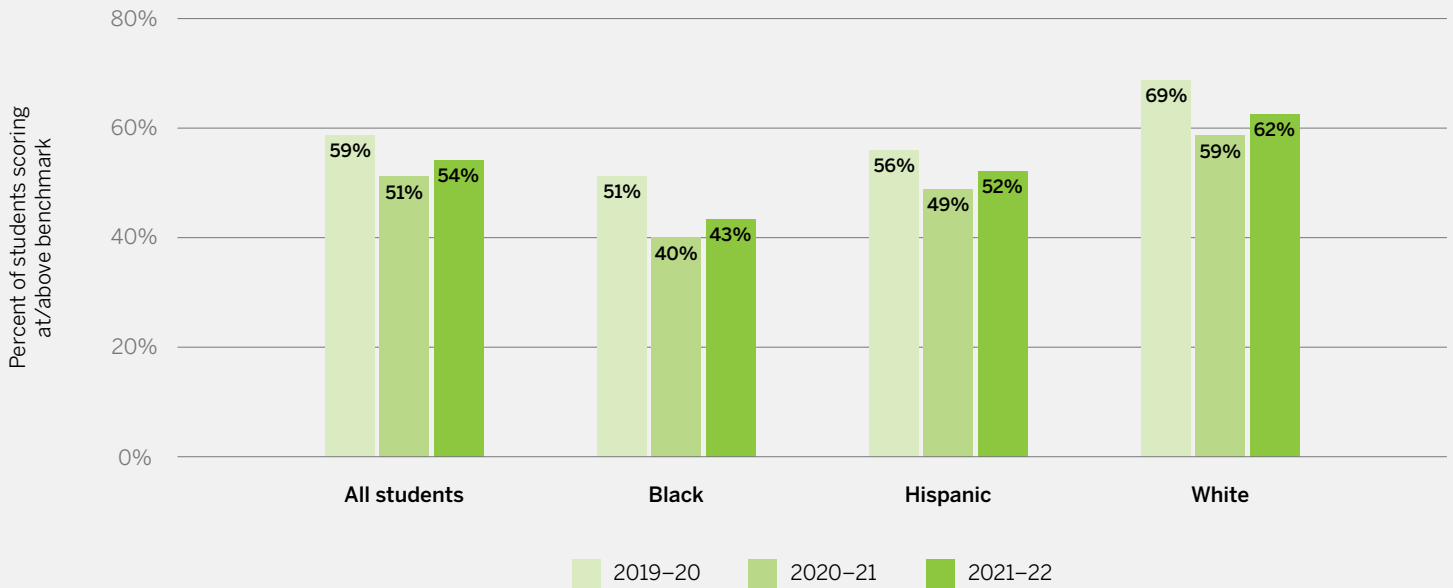
Grade 1: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



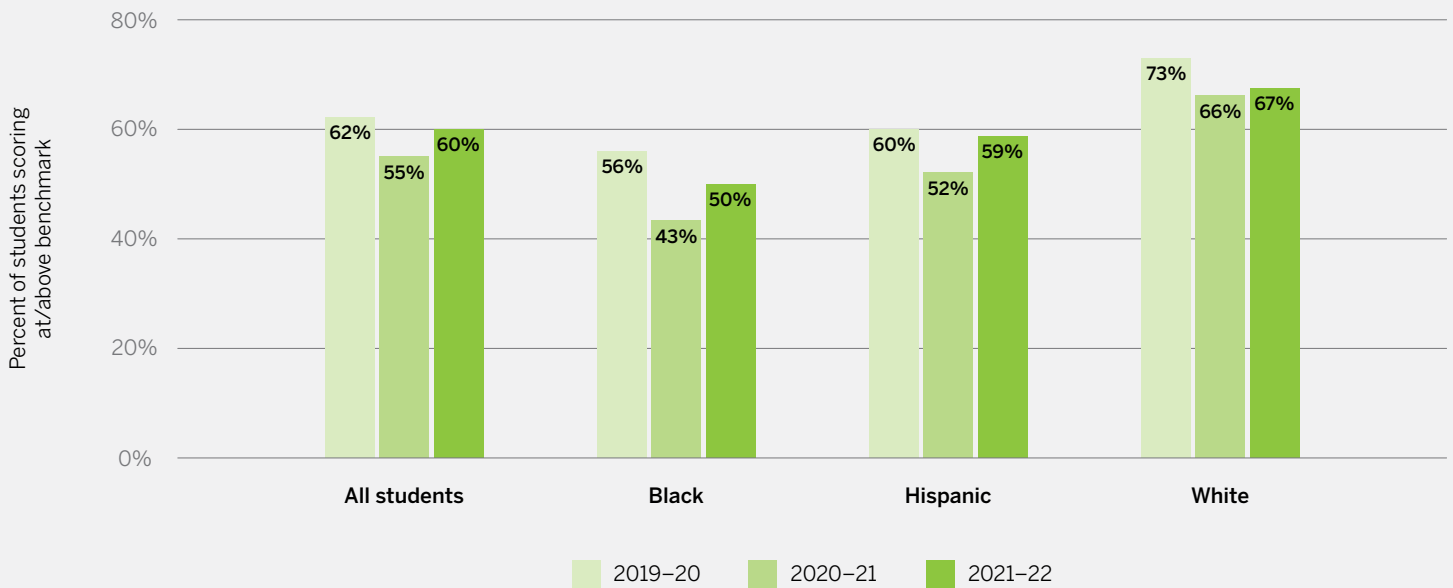
Grade 2: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



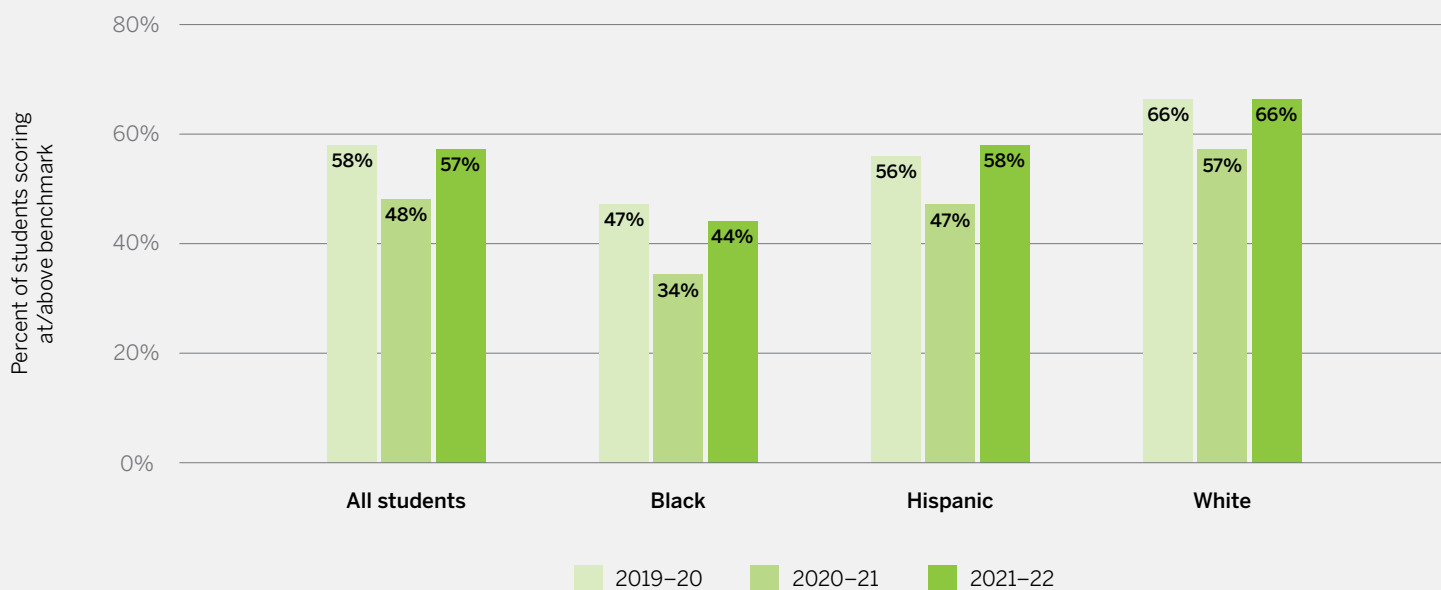
Grade 3: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



Grade 4: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



Grade 5: Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)



The progress from last year reflects that in many places, in the final months of the spring The data show that in most grades and demographic categories there are now (mid-year 2021–22) more students on track for learning to read than there were last year (mid-year 2020–21), but not as many as there were two years ago (mid-year 2019–20) before the pandemic. The main exception is grade 2, where the percentage of Black students on track is unchanged from a year ago (and down from two years ago), and where the percentage of Hispanic students on track has actually fallen from a year ago (and has fallen still further from two years ago).

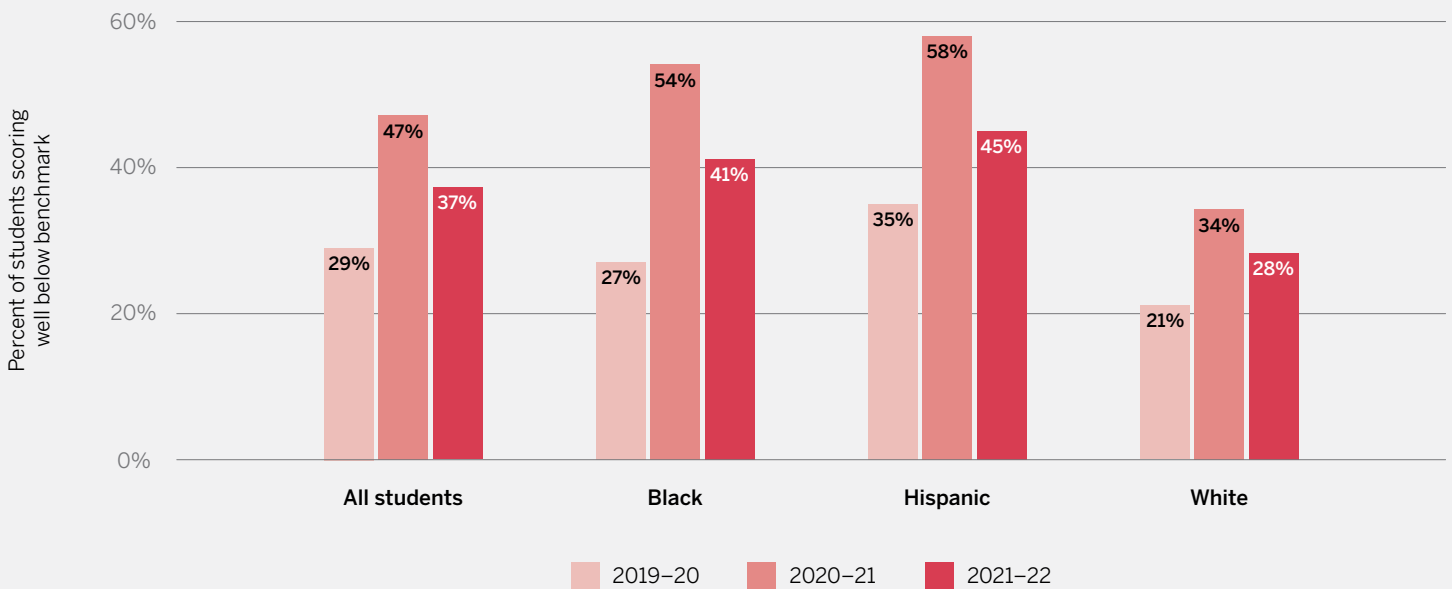
In kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2, the gaps nationally between Black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts are now greater than they were before the pandemic.

- For instance, before the pandemic (mid-year 2019–20), 51 percent of Black grade 1 students and 54 percent of Hispanic grade 1 students were on track to learn to read, compared to 65 percent of white grade 1 students. But according to the most recent data (mid-year 2021–22), only 37 percent of Black grade 1 students are on track, and 42 percent of Hispanic grade 1 students, compared to 58 percent of white grade 1 students. So in grade 1, there was a decrease of 14 percentage points for Black students, 12 percentage points for Hispanic students, and only 7 percentage points for white students.
- Similarly, before the pandemic (mid-year 2019–20), 49 percent of Black grade 2 students and 56 percent of Hispanic grade 2 students were on track to learn to read, compared to 67 percent of white grade 2 students. But according to the most recent data (mid-year 2021–22), only 40 percent of Black grade 2 students are on track, and 48 percent of Hispanic grade 2 students, compared to 61 percent of white grade 2 students. So in grade 2, there was a decrease of 9 percentage points for Black students, 8 percentage points for Hispanic students, and only 6 percentage points for white students.

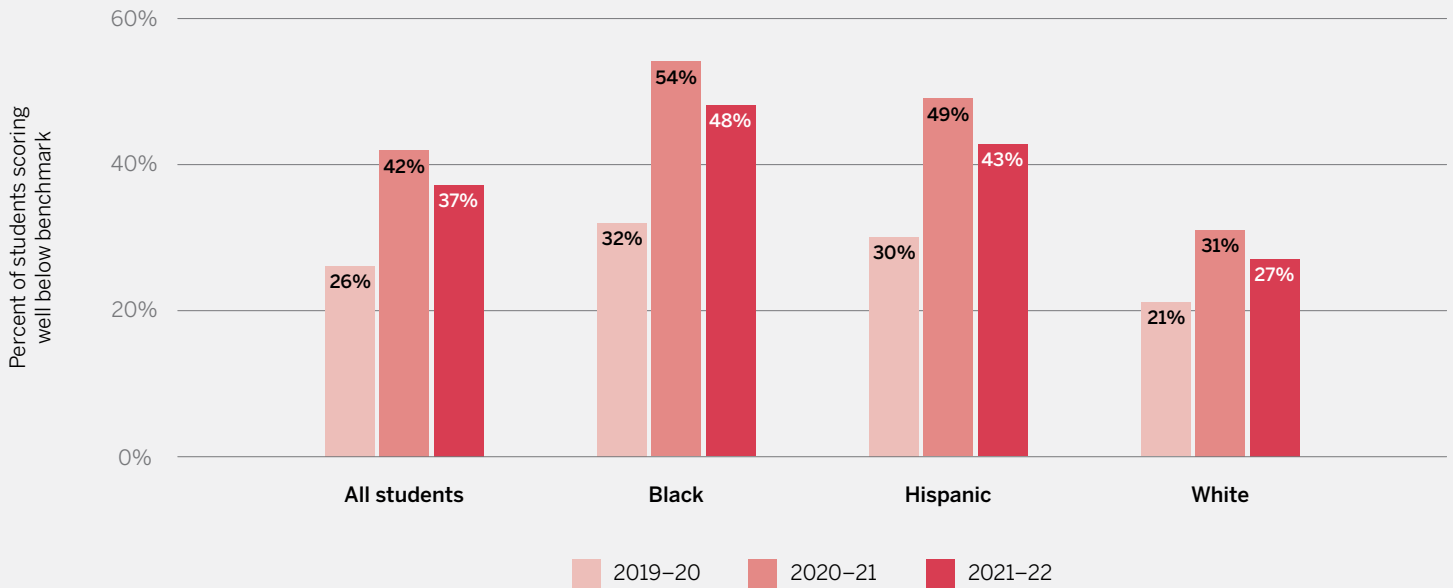
Has the pandemic disproportionately impacted the number of Black and Hispanic students who are at greatest risk for not learning to read?

The following six tables disaggregate student data by race/ethnicity. They show the percentage of students in each grade who were assessed as being far behind (in need of intensive intervention) in early literacy skills. They include the most recent data from the middle of the current school year (2021–22), as well as data from the middle of the two previous school years (2019–20 and 2020–21).

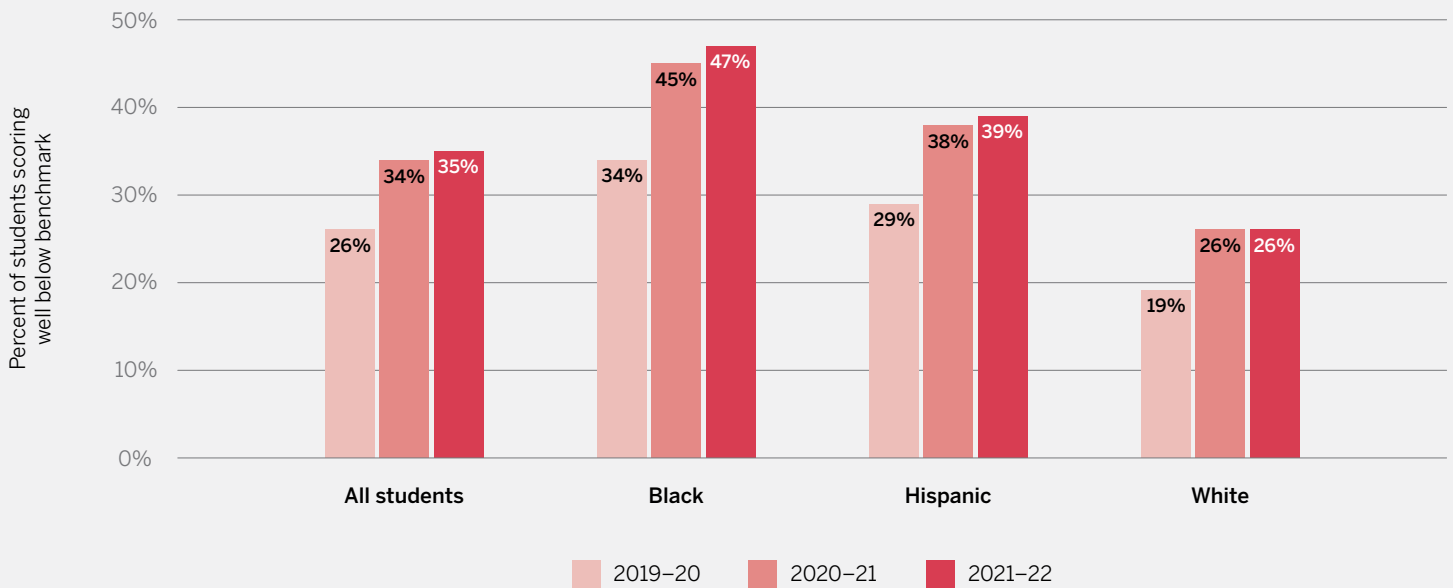
Kindergarten: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



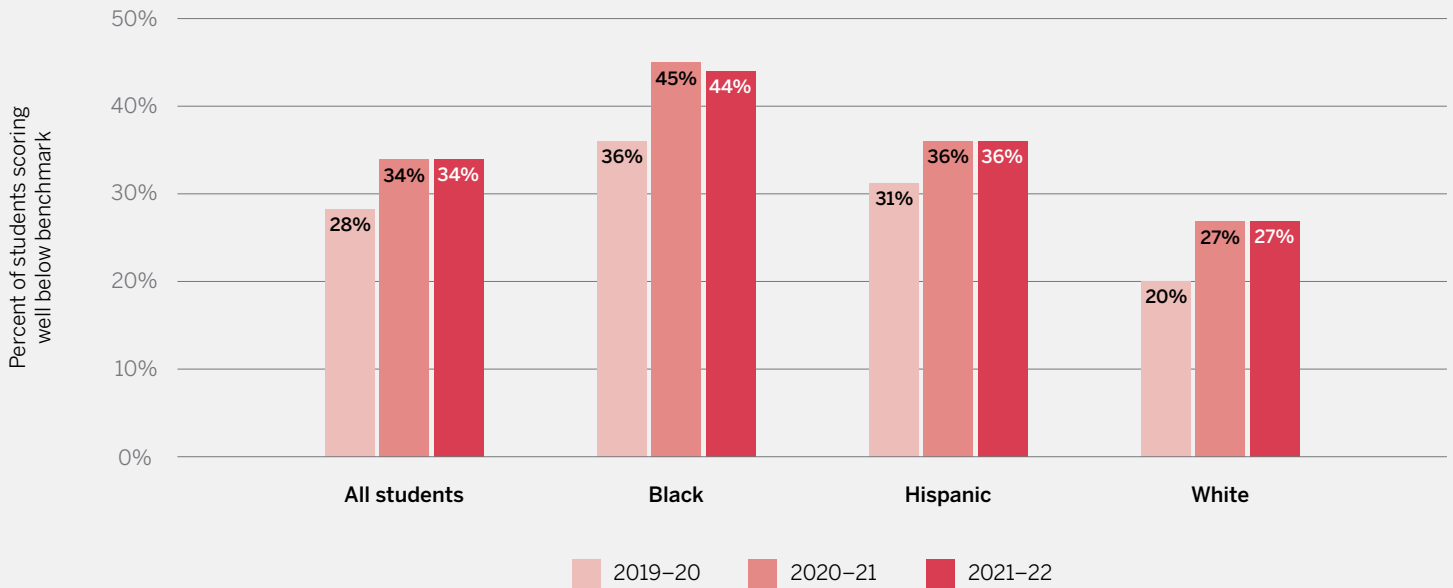
Grade 1: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



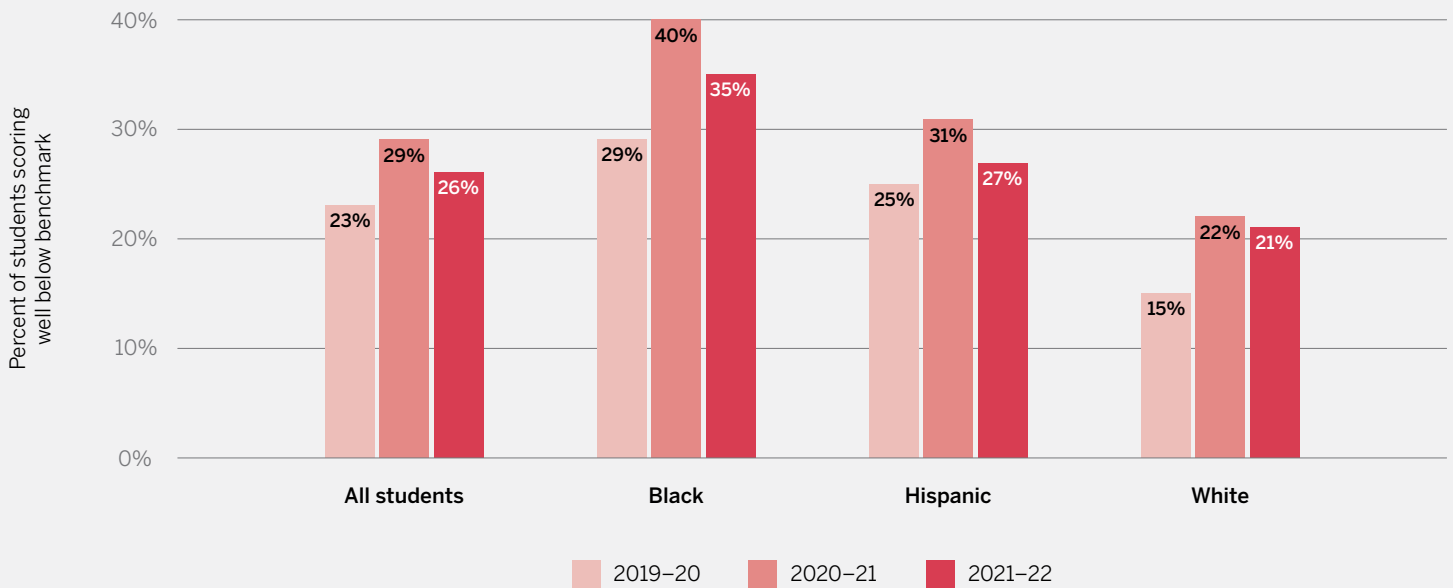
Grade 2: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



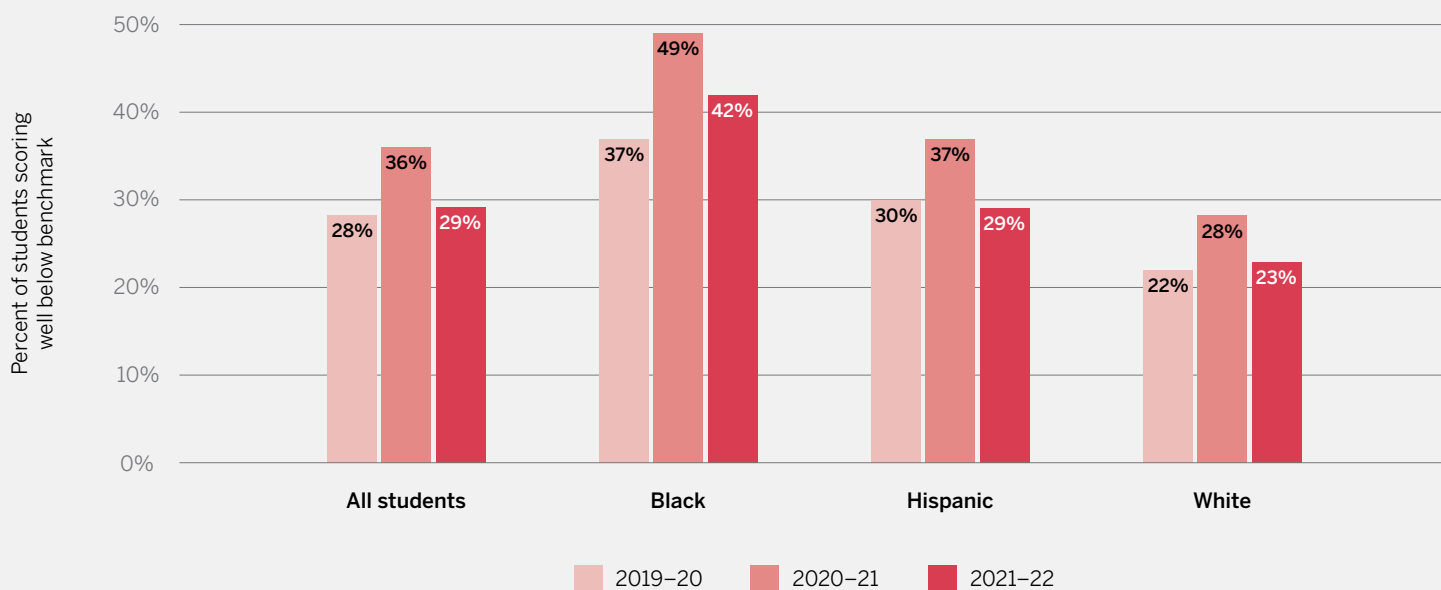
Grade 3: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



Grade 4: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



Grade 5: Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)



The data show that in most grades and demographic categories there are now (mid-year 2021–22) fewer students far behind (needing intensive intervention) in learning to read than there were last year (mid-year 2020–21), but still more than there were two years ago (mid-year 2019–20) before the pandemic. The exception is grade 2, where the percentages of Black, Hispanic, and white students who are far behind have all risen from a year ago (and risen still more from two years ago).

In kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2, the gaps nationally between Black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts are now greater than they were before the pandemic.

- For instance, before the pandemic (mid-year 2019–20), 32 percent of Black grade 1 students and 30 percent of Hispanic grade 1 students were far behind in learning to read, compared to 21 percent of white grade 1 students. But according to the most recent data (mid-year 2021–22), 48 percent of Black grade 1 students are far behind, and 43 percent of Hispanic grade 1 students, compared to 27 percent of white grade 1 students. So in grade 1, there was an increase of 16 percentage points for Black students, 13 percentage points for Hispanic students, and only 6 percentage points for white students.
- Similarly, before the pandemic (mid-year 2019–20), 34 percent of Black grade 2 students and 29 percent of Hispanic grade 2 students were far behind in learning to read, compared to 19 percent of white grade 2 students. But according to the most recent data (mid-year 2021–22), 47 percent of Black grade 2 students are on track, and 39 percent of Hispanic grade 2 students, as compared to 26 percent of white grade 2 students. So in grade 2, there was an increase of 13 percentage points for Black students, 10 percentage points for Hispanic students, and only 7 percentage points for white students.

Recommendations

Susan Lambert, chief academic officer of elementary humanities at Amplify, says the data in this report is a clarion call to help this generation of young students get on track in reading. “It’s really an all-hands on deck moment,” she says. “But aiming for recovery is the wrong goal, because pre-pandemic literacy rates were already a problem. Literacy instruction for the K–2 age group has always been critical. Now we’re seeing second grade students who have spent their entire school lives in the pandemic losing the most instructional time at the most important moments for learning to read. The struggles of students who have fallen behind are not going to go away on their own. If we don’t address them, those struggles will compound. The older these students become, the longer it will take them to catch up.”

What should be done to help these students? “There are many things schools are addressing right now: morale of teachers, well-being of children, reducing the spread of the virus, and helping kids catch up,” Lambert says. “With reading, teacher-student relationships matter. Teaching practices should be evidence-based. High quality instructional materials, grounded in the Science of Reading, should be used daily. Instructional content should develop both word recognition and language skills. Learning must be regularly monitored and learning gaps addressed immediately.”

Lambert is optimistic about how much progress can be made. “When kids get good instruction based in the Science of Reading, outcomes improve. When students receive that instruction in the early grades, 95 percent of them can develop as proficient readers regardless of their background.”

Lambert calls for both accelerating student literacy outcomes through quality grade-level instruction and for targeted instruction and interventions to close existing gaps.

She specifically recommends that each district make a two-year, highly integrated plan for the population of kids that are at high risk. Those integrated plans should ensure that schools:

- Administer benchmark assessments three times per year to monitor levels of risk for reading difficulties.
- Spend more time on literacy instruction, and make sure it is evidence-based instruction (based in the Science of Reading).
- Organize the daily calendar to include time beyond grade-level instruction.
- Be creative about scheduling and staffing to ensure this time is prioritized.
- Support instructional staff in gaining knowledge about the Science of Reading.

Recommendations (continued)

Districts should make a two-year, highly integrated plan for the population of kids that are at high risk.

Elements of a coherent approach

Types of instruction	Scheduling/formatting options	Which students
Grade-level core instruction focused on both knowledge and skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During school day (literacy block)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All
Additional foundational skill instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During school day (in addition to literacy block)• Summer school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All students performing below benchmark
Intervention opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During school day• Before and after school tutoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Those who continue to struggle even with additional foundational skill instruction
Science of Reading based personalized learning (online program)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During school day (as part of additional foundational skills)• At home• Before and after school• Summer school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All
	<p>Instilling a love of reading and of books During all school-based programs Parent/caregiver support Community-based partnerships</p>	

For more information on mCLASS,
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