

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MCPS STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Like every school district in the U.S., the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) district is still trying to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. As our schools have gone back to in-person learning, administrators are working to slow COVID-19’s deadly spread by using practices such as social distancing and quarantining of students who test positive or may have been exposed to someone who tested positive for the virus. MCPS is also coming to grips with the damage caused by an entire year of virtual learning. Not being in school proved especially burdensome for students with limited English proficiency, low-income students without reliable internet connections, and students whose parents could not adequately supervise their attendance or assignments. Virtual learning also proved to be detrimental to students’ social and mental health. As a result, MCPS is discovering that students have fallen behind due to an overabundance of independent online work or because not all the necessary material was covered during the virtual year. All these difficulties are further exacerbated by the fact that MCPS has given employees additional sick leave to quarantine themselves if they test positive for COVID-19 resulting in fewer regular staff members being in school with the students.

On September 21, MCPS Acting Superintendent Monifa McKnight presented to the Board of Education the 2020-2021 Evidence of Learning end-of-year performance data for students in Grades 2, 5, 8, and 11. The report compared the 2018-2019 end-of-year results to the 2020-2021 end-of-year results at the aggregate level. According to the results, students performed worse last school year in nearly every demographic group for both literary and mathematics readiness. McKnight said the findings were not surprising and further validated the district’s belief that virtual instruction is no substitute for in-person learning. McKnight added, however, that with this data MCPS staff can better gauge “how well our students performed during a year of primarily remote learning and their readiness to advance to the next level.”^{1, 1a}

BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA

GRADE 2	Literary readiness			Math Readiness		
	2018-19	2020-21	Change	2018-19	2020-21	Change
Overall	82.80%	47.50%	-35.30%	84.40%	63.80%	-20.60%
Black/AA¹	81.70%	43.50%	-38.20%	80.10%	55.60%	-24.50%
FARMS ² enrolled	77%	35.70%	-41.30%	75.20%	46%	-29%
Hispanic/Latino	71%	24.80%	-46.20%	73.70%	43.10%	-30.60%
FARMS enrolled	65.70%	16.30%	-49.40%	69%	34.60%	-34.40%
FARMS enrolled	70.60%	25%	-46%	72.30%	40.70%	-31.60%
ESOL (ESL)³	65.40%	17.90%	-47.50%	68.40%	38.50%	-29.90%
Students with Disabilities	48.90%	25.40%	-23.50%	49.50%	41.80%	-7.70%

¹ AA = African-American

² FARMS = Free and Reduced Meal Student

³ ESOL (ESL) = English to Speakers of Other Languages (English as a Second Language)

GRADE 5	Literary readiness			Math Readiness		
	2018-19	2020-21	Change	2018-19	2020-21	Change
Overall	81.10%	57.60%	-23.50%	77.10%	51.30%	-25.80%
Black/AA	73.50%	47.60%	-25.90%	64.50%	37.80%	-26.70%
FARMS enrolled	66.40%	38.70%	-27.70%	56.70%	29%	-27%
Hispanic/Latino	68.60%	34.20%	-34.40%	64.50%	26.70%	-37.80%
FARMS enrolled	62.30%	26.10%	-36.20%	57.10%	18.90%	-38.20%
FARMS enrolled	65.40%	33.10%	-32.30%	59.10%	25.30%	-33.80%
ESOL (ESL)	45.90%	16%	-30%	39.50%	10.30%	-29.20%
Students with Disabilities	37.70%	26.70%	-11.00%	38%	23.50%	-14.50%

GRADE 8	Literary readiness			Math Readiness		
	2018-19	2020-21	Change	2018-19	2020-21	Change
Overall	80.10%	69.30%	-10.80%	76.10%	58.90%	-17.20%
Black/AA	71.20%	63.40%	-7.80%	60.50%	47.20%	-13.30%
FARMS enrolled	62.10%	54.70%	-7.40%	49.20%	39%	-11%
Hispanic/Latino	66.30%	49.60%	-16.70%	54.40%	35.40%	-19.00%
FARMS enrolled	58.70%	41.60%	-17.10%	46.60%	28.10%	-18.50%
FARMS enrolled	62.30%	47.90%	-14.40%	50.50%	34.50%	-16.00%
ESOL (ESL)	50.20%	38.70%	-11.50%	25.90%	15.30%	-10.60%
Students with Disabilities	49.30%	50%	1%	36.70%	27.40%	-9.30%

GRADE 11	Literary readiness			Math Readiness		
	2018-19	2020-21	Change	2018-19	2020-21	Change
Overall	79%	69.80%	-9.20%	65.20%	62.90%	-2.30%
Black/AA	73.90%	63.40%	-10.50%	54%	55.10%	1.10%
FARMS enrolled	68.10%	56.10%	-12.00%	48.30%	47%	-1%
Hispanic/Latino	63.50%	48.80%	-14.70%	42.90%	40.30%	-2.60%
FARMS enrolled	59%	41%	-18%	36.90%	32.70%	-4.20%
FARMS enrolled	64.80%	49.60%	-15.20%	44.40%	41.20%	-3.20%
ESOL (ESL)	51%	30.40%	-20.60%	22.20%	19.40%	-2.80%
Students with Disabilities	50.70%	49.90%	-0.80%	30.10%	32.80%	2.70%

EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT

The only areas in which students improved between those two academic years are:

1. Students with disabilities in Grade 8: literary readiness (0.7% increase)
2. Students with disabilities in Grade 11: math readiness (2.7% increase)
3. Black/AA students in Grade 11: math readiness (1.1% increase)
4. Non-FARMS Black/AA students in Grade 11: math readiness (3.7% increase)
5. Non-FARMS Hispanic/Latino students in Grade 11: math readiness (0.9% increase)

None of the above groups exceeded 69% readiness by the end of the 2020-21 school year. In the 2018-19 school year – pre-pandemic – students had between 79% and 83% proficiency overall.

Eleventh graders were also evaluated for college and career readiness in both school years. The College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 was designed to increase college and career readiness and degree completion in Maryland. By the end of Grade 11 each student must take an English assessment and a math assessment to determine their readiness for college and careers. Students who do not meet college and career readiness standards by the end of Grade 11 must enroll in a transition course that is typically the next course of study in English or mathematics with additional requirements.

In December 2020 MCPS reported that 36% of low-income eighth graders failed English in the first quarter, a big jump from the 5.5% who failed English a year prior. A similar trend was seen in those same students' math performance. Low-income Hispanic (white and non-white) and Latino students failed at a higher rate than low-income Black students. Special education ninth graders also failed English at higher rates last year compared to the year prior.

MCPS RESPONSE TO THE DATA

According to the district, "Evidence of Learning" data [from the 2020-21 school year] indicate that [the switch to] virtual instruction in literacy and mathematics during the pandemic had the greatest impact on primary [kindergarten to third grade] students and on students in transition grades at the secondary level." MCPS outlined a six-point instructional response plan to the board. Core pieces of the plan include tutoring, targeted foundational lessons, constant measurement of student progress to allow teachers to adapt in real time, and a desire to move students forward at grade level as much as possible.

1. **School Improvement Planning** – This recognizes that the full return to school in 2021-22 supports accelerated learning while acknowledging the need to prioritize social and emotional support for students, staff, and families.
2. **Literacy and Mathematics Instructional Foci** – The literacy focus is different for elementary and secondary students, but both include tactics such as small group instruction and text-dependent questions to elevate critical thinking skills. The math focus for all students addresses unfinished learning from the 2020-2021 school year, foundational learning days, and pacing guides for secondary students.
3. **Assessment data** – This information reflects how much students have learned or progressed in meeting grade level expectations. Teachers use this data to "constantly" adjust their instructional goals.

4. **Acceleration of Learning** – The district prefers to move students forward at grade level and to avoid remediation as much as possible, only addressing prerequisite skills and concepts from the previous grade when they are needed to work with grade-level content. This was a point of concern for some Board of Education members. Associate Superintendent Niki Hazel noted that the district had researched what other school systems were doing and that this proved to be the better approach.
5. **Tutoring and Intervention** – All schools will offer tutoring opportunities in an online model using \$17.1 million in federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Funds – Supplemental Instruction and Tutoring Grant Program FY 2022. The money will support not only staff but also contracted tutoring partners, for which MCPS issued a Request for Proposal in August and received more than 26 vendor responses. Tutoring is free for school families and students are allowed to pursue tutoring from a school other than their own if their school does not provide what they need.
6. **Professional Development** – MCPS is developing districtwide training that focuses on accelerated learning to support teachers as they analyze student data and plan for their next instructional moves.

Associate Superintendent Hazel said schools with extended school years would have more time to employ some of these intervention strategies. Extended School Year services are offered to special education students and are tailored to give participants extra help or time with learning.

On October 26, MCPS staff told the district’s Board of Education that summer programming designed to mitigate learning disruptions would include local in-person options for students at all schools. Grades K-8 would receive a math and literacy focus, while high-schoolers could earn original credits, repeat credits, credit recovery and non-credit enrichment. As of that date, 53,295 students had registered for summer programs with the demographics broken down into:

- Asian - 19.56%
- Black/African-American - 25.96%
- Hispanic/Latino - 33.29%
- White - 16.17%
- Two or More Races - 4.70%
- Special Education - 21.63%
- English Language Learners - 22.71%
- Free and Reduced Meals-enrolled - 42.27%²⁰

COMPARISON TO THE REST OF MARYLAND

Maryland’s State Board of Education permitted hybrid instruction in our schools during the pandemic although MCPS decided to go entirely virtual for the 2020-21 school year. Ultimately, however, virtual teaching proved inadequate statewide, and MCPS student learning outcomes are indicative of what Maryland public schools have faced as a whole. Maryland school districts saw a 3% decline in enrollment during the first quarter of 2020-21, as exposure to the coronavirus continued to keep many students and teachers at home. The number of pre-K students was down by 26.7% in the first quarter of 2020-21, while the number of kindergarten students declined by 10%, according to the state.¹⁵

Second-quarter data reveals that most districts in Maryland have doubled or tripled the number of failing grades in math and English compared with last year. In neighboring Prince George's County about 16% of elementary students failed at least one class this year, and 21 out of 24 Maryland school districts report that failure rates increased among high school students in science and English.¹⁴

Before the pandemic, 60% of all public school students in Maryland were below proficiency¹⁶ and most Black and brown students were already many grades behind their white peers. Since the pandemic began, they have fallen even further behind.

As of September 2021, the State Board of Education revealed that there have been 4,042 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among students in schools statewide and 681 cases among staff members. At least 16,559 students – out of more than 882,500 enrolled statewide – and 784 staff have been quarantined since schools reopened.¹⁷

COMPARISON TO THE REST OF THE COUNTRY

MCPS data also appears to be in line with the rest of the U.S. An NPR survey of more than 60 school districts across 20 states found that kindergarten enrollment was down an average of 16% for the 2020-21 school year.¹² Federal education data revealed that public school enrollment dropped 3% for 2020-21 compared to the previous year due to the rapid spread of the pandemic.¹³ The rate of homeschooling jumped by 7.3% during the fall of 2020 compared to 4.3% in February 2020 but in Maryland it was almost 32%. About 4,000 kids were pulled out of MCPS in the 2020-21 school year to be homeschooled instead and Maryland had 8,746 more homeschooled students that year overall. MCPS expects many to re-enroll. Virtual academy slots are in short supply as well due to staff limitations.⁶

Fairfax County in Virginia had its biggest increase in failure rates after the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year among students with disabilities and ESOL students.¹⁸ In Texas the percentage of students reading at grade level by the end of the 2020-21 school year slid to the lowest level since 2017, while math scores plummeted to their lowest point since 2013. In total, about 800,000 additional students are now behind their grade level in math across the state.¹⁹

Much of the learning loss identified in K-12 students correlates with family income; many students in lower income households could not access computers or decent internet service required for continuous online instruction. An analysis conducted by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce between April and December 2020 found that more than 92% of students from families with household incomes of \$200,000 or more always had a computer available for schooling. By comparison, only 61% of students from families with household incomes of less than \$25,000 always had computer access. A typical fifth grader at an affluent school would normally be at the 71st percentile in math for the 2018-19 school year but had fallen to the 64th percentile by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Comparatively, students at low-income schools dropped from the 35th to the 24th percentile overall during that time.⁹

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) estimates that more than 3.3 million students were enrolled in (mainly free) mandatory and/or optional summer classes to make up the work they missed and to learn the material that was not covered during the school year.¹⁰ DOE is providing states with more flexibility by:

- Extending the testing window and rescheduling assessments.
- Giving state assessments remotely where feasible.
- Shortening the state assessments to make testing more feasible to implement and prioritizing in-person learning time.
- Working with states to address their individual needs and conditions while tracking statewide school data as much as possible to targeting resources.¹¹

THE ROLE LWVMC CAN PLAY TO HELP MITIGATE THE DAMAGE

Nonprofits have a few options for how they can help. One example is the organization called Innovate Public Schools (IPS), which is lobbying California Governor Gavin Newsom and the state of California to provide at least \$1.1 billion from the American Rescue Plan directly to organizations working on the ground. IPS argues that this would provide students and families with much needed resources including after-school programs, tutoring lessons and technology for online learning.⁵ Similarly, the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC), as well as the Maryland League, could advocate for the use of federal relief funds for student, teacher and family supports inside and outside of school. MCPS received about \$424 million combined from the American Rescue Plan, CARES Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act - for 161,000 students³ - while Maryland got \$1.9 billion from the U.S. Dept. of Education in American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief.⁴

LWVMC could also reach out to MCPS about potential partnership opportunities to provide tutoring in civics, social studies, the English language, or other subjects that our organization's members are trained to teach. Similarly, we could share with teachers our online League materials to use in the classroom or for homework where appropriate.

Other nonprofits working to curb learning loss include [Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop](#), which focuses on students who are incarcerated, and [Horton's Kids](#)⁷, both in Washington, D.C., as well as [Springboard Collaborative](#) in Philadelphia.⁸

What are some other ideas?

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