

# 5 Things to Know About

# LEARNING LOSS & RECOVERY

# In Massachusetts

Massachusetts is falling behind other states in addressing learning loss from the pandemic, serving as a clear wake-up call. Despite our state's reputation as an educational leader, this slow recovery threatens to deepen achievement gaps and undermine years of progress.

# A Closer Look At Pandemic Learning Loss and Recovery in Massachusetts

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to education in schools across the U.S. — Massachusetts has been no exception. The shift to remote instruction resulted in significant reductions in instructional time, limited access to essential resources, and fewer opportunities for social and emotional development. These challenges continue to disproportionately affect students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities, exacerbating pre-existing achievement gaps.

In response, the federal government allocated a historic \$2.86 billion in funding to Massachusetts schools. This substantial support served as a lifeline to address the pandemic's impact and foster recovery. Additionally, many high-need districts — those most affected by the pandemic — received supplemental support from earlier federal relief packages and state-level funding, such as the Student Opportunity Act (SOA). These funds represent a unique opportunity not only to repair the damage caused by COVID-19 but also to tackle long-standing inequities in our educational system.

The dedication of teachers, districts, and families during the pandemic — ensuring that students continued to learn amid unprecedented challenges — has been remarkable. Nevertheless, academic recovery remains complex and ongoing with much work still needed to understand and address students' evolving needs.

Recent data indicates that, despite these efforts and additional resources, Massachusetts has encountered significant hurdles in academic recovery. Findings suggest that students in Massachusetts have been slower to rebound academically compared to their peers in other states. For instance, while Mississippi experienced larger pandemic declines in math (-0.73) than Massachusetts (-0.66), Mississippi has rebounded significantly, leading the nation in academic recovery and even seeing reading scores rise above pre-pandemic levels.

Looking ahead, Massachusetts must invest in targeted solutions and wraparound supports, particularly in areas where students struggle the most, such as math and literacy. It is also crucial to ensure that students feel welcome, safe, and supported in their learning environments. Addressing these needs requires bold and immediate action. Failing to confront the academic fallout of the pandemic risks setting back an entire generation of students, especially the most vulnerable.



*Despite the significant challenges students are facing in this post-pandemic era, we remain optimistic about the future. Ongoing discussions among state leaders are paving the way for solutions to urgent issues such as chronic absenteeism and the literacy crisis. This dialogue reflects a strong commitment to ensuring that every student receives the support they need to thrive.*

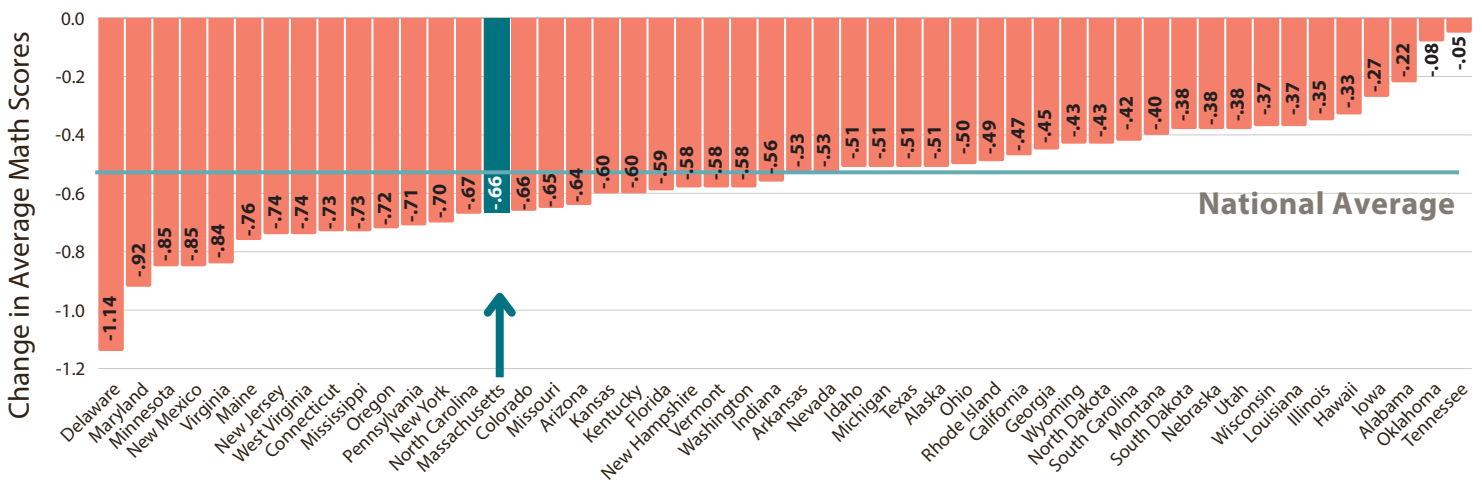


**On average, Massachusetts had worse pandemic 'learning losses' than the rest of the country.**

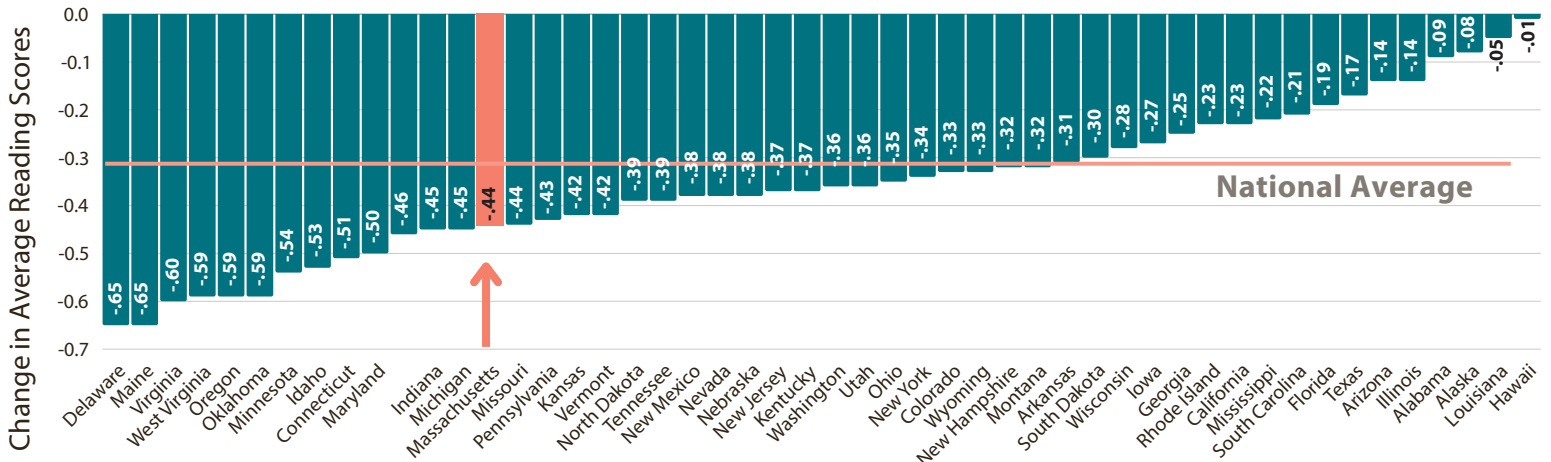
Recovery from pandemic-induced learning losses in the U.S. remains a complex and ongoing challenge. While schools and districts have made concerted efforts to address these setbacks, the overall effectiveness of these initiatives in restoring pre-pandemic achievement levels has remained unclear.

Recent data reveals that in Massachusetts pandemic learning losses have been more severe than the national average. From 2019 to 2022, Massachusetts students experienced a decline of 0.66 points in average math scores and 0.44 points in average reading scores, compared to national declines of 0.53 in math and 0.31 in reading.

**FIGURE 1: CHANGE IN AVERAGE MATH ACHIEVEMENT IN THE U.S. FROM 2019 TO 2022**



**FIGURE 2: CHANGE IN AVERAGE READING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE U.S. FROM 2019 TO 2022**

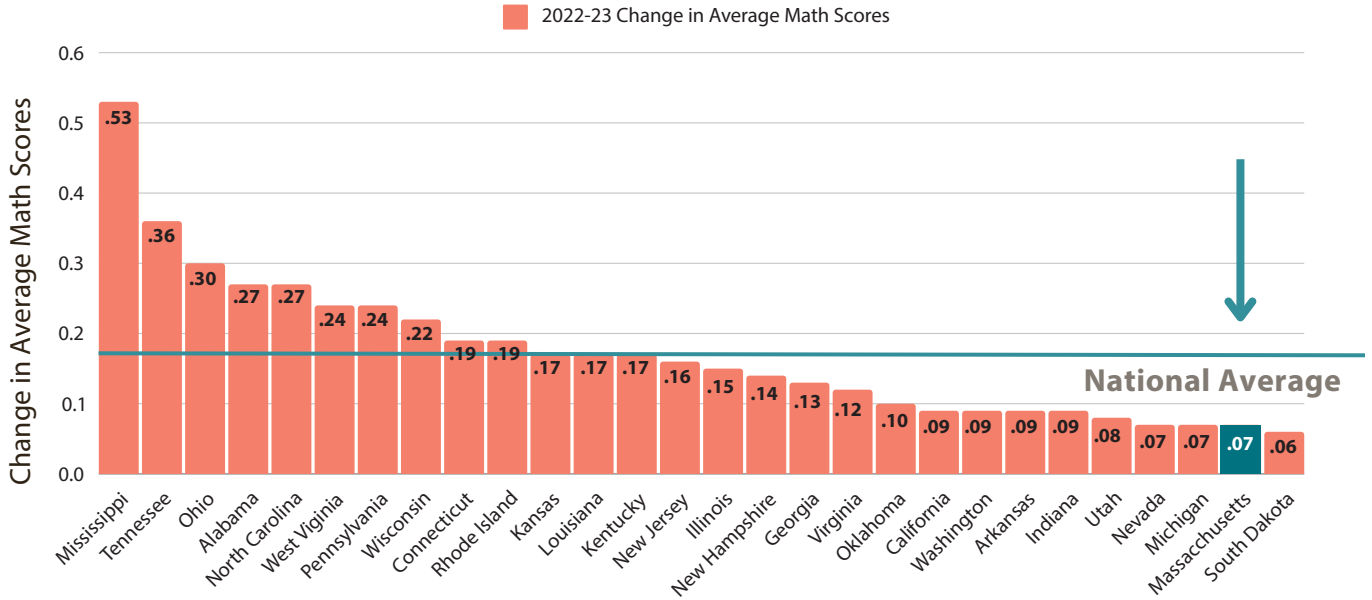


Source: Reardon, S. F., Ho, A. D., Shear, B. R., Fahle, E. M., Kalogrides, D., Saliba, J. (2024). *The Education Opportunity Project at Stanford University*.

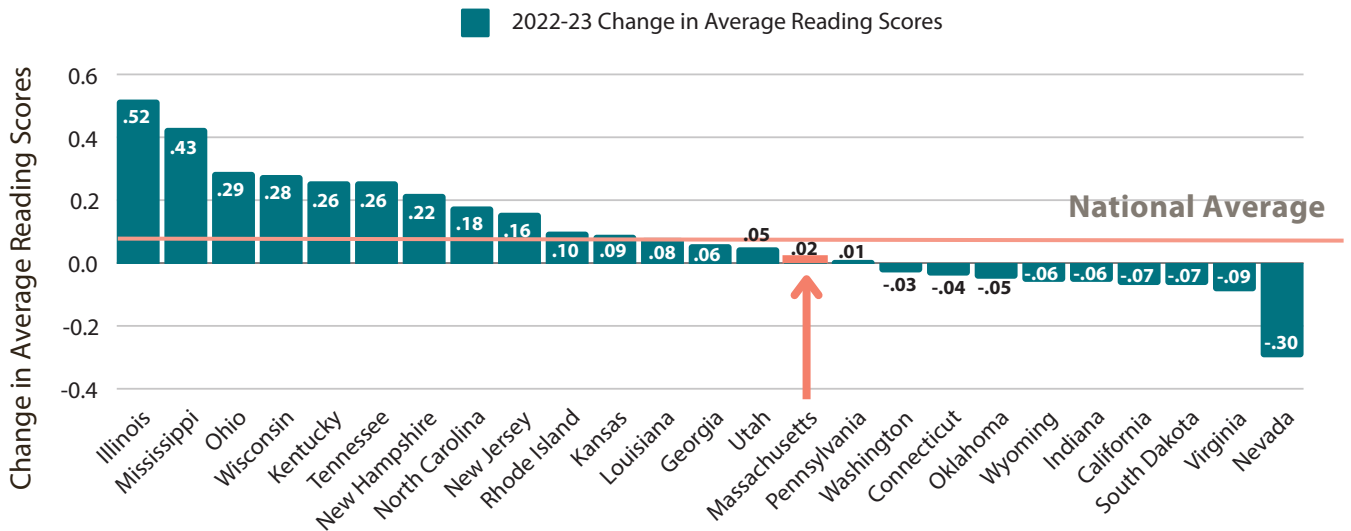
**Massachusetts' recovery from COVID-related learning losses lags behind that of other states in the country.**

On average, Massachusetts is recovering more slowly from COVID-19 learning loss compared to the national trend. Between 2022 and 2023, the state saw an increase of just 0.07 points in average math scores and 0.02 points in average reading scores, while the national averages were 0.17 in math and 0.08 in reading.

**FIGURE 3: CHANGE IN AVERAGE MATH ACHIEVEMENT IN THE U.S.**



**FIGURE 4: CHANGE IN AVERAGE READING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE U.S.**



Note: Figures 3 and 4 include only the states for which data was available during the 2022-23 school year.

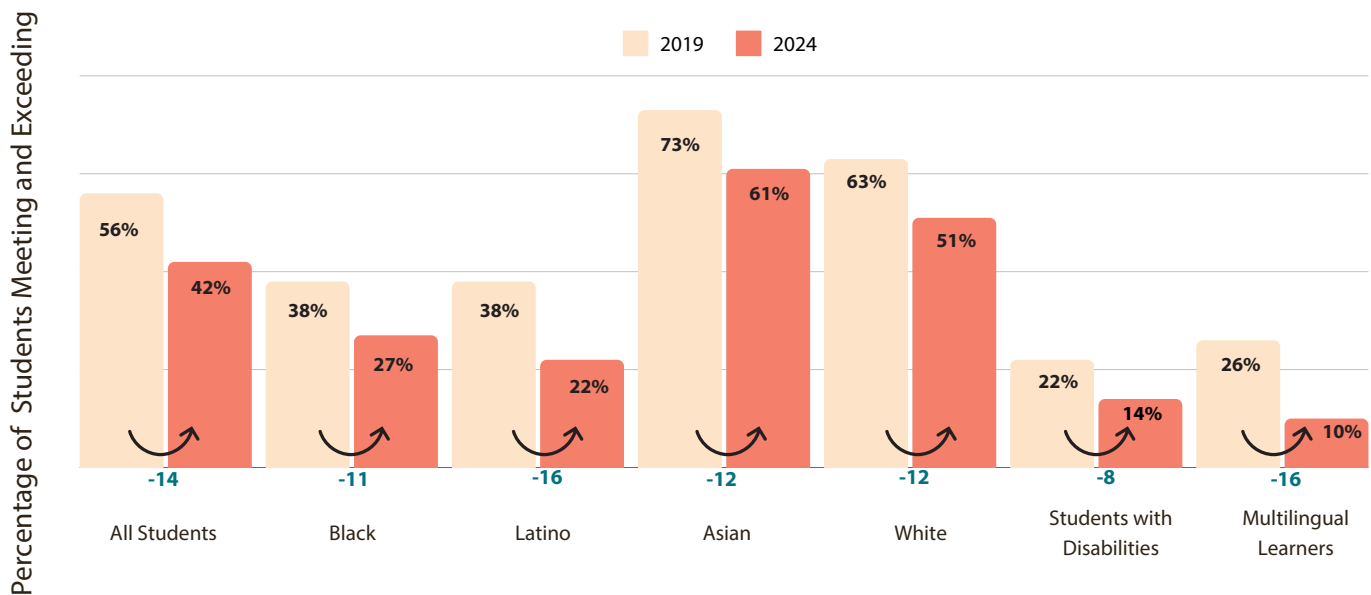
Source: Reardon, S. F., Ho, A. D., Shear, B. R., Fahle, E. M., Kalogrides, D., Saliba, J. (2024). *The Education Opportunity Project at Stanford University*.



### Third-grade English Language Arts (ELA) scores continue to lag significantly behind pre-pandemic levels, especially for Latino students and multilingual learners.

The scores for third-grade English Language Arts (ELA) on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) have decreased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, 58% of third-grade students are struggling with reading, which is a notable increase from the pre-pandemic rate of 44%. While reading scores have dropped for all student groups, the impact has been more pronounced for some underserved populations. For instance, Latino students experienced a 16-percentage point decline, compared to a 12-percentage point decrease among their white peers.

**FIGURE 5: 3RD GRADE STUDENTS MEETING AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN ELA, BY STUDENT GROUP**



Source: MCAS achievement results. *Massachusetts Department Of Elementary And Secondary Education - Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results Statewide Report. (2024).*

#### WHY ARE THIRD GRADE ELA SCORES SO IMPORTANT?

Literacy, defined as the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively, is a fundamental skill crucial for a child's academic and personal development. It enables children to express their thoughts and emotions clearly. For young children, the early development of literacy skills is especially important. Research shows that being able to read and write by the third grade is closely linked to positive outcomes later in life.

Studies have also demonstrated that early literacy contributes to greater success both in and out of school, resulting in:

- Greater high school completion
- Higher attendance rates
- Higher test scores
- Higher lifetime earnings
- Better physical and mental health



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## Eighth-grade math MCAS scores in Massachusetts indicate substantial learning losses attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The eighth-grade math MCAS scores in Massachusetts show that there have been significant learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2019, scores have declined, with only slightly more than one in three eighth graders demonstrating proficiency in math. Although the statewide average math MCAS scores for eighth graders have stayed the same since last year, proficiency outcomes for all student groups continue to be lower than they were before the pandemic.

### Outcomes for all student groups remain below pre-pandemic levels

**FIGURE 6: 8TH GRADE STUDENTS MEETING AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN MATH, BY STUDENT GROUP**

Student Group	2019	2024	Difference
All Students	46%	38%	<b>-8%</b>
White	53%	46%	<b>-7%</b>
Asian	76%	73%	<b>-3%</b>
Black	25%	20%	<b>-5%</b>
Latino	25%	18%	<b>-7%</b>
Students with Disabilities	11%	10%	<b>-1%</b>
Multilingual Learners	8%	5%	<b>-3%</b>

Despite smaller declines in math MCAS scores from 2019-2024 for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities compared to white students, their scores remain significantly behind those of their white peers—and even trail behind white students' pre-pandemic outcomes.

Source: MCAS achievement results. *Massachusetts Department Of Elementary And Secondary Education - Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results Statewide Report. (2024).*

### WHY IS EIGHTH GRADE MATH SO IMPORTANT?

Eighth-grade math is particularly critical, as students' proficiency at this stage determines their access to advanced high school courses and directly influences their college and career readiness. Those who excel in eighth-grade math are more likely to be prepared for higher education, pursue careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and achieve higher lifetime earnings compared to their peers. Mastery of math at this level lays a solid foundation for future academic success and professional opportunities, making it a key predictor of long-term outcomes.

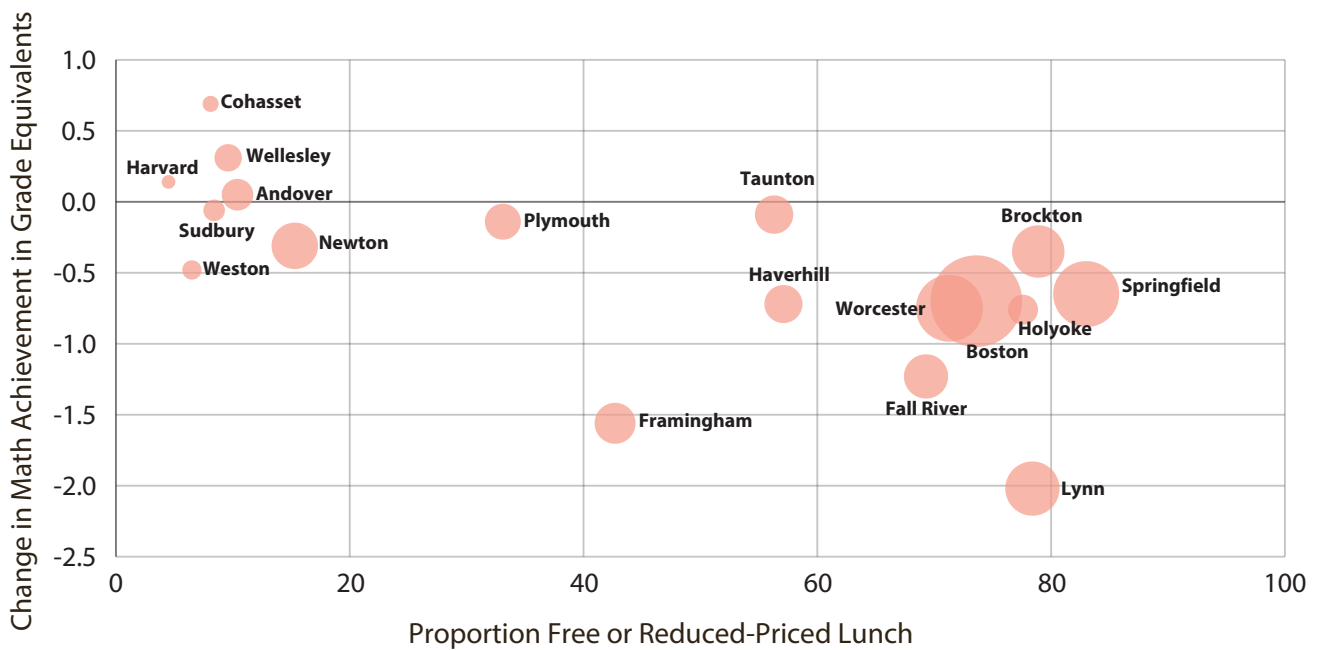


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**In Massachusetts, wealthier districts have made significant progress in academic recovery, while higher-poverty districts have increasingly fallen behind.**

In Massachusetts, wealthier school districts have shown notable progress in academic recovery, while districts with higher levels of poverty have continued to fall behind. In fact, a recent study found that Massachusetts has seen the largest widening of achievement gaps of any of the states examined. These disparities underscore the ongoing challenges that lower-income schools face as they work to bring academic performance back to pre-pandemic levels.

**FIGURE 7: CHANGE IN MATH ACHIEVEMENT BY FREE/REDUCED PRICE LUNCH IN MASSACHUSETTS DISTRICTS, 2019-23**



*Note: The size of each point represents the enrollment for each district.*


Source: Reardon, S. F., Ho, A. D., Shear, B. R., Fahle, E. M., Kalogrides, D., Saliba, J. (2024). The Education Opportunity Project at Stanford University.





### **ABOUT EDTRUST**

EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.

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