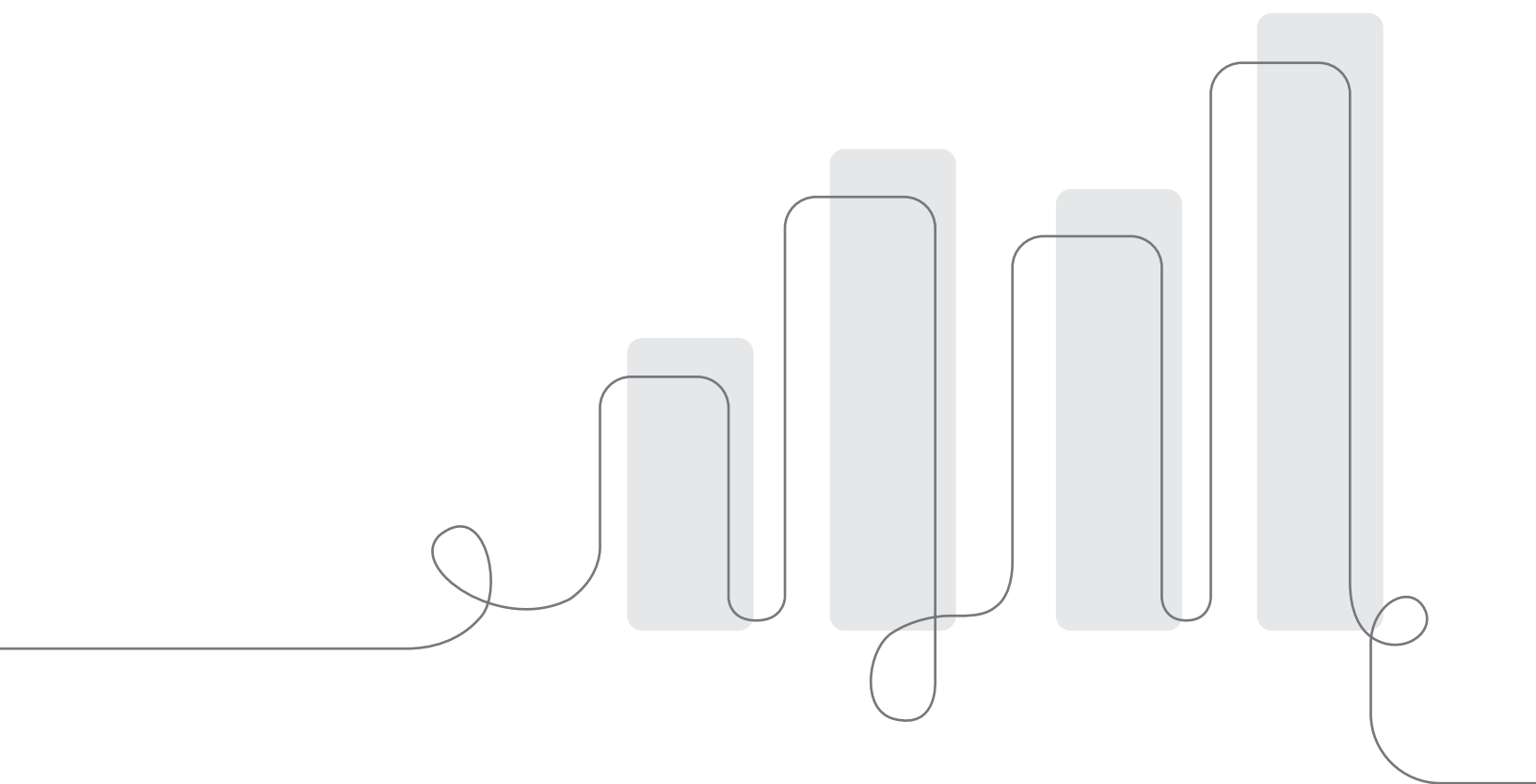# Early literacy gains offer hope for COVID recovery, though broader literacy challenges persist nationwide

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Amplify.

Early literacy gains offer hope for COVID recovery, though broader literacy challenges persist nationwide.

The latest middle-of-school-year data show encouraging gains in early reading, particularly among the nation's youngest students. Throughout the spring and fall of 2024, schools across the country made some progress increasing the number of K–2 students on track for learning to read, with this year's kindergarten cohort returning to pre-pandemic literacy readiness levels. However, broad literacy trends nationwide remain a concern, as progress across all early grades remains slow.

Across grades K–2, only 56 percent of students are on track for learning to read at middle-of-year, and 29 percent of students are far behind. The decline in fourth grade reading scores reported in the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)[1] data underscores the necessity of a continued focus on early literacy instruction for students in the earliest grades.

Over the past six years, elementary schools across the United States have been assessing students on early literacy skills with mCLASS® DIBELS® 8th Edition. The data, collected by teachers interacting with students one-on-one, either live or over video, reveals instructional loss and the extent to which students have recovered from those losses.
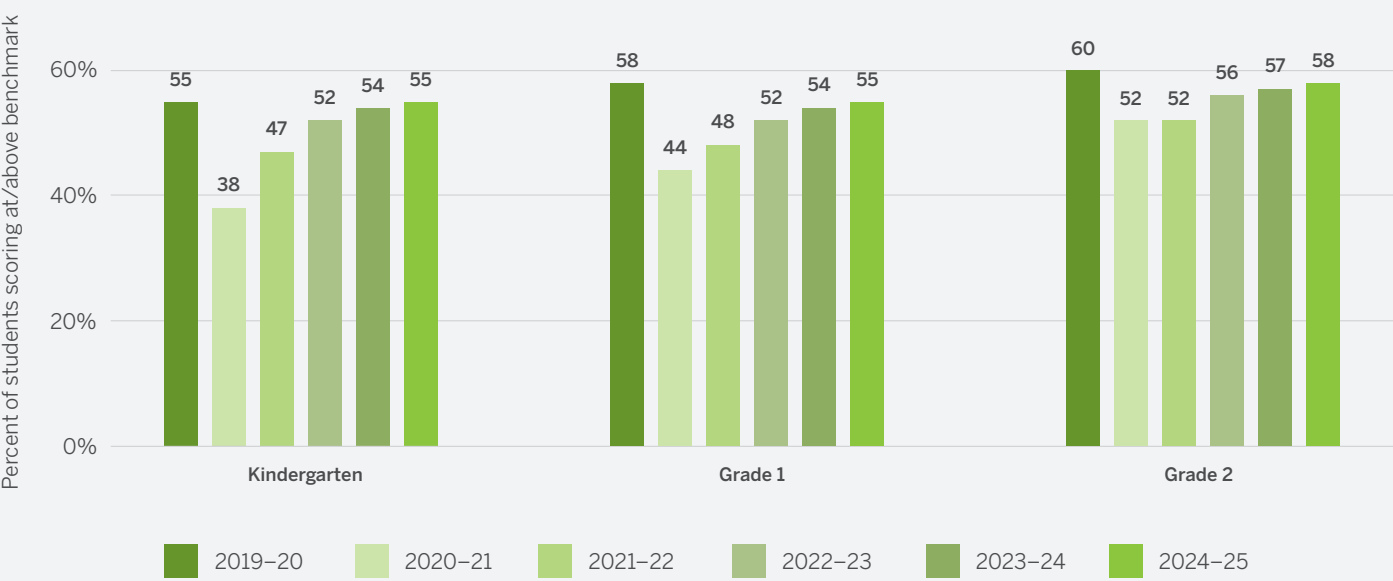
> Middle-of-year data is uniquely positioned to help schools plan for instructional changes and implement those changes before the following school year. See the **Recommendations** section of this report for actions schools and districts can take at middle-of-year.

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1   U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Reading Assessment, http://nationsreportcard.gov.

Insights

How many students are on track to learn to read?

The following table shows the percentage of students in each grade who were identified as being on track (ready for core instruction) in early literacy skills. It includes the most recent data from the middle of the current school year (2024–25), as well as data from the middle of the five previous school years (2019–20, 2020–21, 2021–22, 2022–23, and 2023–24).

Percent of students on track (ready for core instruction)

Percent of students scoring at/above benchmark

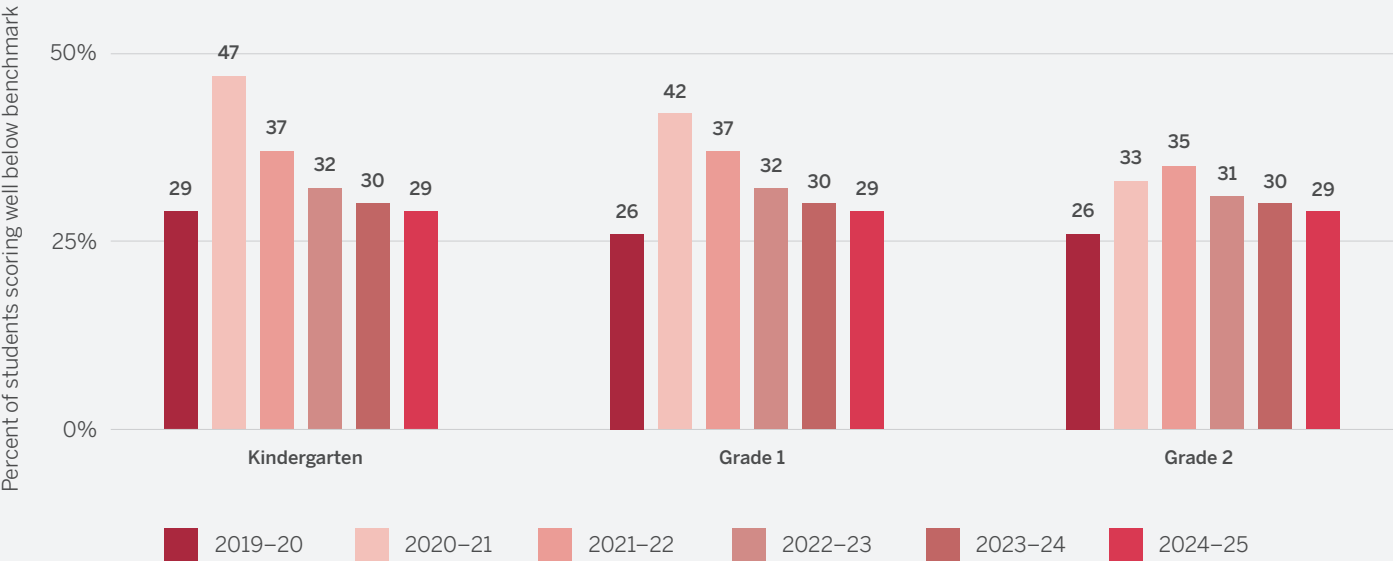|	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2
2019–20	55	58	60
2020–21	38	44	52
2021–22	47	48	52
2022–23	52	52	56
2023–24	54	54	57
2024–25	55	55	58

While all grades across K–2 show signs of year-over-year progress, with more students on-track for learning to read than there were in 2023–24, broader literacy gains remain slow, with a little more than half of students across early grades (K–2) on track for core reading instruction.

While there is an upward trend, and each year more students are on track at mid-year than the year prior, not as many students are on-track for learning to read as there were prior to 2019–20. Kindergarten is the only grade where the data indicates a return to pre-pandemic literacy readiness levels.

How many students are at risk for not learning to read?

The following figure shows the percentage of students in each grade who were identified 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 (2024–25), as well as data from the middle of the five previous school years (2019–20, 2020–21, 2021–22, 2022–23, and 2023–24).

Percent of students far behind (needing intensive intervention)

Percent of students scoring well below benchmark

	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2
2019–20	29	26	26
2020–21	47	42	33
2021–22	37	37	35
2022–23	32	32	31
2023–24	30	30	30
2024–25	29	29	29

All grades across K–2 show the percentage of students at the greatest risk for not learning to read decreasing year-over-year. While fewer students are considered far behind today than in 2023–24, more than a quarter of students across grades K–2 are at the greatest risk for not learning to read. Kindergarten is the only grade where the data indicates a return to pre-pandemic literacy readiness levels.

A deeper dive into progress monitoring

From the two million K–2 students and 11,000 schools using mCLASS, we examined relationships between teacher practice and student outcomes, comparing schools with similar starting points for student performance, then categorizing them based on their progress in reducing the population of students with the greatest risk for not learning to read during the fall semester (from beginning to middle of year). We found that schools making the most headway in early reading were most likely to engage in monitoring the progress of their at-risk students throughout the semester.

The following table shows that schools in the first quintile reduced the population of students requiring intensive intervention by 14 percentage points, while schools in the last quintile saw this group of at-risk students increase by three percentage points. Schools in the first quintile engaged in progress monitoring for 85% of students at risk for not learning to read at least once during the semester, compared with schools in the last quintile, which monitored just 56% of at-risk students. Similarly, schools in the first quintile were more than twice as likely to monitor the progress of these students on a regular basis throughout the semester than were schools in the last quintile (33% versus 14%).

	Progress category	Average change	Percentage of targeted students who received progress monitoring	
			At least 1 time	At least 6 times
First quintile schools (80th to 99th percentile)	Well above average	-14 pts	85%	33%
Second quintile schools (60th to 79th percentile)	Above average	-9 pts	80%	26%
Third quintile schools (40th to 59th percentile)	Average	-6 pts	75%	22%
Fourth quintile schools (20th to 39th percentile)	Below average	-3 pts	68%	19%
Last quintile schools (0 to 19th percentile)	Well below average	+3 pts	56%	14%

Recommendations

Middle-of-year data is uniquely positioned to help schools plan for instructional changes and implement those changes before the following school year.

Progress monitoring—identifying, supporting, and tracking outcomes—is one strategy schools can engage in when working with students who are the most at-risk for not learning to read. Grade-level instruction for all students and targeted instruction for some students should be based on assessment data that highlights specific skill gaps, instructional needs, and learning strengths. This data-driven approach enables educators to provide differentiated support, developing foundational reading skills based on each student's progress and proficiency.

Districts should analyze middle-of-year data by school, grade, and classroom and create plans that:

- Ensure all students receive quality instruction grounded in evidence-based practices.
- Identify students that need additional support and develop a plan for addressing their needs.
- Allocate resources for additional support and implement those plans.
- Regularly monitor progress for students and make adjustments as needed.

Early literacy instruction must include systematic instruction on letter-sound relationships to support word recognition and spelling while providing opportunities for students to practice those skills to build automaticity and fluency. Likewise, instruction must engage students in rich oral language experiences while developing their background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension skills through interactive discussions, read-alouds, and meaningful connections to text. Schools that deliver the strongest literacy outcomes deliver quality instruction and regularly screen students, responding when they need support.

Elements of quality instruction

Systematic	Cumulative	Explicit
Systematic instruction involves a sequential progression where skills and concepts are organized in a clear, logical order. Skills to be taught are explicitly identified within and across grade levels, ensuring consistency. Schools should establish a scope and sequence for these skills across all grades and teachers should teach the skills identified for their grade level.	Cumulative instruction begins with less complex skills and concepts, building knowledge progressively. It emphasizes regular review of previously taught material, ensuring that skills are revisited, strengthened, and applied to new learning. This approach goes beyond isolated skill practice, enabling students to connect and apply new learning to their prior knowledge.	Explicit instruction uses clear, direct teaching in which teachers explain and model skills through a gradual release model. Scaffolded support helps students build independence in applying these skills and strategies. This approach encourages active learning through guided practice, collaboration, and discussion, allowing teachers to monitor progress and provide immediate feedback.

About the data

The report highlights the effects of instructional loss by comparing Amplify mCLASS with DIBELS®️ 8th Edition benchmark data from the 2019–20, 2020–21, 2021–22, 2022–23, 2023–24 and 2024–25 school years. From more than 3 million students assessed with mCLASS, approximately 250,000 students in a matched set of 1,400 schools in 43 states are represented. The schools in the source data are slightly more likely to be in large urban metropolitan areas than the nation overall, but perform comparably to the much larger mCLASS national population.

For the year-to-date (fall semester) progress analysis, data are drawn from a matched set of over 11,000 schools and 2 million students in grades K–2 from the 2024–25 school year.

About mCLASS

The data was collected with mCLASS, Amplify's teacher-administered literacy assessment and intervention suite for grades K–6. mCLASS, powered by DIBELS 8th Edition, automates the data collection of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), 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.

Explanation of assessment performance levels

DIBELS performance levels	Status	Instructional implications
🟦 Above benchmark	On track	Ready for core instruction, likely to meet grade-level reading standards at end of year
🟩 At benchmark		
🟨 Below benchmark		Not far behind, require some strategic support, reasonably likely to meet end of year standards
🟥 Well below benchmark	At risk	Far behind, require intensive intervention, unlikely to meet end of year standards

About Amplify

A pioneer in K–12 education since 2000, Amplify is leading the way in next-generation curriculum and assessment. Our captivating core and supplemental programs in literacy, math, and science engage all students in rigorous learning and inspire them to think deeply, creatively, and for themselves. Our formative assessment products turn data into practical instructional support to help all students build a strong foundation in early reading and math. All of our programs provide teachers with powerful tools that help them understand and respond to the needs of every student. Today, Amplify reaches more than 15 million students in all 50 states. To learn more, visit **amplify.com**.

For more information on mCLASS,
visit **amplify.com/mclass**.

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