

PRESS RELEASE

Reading Skills of Young Students Stall Amid COVID-19 Pandemic



PUBLISHED: March 9, 2021

New PACE Research Details Lower Rates of Oral Reading Fluency Across Nation; Students in Low Achieving Schools Fall Farther Behind

Amid the disruption of schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the oral reading fluency for students in early grades is estimated to be about 30 percent lower than in typical years, and students from lower achieving schools may be falling even farther behind, according to new research released today by Policy Analysis for California Education ([PACE](#)).

"This new research provides clear and concerning evidence of learning loss in terms of the development of essential reading skills among young students," said [Heather J. Hough](#), executive director of PACE and one of the principal authors of the research brief. "And the losses may be greater than we estimate, particularly for students in lower achieving schools, raising gravely concerning issues of educational equity."

Oral reading fluency—the ability to read aloud quickly and accurately—is an important skill for developing readers that is highly predictive of comprehension and other important measures of student reading ability.

The research brief, [*Changing Patterns of Growth in Oral Reading Fluency During the COVID-19 Pandemic*](#), examines and details concerning changes in oral reading fluency related to disruptions in schooling during spring and fall 2020 using data from nearly 250,000 scores for students in Grades 1–3 collected in over 100 school districts spread across 22 states.

The study reports that growth in oral reading fluency among students flattened and remained stalled this past spring, with students in Grades 2 and 3 most affected.

This past fall, those students tested demonstrated gains in oral reading fluency, but those gains were not sufficient to make up losses from the spring. **The accumulated learning loss for second and third graders represents 26 percent of expected yearly gains for second grade students and 33 percent for third grade students.** These findings may underestimate the impact on oral reading fluency as many students were not assessed in spring 2020 and may not have been provided with or been engaged in learning opportunities.

The research also shows a more robust growth in oral reading fluency in higher achieving school districts than in lower achieving school districts, indicating that students in lower achieving schools may be falling farther behind during the pandemic.

“These gaps in growth in oral reading fluency between high and low-achieving districts are likely a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and illustrate the unequal effects of COVID,” said [Benjamin W. Domingue](#), an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University and lead author of the report. “If left unchecked, they may result in a widening of preexisting achievement gaps.”

The research brief urges policymakers and educators to pay close attention to the impact of the pandemic on the development of reading skills for young students. The brief recommends that substantial resources be allocated to support literacy development in the early grades, especially within historically low-achieving districts, which often serve a disproportionate number of low-income students.

“The development of reading skills is fundamental to academic development and success, and these findings should be met with urgent concern about the impact of the pandemic on development of young students, especially those from low income backgrounds,” Hough concludes. “These findings are worrisome, but they do not need to be catastrophic. As the gains in learning made in the fall demonstrate, educators are finding ways to successfully teach and assess oral reading fluency even during the continued disruption of the pandemic. We can build on those practices. It is essential that educators and policymakers take action to accelerate learning for those students who have fallen behind and ensure that schools have the resources and support they need to enact effective practices at scale.”

This research brief, [Changing Patterns of Growth in Oral Reading Fluency During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), investigates the impact of the pandemic on student learning separately in spring and fall 2020 by using data from an oral reading fluency assessment delivered by [Literably](#). The assessment measures oral reading fluency based on first recording students’ readings of texts presented to them on a device and then using a combination of human transcription and speech recognition to score these recordings.

The brief *Changing Patterns of Growth in Oral Reading Fluency During the COVID-19 Pandemic* and an accompanying working paper are available [here](#).



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