COMMENTARY

Modest Gains and Persistent Gaps in Student Performance in 2023–24

AUTHOR

H. Alix Gallagher | Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University

PUBLISHED: January 22, 2025

In October 2024, the California Department of Education released the results of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test scores from spring 2024. These tests measure students' proficiency at meeting the expectations of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In 2022, as PACE reported, the results showed declines in test scores in both ELA and mathematics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related school disruptions, with disproportionately negative impacts of COVID-19 on the performance of low-income students, Black students, other students of color, and English learners (ELs). Last year, we reported on scores from spring 2023, which showed continued declines in ELA performance and a slight rebound in mathematics.

This is the third year that postpandemic testing data have been available. Overall, we see very modest improvements in ELA and mathematics, substantial gaps in performance across subgroups, and a concerning pattern in mathematics performance. See the Analytic Notes for information on the methods and limitations of this analysis.

ANALYTIC NOTES

This commentary analyzes what we can tell about California students' performance in ELA and mathematics based on available data. Ideally, to understand if students' performance is improving over time, we would track individual students' scores from year to year as they progress through the school system. Data in California do not allow that type of analysis without a special application process, unlike states such as North Carolina, Florida, or Texas, which have had well-developed longitudinal data systems for years. Instead, the closest we can currently come to understanding how student proficiency may be changing as students move through California schools is cross-cohort comparisons. These are less than ideal because they do not show the growth of a relatively consistent cohort of students over time; however, they offer some insights based on the assumption that if the proportion of students proficient was the same over time, the rate of proficiency would be relatively comparable across cohorts.

Analyzing trends across cohorts is less than ideal because California has a changing population. From 2019 to 2024, the number of students tested in ELA and mathematics declined by 7 percentage points. There was variation in the rate of decline across grade levels and subgroups as well. It is unclear to what extent the observed changes (or lack of changes) in scores reflect shifts in the student population rather than true changes in performance over time. The solution, of course, would be to follow students over time.

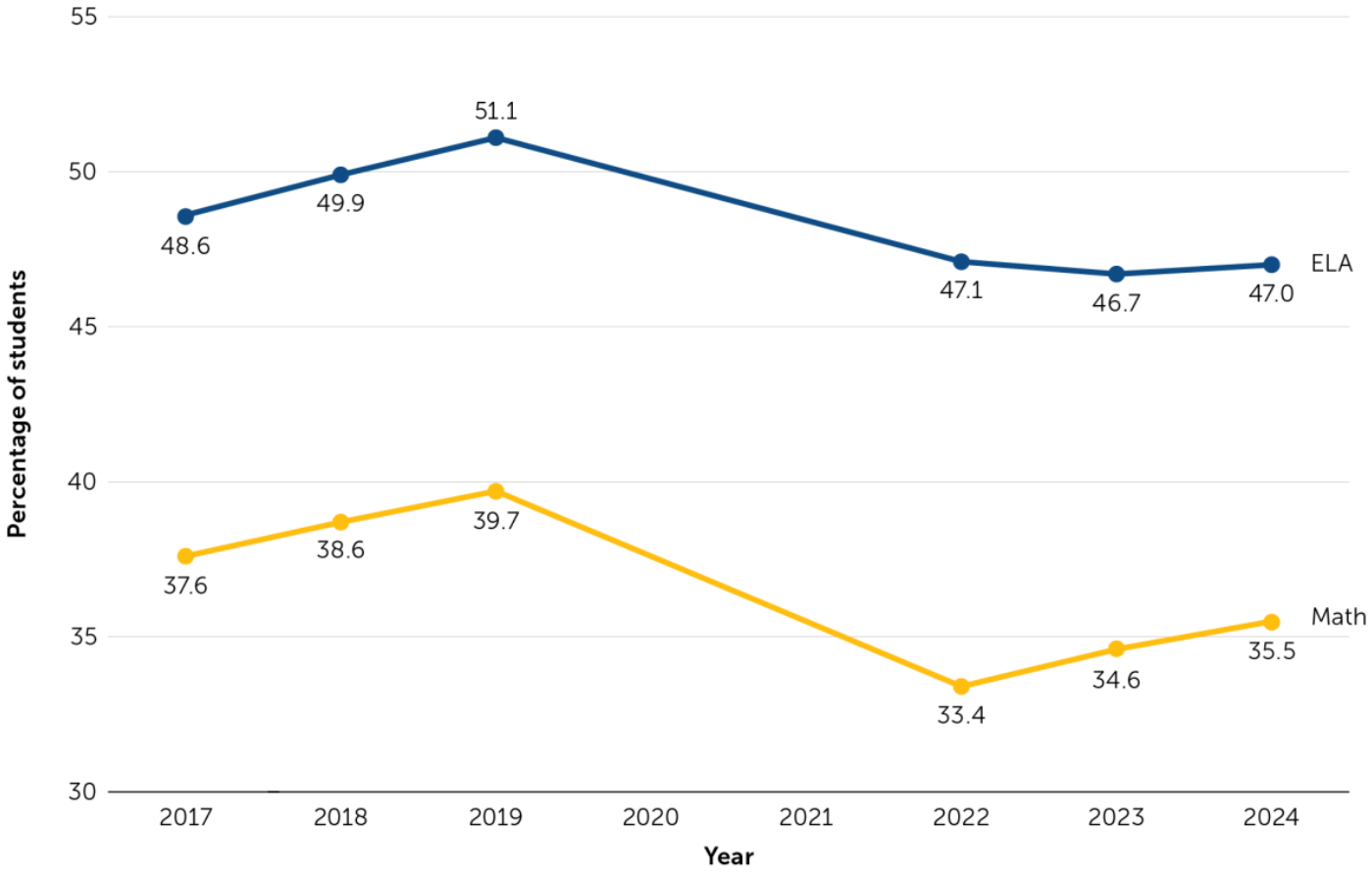
A final limitation to understanding progress over time is that there are multiple years for which we have no data for each cohort. The lack of data was exacerbated by the pandemic-related pause in testing in 2020 and 2021. Even in normal years though, students do not take a statewide assessment in Grades 9, 10, or 12 or before Grade 3; we have consistent statewide insight into student learning for only the middle part of students' time in the K–12 education system, and even those middle grades have gaps for recent cohorts (see Table A3 in the appendix).

While the cross-cohort analyses we rely on for this commentary have inherent limitations for understanding trends in performance, they nonetheless provide an accurate snapshot of how each cohort of students—both overall and by subgroup—is performing.

Overall results in ELA and mathematics show a very slow rate of improvement

From 2017 to 2019, there was an increase of approximately 1 percentage point per year in the percentage of students who met or exceeded standards in both ELA and mathematics. By 2019, slightly over half (51 percent) of California students were meeting or exceeding standards in ELA, and almost 40 percent were meeting or exceeding standards in mathematics. After a 2-year pause in standardized testing during the pandemic, in 2022 the proportion of students who met or exceeded standards dropped sharply in both ELA and mathematics from 2019 (see Figure 1). The proportion of students who met or exceeded standards in mathematics started to rebound in 2023, but ELA performance continued to decline.

Figure 1. Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in ELA and Math by Year, 2019–24 (All Grades)



While in 2024 there is evidence of ongoing recovery in mathematics performance trends, there has been minimal progress in ELA; this year's gains do not even fully erase the declines from 2022 to 2023. In both subjects, less than half of California's tested students met or exceeded standards in either ELA (47 percent) or mathematics (36 percent) in 2024 (Figure 1). California's overall pattern of student performance matches trends in many states across the country.

For ELA, if improvement continues at the same rate as this year (an increase of 0.3 percent in the percentage of students who meet or exceed standards each year), it would take 10 years for half of all students to at least meet standards—and in that decade, performance still would not have reached prepandemic levels. In mathematics, we have seen steady gains of slightly more than 1 point in the percentage of students who met or exceeded standards, which is essentially the same rate of increase in scores that we saw prior to the pandemic. Unfortunately, given where proficiency rates started, at this rate it would take more than a decade for half of all students to meet or exceed standards.

The Brookings Institution's analysis also characterizes California as making "minimal progress" towards pandemic recovery in both mathematics and ELA, whereas almost half of states with available data are either making progress or have recovered in at least one subject. Proficiency rates in Iowa, New Mexico, and New York have recovered to prepandemic levels in both subjects.

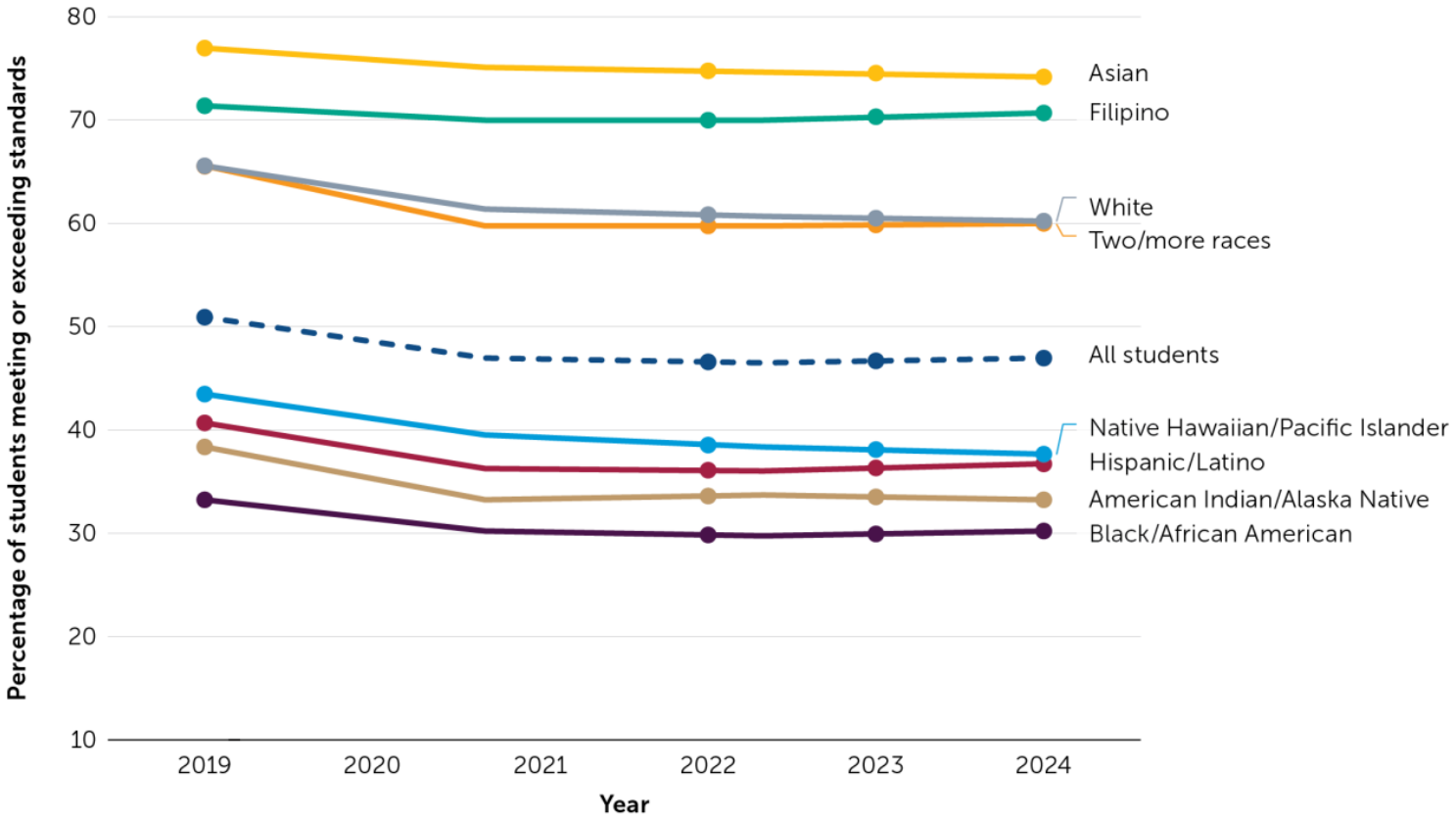
The remainder of our analysis focuses more deeply on different groups of students and their performance trends since just before the COVID-19 pandemic until testing resumed (2019–24).

Prominent differences among subgroups remain

Examining SBAC data from spring 2024 shows that the gaps across subgroups that existed before the pandemic remain. Because the patterns in subgroup gaps are similar across ELA and mathematics scores, we chose to illustrate racial subgroup gaps for ELA scores and other subgroup gaps for mathematics scores. Data for all subgroups in both subjects can be found in the appendix. We focus these analyses on the period from 2019 to 2024, which represents the final administration of the SBAC before the pandemic and the 3 years of administration since testing resumed after the pandemic.

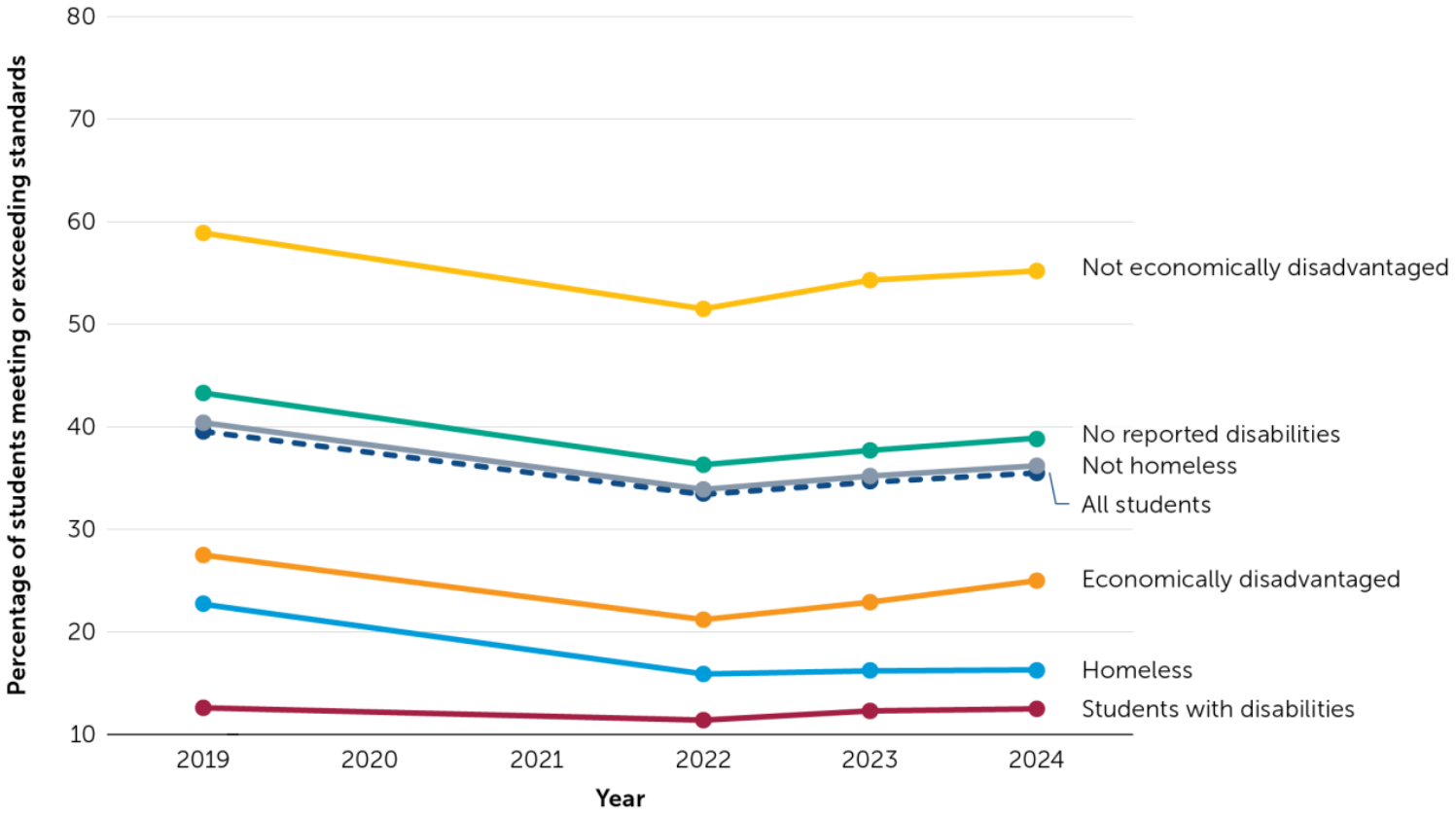
In Figure 2, the dashed dark blue line represents the overall mean in ELA scores from 2019 to 2024. Racial/ethnic subgroup performance patterns remain relatively constant, with Asian, Filipino, and White students as well as students of two or more races generally performing above the mean, while students identifying as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Black/African American tend to perform below the mean. In 2024, scores for Hispanic, Black, and Filipino students showed slight improvements in the percentage of students who met or exceeded standards, while Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and White students continued their earlier declines. The overarching subgroup gaps in 2024, as in 2019, remained stubbornly consistent, with a difference of 44 percentage points between Asian and Black/African American students in the percentage who met or exceeded standards in ELA in both years.

Figure 2. Trends in ELA Scores Across Racial Subgroups, 2019–24



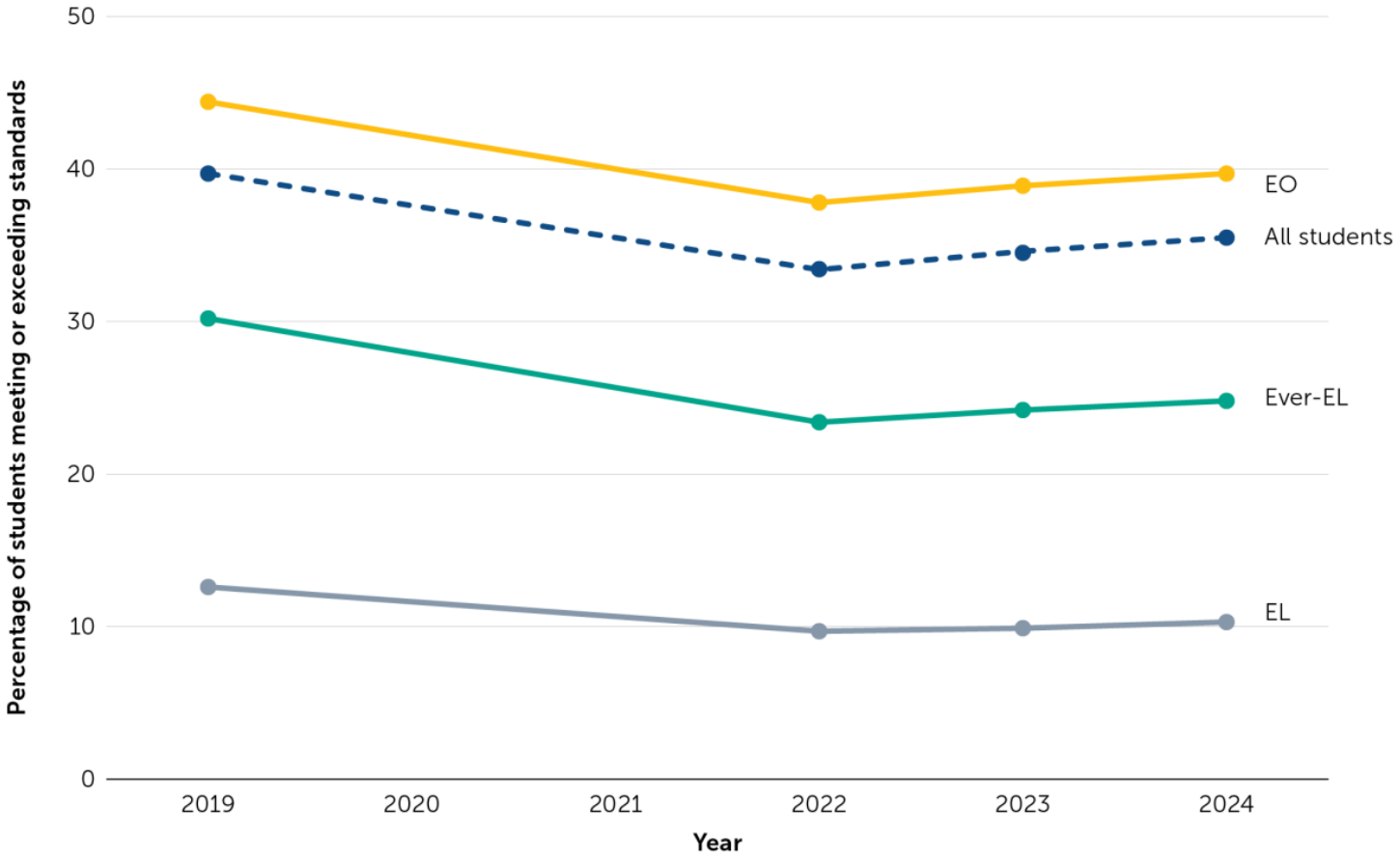
Turning to mathematics, we examined the data for students with disabilities, students who are experiencing homelessness, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, with the dashed dark blue line in Figure 3 representing the mean. In all cases, student groups whose members are disadvantaged have a lower percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in mathematics in 2024 than in 2019. Mirroring broader trends in mathematics, all these subgroups saw a drop, due to the pandemic, from 2019 to 2022 in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards, and all groups have continued rebounding (albeit at different rates) since 2022. Much more striking than the minor rebound, however, is the gap between marginalized subgroups and their peers. For example, 13 percent of students with disabilities met or exceeded standards compared to 39 percent of students with no reported disabilities—a gap of 26 percentage points in 2024; 25 percent of economically disadvantaged students met or exceeded standards compared to 55 percent of students who were not economically disadvantaged—a gap of 30 percentage points in 2024; and 16 percent of students experiencing homelessness met or exceeded standards compared to 36 percent of students who were not homeless—a gap of 20 percentage points in 2024. These gaps were relatively consistent over time, with only minor deviations from year to year.

Figure 3. Trends in Mathematics Scores Across Nonracial Subgroups, 2019–24



Our last subgroup analysis focuses on variation across subgroups based on English language proficiency status. The groups we examined are English only (EO), EL, and Ever-EL; the dashed line in Figure 4 shows the overall mean. The pattern of pandemic-related decline and incremental recovery from 2022 to 2024 that we see in the overall trend is matched by each subgroup.

Figure 4. Trends in Mathematics Scores Across English Proficiency Subgroups, 2019–24



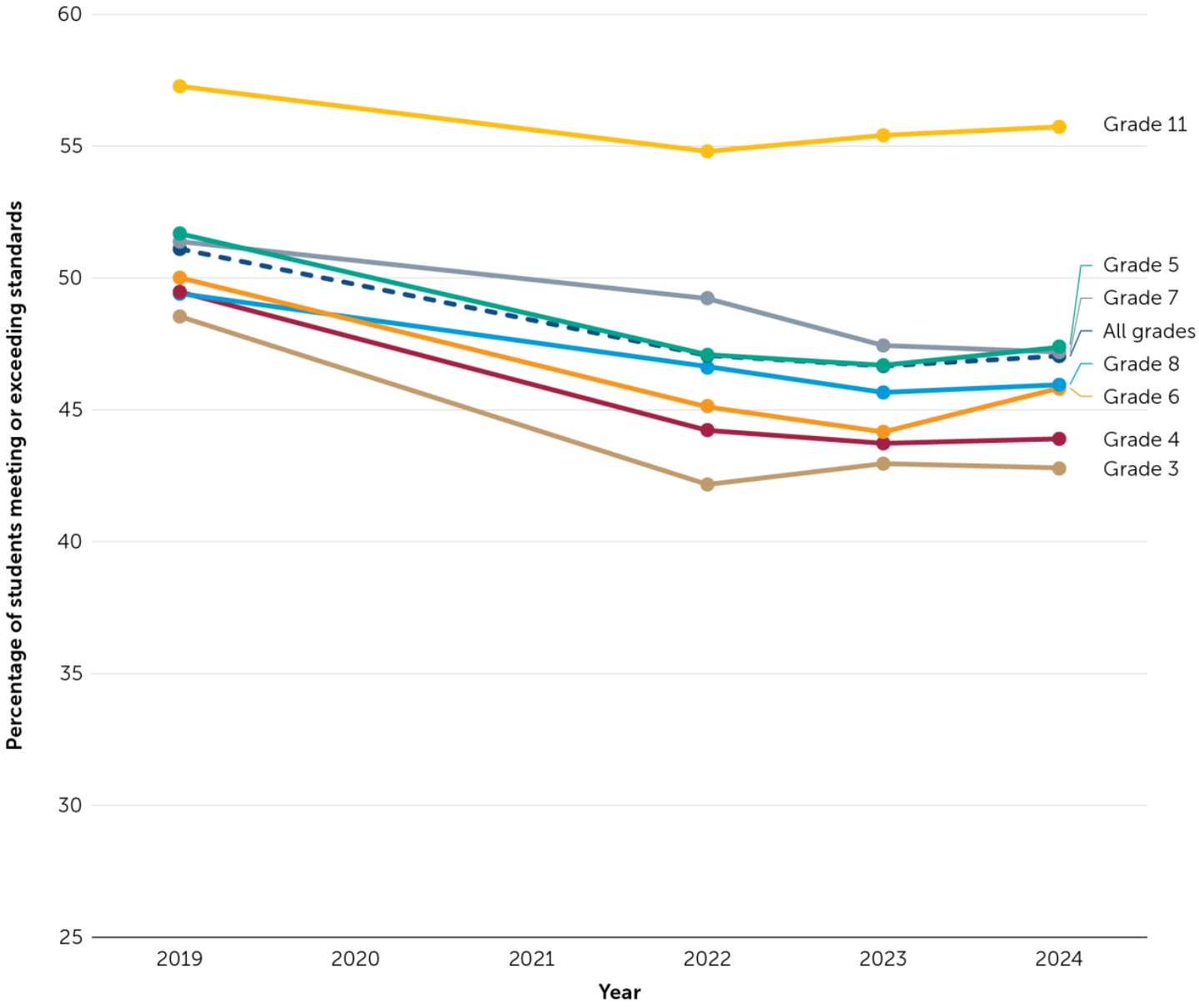
Note. EL (English learner) is a student in kindergarten through Grade 12 whose primary language is a language other than English, as indicated on their Home Language Survey, and who, upon initial assessment in California, is determined to be eligible for support with English language development based on the results of their initial assessment of English language proficiency. EO (English only) is a student in kindergarten through Grade 12 for whom English is reported as the primary language on their Home Language Survey. Ever-EL is a student who has been designated an EL at any point during their enrollment in a U.S. school. Source. About CAASPP and ELPAC.

The modest rebounds seen across all groups are unfortunately dwarfed by the gaps across subgroups, suggesting that much work is left to serve all students equitably. These data underscore the importance of addressing the unique needs of disadvantaged student groups in postpandemic recovery efforts.

Trends across grade levels show higher proficiency rates in higher grades for ELA and lower proficiency rates in higher grades for mathematics

Examining grade-level trends in the percentage of students who meet or exceed ELA standards on the SBAC shows an interesting pattern. In all testing years since 2019, Grade 3 is the grade with the lowest percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards, and Grade 11 is the grade with the highest percentage (Figure 5).

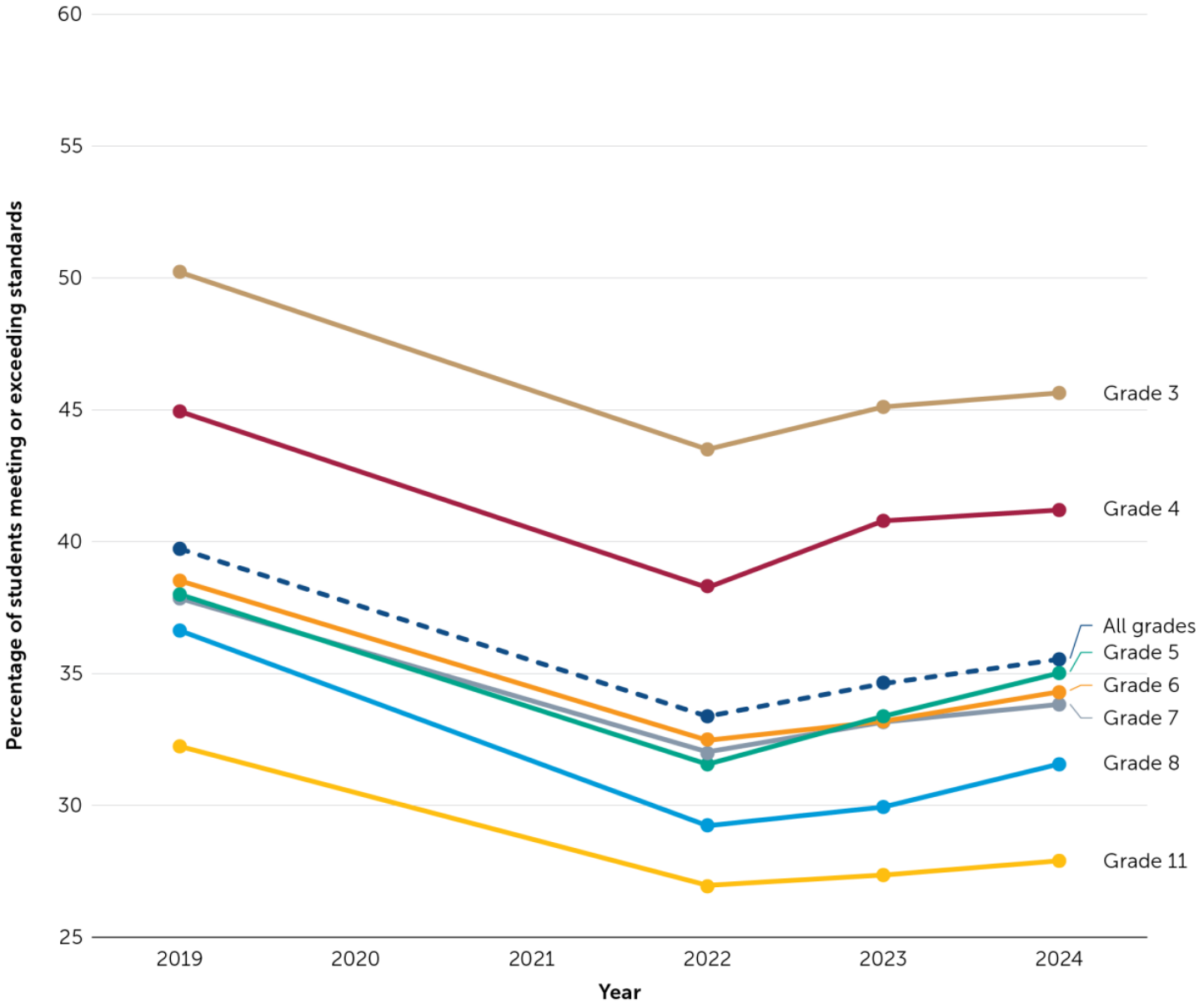
Figure 5. Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in ELA by Grade and Year, 2019–24



This pattern is generally consistent with patterns found in prior research. For example,reardon et al. (2018) used national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010–11 to show that California students entered school behind many of their peers across the country; however, over time their proficiency improved.

The grade-level patterns in SBAC performance look very different in mathematics. In mathematics, the grade with the highest percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards on the 2024 SBAC is Grade 3, followed by Grade 4; the lowest proficiency rates are for Grades 8 and 11. As students progress through California schools, a lower percentage meets or exceeds standards in mathematics.

Figure 6. Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Mathematics by Grade and Year, 2019–24



Looking at these data raises concerns both about the low percentages of students who met or exceeded proficiency in mathematics and why the proficiency rates are lower for California's oldest students. It is deeply problematic that as students advance through California's educational system, fewer meet the standards, culminating in only 28 percent of 11th graders meeting or exceeding standards in spring 2024. Given that SBAC performance serves as a key indicator for college and career readiness, this raises serious concerns about the system's ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

Where do we go from here?

Even with these limitations, the results suggest the need for reflection on why California's performance is more or less stagnant relative to our adopted Common Core State Standards and other states' recovery progress. We have a pressing need for improvement on both counts. The challenge of improving going forward will be greater than in past years because the additional funding from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) that schools have benefitted from is drawing to a close, and many districts are facing a fiscal cliff, with declining enrollment leading to declining revenues. Research has shown

that the additional resources funded by ESSER have supported improvement, but those resources will not be available to support continued progress, much less the increased trajectory of improvement that California students need. It is unclear how California will be able to provide much-needed support for our educator workforce in the current climate.

These analyses suggest a need to rethink how we are supporting districts to build effective systems for consistent and high-quality instruction. In the face of declining funding, it will not be possible for California districts to improve student performance by spending more money on programs. Instead, they will need to work smarter by building more effective teacher and administrator learning into educators' ongoing work, using data to identify programs that are underdelivering for students, and reallocating limited resources to more effective approaches. This is a tall task, but it is the only path to increasing the proportion of students who graduate from high school ready to thrive in a rapidly changing society.

Suggested citation

Gallagher, H. A. (2025, January). *Modest gains and persistent gaps in student performance in 2023–24* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/modest-gains-and-persistent-gaps-student-performance-2023-24

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org