



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

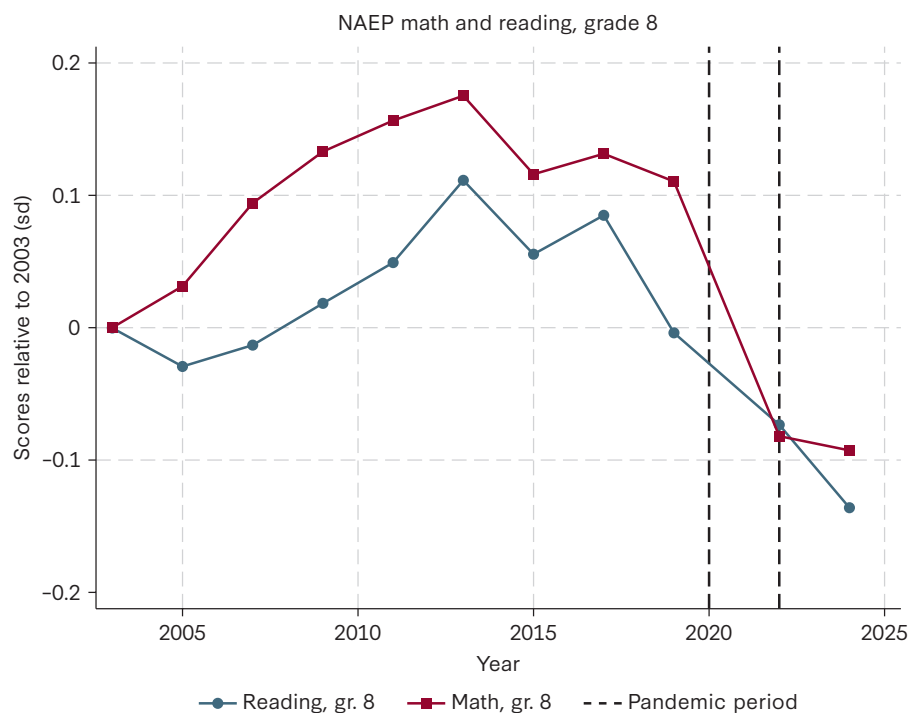
The Pandemic in Perspective

US Learning Losses in the Twenty-First Century

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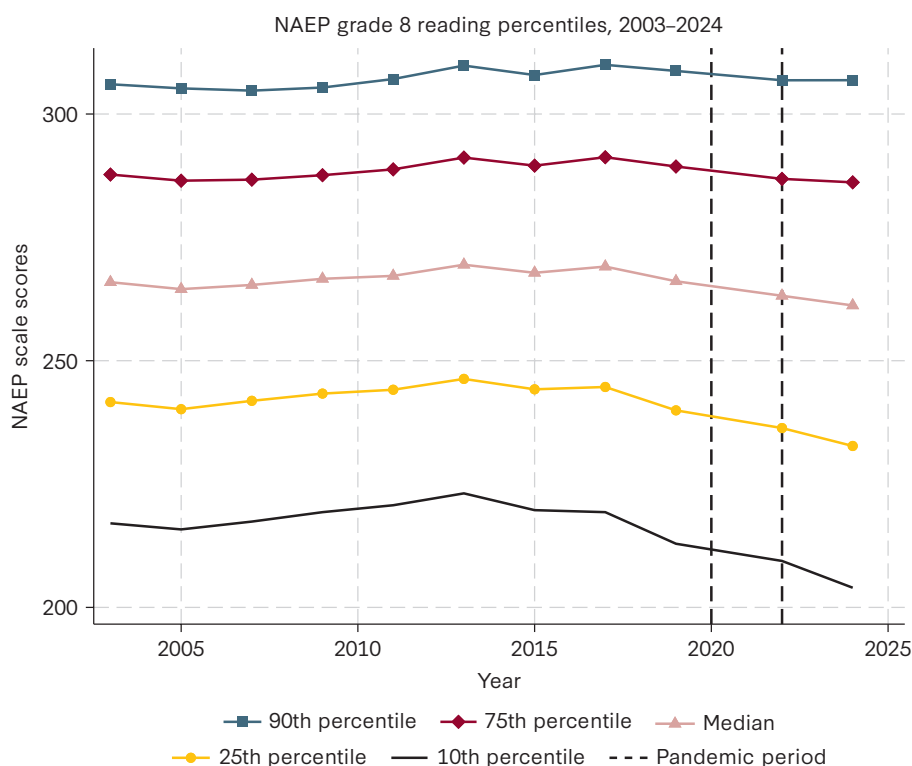
US student achievement was clearly hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic, but achievement had already been on a downward trajectory since 2013. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for eighth-graders shows that for the pandemic period of 2019–2022, math scores fell by 0.20 standard deviations (sd) and reading scores by 0.07 sd. These huge declines have large implications for students' future earnings and the quality of the nation's workforce. But as indicated in figure 1, these declines were preceded by years of prior decline,

FIGURE 1 NAEP math and reading scores before, during, and after the pandemic period



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov>.

FIGURE 2 Scores of students at different percentiles of the NAEP achievement distribution, reading, grade eight



Source: NAEP, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov>.

and they continued even after the height of the pandemic despite unprecedented federal spending of \$190 billion for remediation. Without significant structural reform, the nation faces a future of lower economic growth and reduced global competitiveness and leadership.

These average losses were not evenly shared: Students at the lower end of the achievement distribution experienced much larger declines than higher-performing peers (figure 2). The widening achievement distribution also began in 2013 and continued during the “recovery phase” of 2022–2024. This widening gap threatens to deepen long-term disparities in income, employment, and social mobility, compounding the disadvantages for the nation’s most vulnerable students.

State-level results reveal wide variation. For example, seen from states’ peak performances, the median math score across states declines by over one-third of a standard deviation (sd), but state declines range from 0.11 sd to 0.56 sd.

The economic stakes are enormous. Based on historical links among skills, earnings, and growth, restoring achievement to its 2013 levels would raise the lifetime earnings of today’s average student by close to 8 percent and would increase annual US GDP by roughly

6 percent for the remainder of the century. In total, the present value of future lost growth from continued low achievement is estimated to be three times current GDP.

Recent US policy response has so far been dominated by short-term remediation: tutoring, added instructional time, and technology support. These approaches treat the pandemic as an isolated disruption rather than part of a decade-long decline. The failure of these efforts to reverse the achievement slide, pandemic or otherwise, suggests more systemic approaches are needed.

For the last half century, education reforms have largely consisted of incremental adjustments—new programs, altered regulations, and more resources—within the same institutional framework. This approach has consistently failed to deliver sustained improvement. Even proven interventions, such as performance-based teacher pay in Washington, DC, and Dallas, have rarely been adopted more widely because they run counter to entrenched practices and incentives.

Reversing the decline will require more than piecemeal policy changes. The paper argues for a fundamental shift to an outcome-based system that sets clear goals, rewards demonstrated effectiveness, and tailors interventions to local needs. Such a system would give high-performing districts greater operational autonomy while imposing stronger oversight and providing targeted support where results lag. This kind of change is consistent with a smaller federal footprint and state policy focused on enabling and incentivizing innovation rather than prescribing uniform mandates.

Without such structural reform, the United States risks locking in lower economic growth, reduced opportunity, and diminished global competitiveness. The pandemic may have brought the problem into sharp relief, but the underlying challenge is a decade-long erosion of achievement that can only be addressed by rethinking how the education system operates.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Eric A. Hanushek, the Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, is internationally recognized for his economic analysis of educational issues. He received the 2021 Yidan Prize for Education Research. He has authored or edited twenty-six books and hundreds of articles. A distinguished graduate of the US Air Force Academy, he has a PhD from MIT.

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