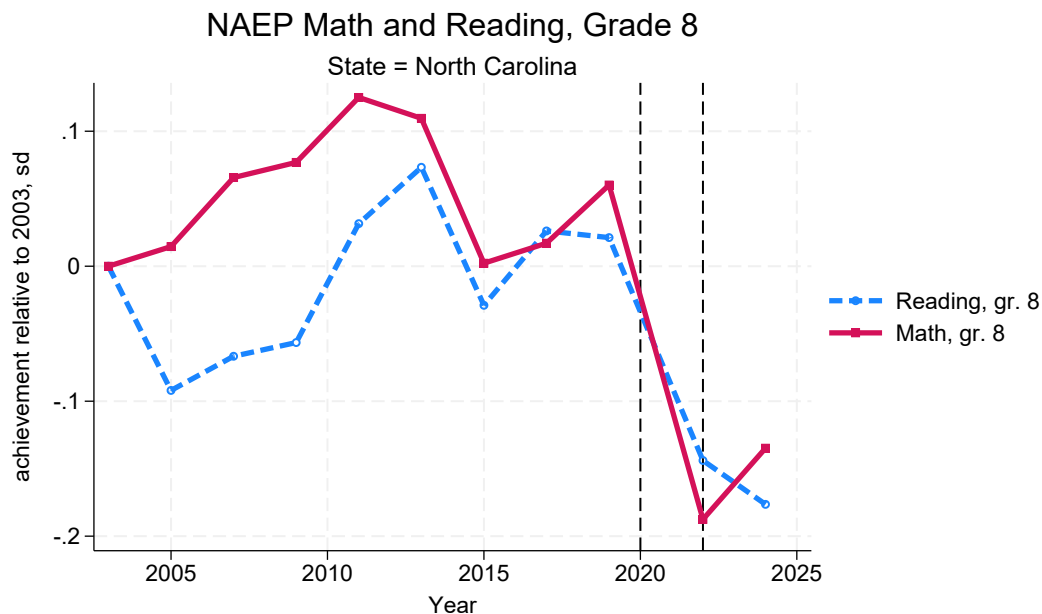


NORTH CAROLINA

by Eric A. Hanushek



PATTERNS OF STATE ACHIEVEMENT AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably disrupted student learning, but the decline in educational outcomes began well before its onset and has persisted after the end of school closures. At the national level, American students reached their peak achievement in 2013 according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Since then, students have lost the equivalent of more than a year's worth of education, only half of which happened during the pandemic years.

Not all states followed the same pattern, and it is useful to see what happened in North Carolina. Math peaked in 2011 and reading in 2013. Both saw particularly sharp declines in the pandemic period, leading to both being below 2003 levels.

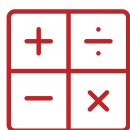
The average student in North Carolina in 2024 can, according to the historical relationship between achievement and earnings, expect lifetime earnings that are 7 percent lower than the average student at the prior period of peak achievement. Only a portion of this is due to the losses during the pandemic period.

The averages, however, tell just part of the economic story. On NAEP, basic performance levels are best interpreted as the minimum skills that will be commonly needed to participate fully in an information-based economy. The percentage of students failing to reach the basic level of math and reading rose substantially during the pandemic, but as with overall performance, this deterioration in performance both preceded and did not end with the pandemic.

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The figure below shows that North Carolina students are more likely to reach the basic level in math compared to the national average, but more likely to fail in reading. These low achievers will suffer more in terms of future economic outcomes.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS AT THE BELOW-BASIC LEVEL IN MATH AND READING, 2024



MATH

North Carolina

37.7%

National

39.4%



READING

North Carolina

35.3%

National

32.9%

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Recent US policy response has so far been dominated by short-term remediation efforts that 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. Indeed, the nation has tried incremental reform for [over 40 years](#). And still, American students are learning less today than they did decades ago.

The Hoover Institution's [Education Futures Council](#) has developed a thoughtful framework for this kind of systemic change, emphasizing student outcomes, local flexibility and state oversight based on performance.

Without these kinds of structural reforms, 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.



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