MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Students Have Fallen Behind During COVID-19: A Path Forward for Mississippi Kids

Students who are falling behind in school – in particular, those who are at below grade level – are at greater risk of dropping out of high school. This can have detrimental lifelong impacts, as well as negative economic consequences for dropouts and society at large.

This issue is much more important in this era of COVID-19, as many more children are falling behind grade level. Policymakers should therefore pay attention to state remedial education programs and consider whether current resources, both state and federal, are being used to the best advantage for kids who are falling behind.

The Achievement Gap Has Gotten Bigger

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by the consulting firm McKinsey found that minority and low-income students are at much greater risk of falling behind because of school closures and disruptions. They found that:

- Black students may fall behind by an additional 10.3 months;
- Hispanic students may fall behind by an additional 9.2 months;
- Low-income students may fall behind by an additional year.

Achievement gaps between groups of students were very large and stubbornly persistent for decades heading into the COVID-19 pandemic. And, from March 2020 to June 2021, McKinsey estimates that these achievement gaps will grow by another 15 to 20 percent.

McKinsey forecasts that the learning loss from COVID-19 "may translate into long-term harm for individuals and society." They estimate that the decline in student achievement will have a national cost in upcoming years of $110 billion in annual earnings for students, higher crime and incarceration rates, and other negative social outcomes.

Other recent studies are arriving at very similar conclusions.

New Solutions Are Needed

Given the decades-long failure of existing remediation programs and the acute learning losses due to the pandemic, it is time to try something new to help students who are falling behind.

The research consensus on remediation programs for public school students is that they have performed poorly for decades. Federal and state funding for remediation programs have increased significantly over time. For example, federal Title I-A funding increased by 81 percent between 1980 and 2017 in real (inflation-adjusted) terms.[1] Despite this large increase in funding, Title I has not boosted student achievement (Brookings report: Dynarksi and Kainz, 2015) and been poorly targeted to the students most in need (Hamilton Project, Gordon, 2016). Further, achievement gaps between groups of students have been stubbornly persistent for decades (Hanushek, et al., 2020).

Students who fall behind grade level and remain behind for a period of years often end up as high school dropouts. The economic consequences of dropping out of high school are severe: lower lifetime earnings, more poverty, increased use of government welfare programs, reduced generation of tax revenue, higher rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, higher incarceration rates, more drug use, lower life expectancy, etc.

Given the expensive and absolute failure of federal remediation programs, it is clearly left up to the states to do something about helping students who are behind grade level.

Based on scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), Mississippi has done a very good job of increasing student achievement overall in Grade 8 Mathematics over the last 20 years. Grade 8 Mathematics scores increased by 13 points from 2003 to 2019, while the national average increased by only 4 points.[2] However, Grade 8 Reading scores were essentially flat over the same time period (+1 point in Miss., while the national average was unchanged). That said, achievement gaps between groups of students in Mississippi have remained persistently large.

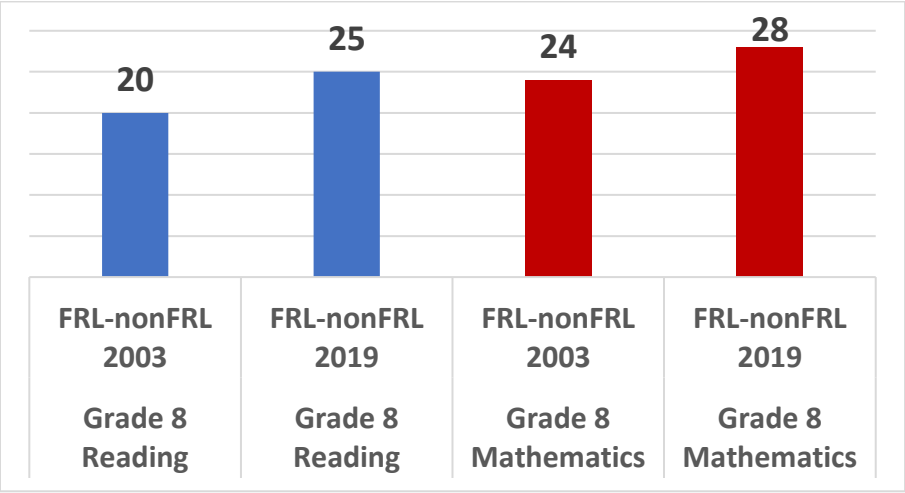
There is strong evidence that higher NAEP scores are associated with higher economic growth – see, for example, Hanushek, Ruhose, and Woessmann (2016). Thus, the gaps in achievement in Mississippi displayed below impact not only the students themselves, but the entire economy of the state.

As shown in the charts below for 8th Grade students, gaps between economically disadvantaged students (defined as eligible for a free or reduced price meal: FRL) and students from higher income backgrounds (nonFRL) increased in Mississippi by 5 points in Reading and 4 points in Mathematics from 2003 to 2019. That is, these gaps in learning were large in 2003 and were even larger in 2019. Gaps between 8th Grade Black and White students in Mississippi were large and essentially unchanged during this time period.

[1] Congressional Research Service, 2017. Title I-A grants are to be used to "provide supplementary educational and related services to low achieving and other students attending elementary and secondary schools with relatively high concentrations of students from low-income families."

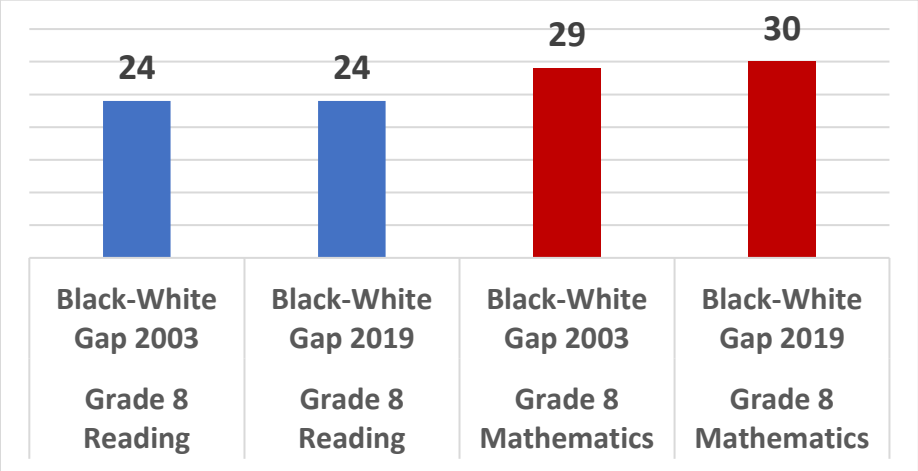
[2] The NAEP exams are often referred to as the "gold standard" of assessments.

Gaps in Grade 8 NAEP Scores Between Economically Disadvantaged Students (eligible for FRL) and Students from Higher Income Families (nonFRL) – Mississippi



Source: https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/data/

Gaps in Grade 8 NAEP Scores Between Black and White Students – Mississippi



Source: https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/data/

A Positive Step Forward

Mississippi's state funding formula (the Mississippi Adequate Education Program: MAEP) provides local public school districts with an "At-Risk Allowance." These funds may be spent by school districts on 30 different initiatives, as specified by the Mississippi Department of

Education (MDE). Prior to spending their At-Risk Allowance funds, however, districts must submit extensive paperwork to ask MDE for permission, including stating their purpose, goals and objectives, and the methodology for determining success of the program.

The amount of money allocated to each student is relatively small: about $300 next year. This figure may not sound like much, but that $300 could buy many hours of one-on-one tutoring, just as an example.

The bureaucratic hurdles for school districts to get the money are high and unnecessary. It would make sense to eliminate the red tape and give schools and school districts, as well as parents and students, more flexibility in how they use this money to serve at-risk children.

In fact, legislation introduced during the 2021 legislative session would have done that. HB 866, sponsored by Rep. Carolyn Crawford, sought to direct the State Board of Education to:

> "Provide maximum flexibility for school districts that receive at-risk funds to use and account for the expenditure of those funds in a manner that provides broad discretion to districts to efficiently meet the needs of at-risk students, including through the use of online learning opportunities and any other options that expand educational access for at-risk students."

Such flexibility would help school districts better meet the needs of low-income and minority students. But to help those students most at-risk of falling behind during the pandemic, the state of Mississippi should consider redirecting state funding to more directly serve these students.

As other states have done, Mississippi could allow at-risk students to use this funding in the form of "COVID Emergency Grants" to directly access tutoring and other remedial educational services. Families, of course, could also choose to continue having their students receive these services from their local public school.

These COVID Emergency Grants could be funded using the At-Risk Allowance provided by the state to public school districts. A primary advantage to doing so would be that the money could be reallocated to at-risk students without additional cost to taxpayers.

Student eligibility for COVID Emergency Grants could be based on eligibility for federal SNAP benefits (Food Stamps). The grants could also be allocated to students who received low scores on the prior year's assessments given to Mississippi public school students (e.g., early grades assessments, the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP), high school subject-area tests, and ACTs).

This opportunity for Mississippi families with at-risk students could be available on a pilot basis for five years, where top economists from Mississippi universities could study the effects of these emergency grants to see if they have increased learning outcomes for at-risk students (perhaps using a randomized controlled trial, RCT).

Mississippi should avoid the design flaws of a prior federal program, the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) program, which was a key feature of the federal No Child Left Behind

law. The key design flaws in the SES program were that it was bureaucratic (like Title I-A and Mississippi's At-Risk Allowance), and it was managed by local public school districts.

To be clear, the SES model is not the one envisioned here. Under the federal SES, parents still had to work with the bureaucracy of local school districts to access services. (For example, an SES document from Michigan contains 19 pages of instructions, forms and regulations.)

In addition, the SES program was inherently antagonistic toward parents: the SES money remained under the control of the public school if families did not wish to have their child receive tutoring outside school. Thus, school districts had a direct financial incentive to limit access to outside tutoring services and not promote those services that might better meet the needs of each student.

In contrast to the SES program, Mississippi could send COVID Emergency Grants to disadvantaged families directly. Similarly, unlike Title I-A funds, which are ultimately distributed and used for entire schools, a targeted grant to disadvantaged students would make sure the kids who most need remedial services are actually getting them.

In implementing this pilot program, Mississippi could also draw upon the experiences of other states that are using online platforms like ClassWallet, to ensure that families are using grants only with state-approved vendors.

Learning loss is real, especially for kids already at risk of falling behind before COVID-19. Instituting a pilot program that redirects the existing At-Risk Allowance to children in need of remedial education would provide direct, concrete and urgently needed assistance before time runs out for disadvantaged children in Mississippi.

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