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It's Worth Knowing What's Really Going On.

DIGGING DEEPER EDUCATION

## Tests show progress for Georgia students

Despite year-to-year improvement, scores trail pre-pandemic levels.

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The latest results on Georgia's Milestones tests show the impact of pandemic schooling, with performances rising after classrooms stabilized in the last school year.

New results from last spring show gains over the previous year when many had returned to classrooms but COVID-19 frequently re-closed them. Performance rose or held steady on 17 of 21 tests, according to Georgia Department of Education data released Friday.

"I'm pleased to report that Georgia's students did show strong improvement on the '22 Georgia Milestones assessments," said Allison Timberlake, the deputy state superintendent for testing. "The results have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels but they do show that academic recovery is under-

Milestones continued on A11

## Milestones

continued from A1

way in Georgia's public schools."

The statewide averages mask varied performances, though.

In English Language Arts, for instance, a third of the elementary and middle school grade levels did worse last school year than in the 2020-21 school year, while a third improved and a third stayed the same. All were below the performances in 2018-19, the last test cycle before the pandemic.

The improvement was better in math, though it showed the same pattern: There were gains but they were mostly one step forward after two steps back.

"I am encouraged by this year-over-year improvement," Gov. Brian Kemp tweeted. "But there is no doubt we have more work to do regarding pandemic-driven learning loss in our classrooms."

The numbers were reported as proficiency rates – the percentage of students in each grade and subject who are ready for the next grade level.

Eighth-grade math, a bellwether of academic success, showed rare longer-term improvement, falling 3 percentage points in 2021, then rising 4 points last spring for a cumulative 1-point gain over 2019.

But there are a couple of caveats: Accelerated eighth-grade students – those taking high school math – had to take the eighth-grade math Milestones this year and last year but not in 2019. Their presence on the recent tests probably boosted those scores.

Also, math was already low, with just 35% of eighth-graders scoring proficient or better in 2019.

"We shouldn't be thinking about it in terms of getting back to pre-pandemic" performance, said Dana Rickman, president of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, a nonpartisan research group. "We need to think about it in terms of setting ambitious goals for our students and figuring out how to get them there."

Many students skipped the tests in 2021, when the participation rate varied from 59% to 79% depending on grade level and subject. And it's still unclear what proportion of them sat for tests last school year. So state officials are warning about the reliability of the data for comparisons with the past, particularly at the more granular level of schools and even school districts.

Some districts were still eager to tout their results.

"Even with the challenges of the past few years, students across the Cobb County School District



The bulletin board at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School urges students to "Smash the GMAS," referring to the Georgia Milestones Assessment System tests. NATRICE MILLER/AJC FILE

outperformed their state and large metro Atlanta peers," its media office said. "Cobb students outpaced their Georgia peers by double digits in multiple grades and subjects."

More than 47% of Cobb's third-graders scored proficient or better in English. That compares with 14.6% in Clayton County, a district with a higher proportion of low-income households. Clayton classrooms reopened to students much later than Cobb.

Clayton Superintendent Morcease Beasley said he thinks scores would have been higher had his students been in-person sooner, but he said parents didn't want that.

"Because so many of our families were frontline, they were not willing for our students to come back overall," he said. "As a community, we basically made a decision that safety would be prioritized over everything else, which meant that students learned virtually. But honestly, they didn't get as much content virtually as they would have gotten face-to-face."

Prior research predicted these outcomes.

"High-poverty schools were more likely to go remote and they suffered larger declines when they did so," said a May report by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. Those districts will need to spend nearly all of their federal pandemic aid catching students up, it added.

Ken Zeff, a former superintendent for Fulton County, is worried that time is running out, given the federal deadlines imposed on the three waves of pandemic relief funding. The last deadline is in two years, though districts can seek an extension of just over a year.

"This is not a V-shaped recovery," said Zeff, who now leads the group Learn4Life Metro Atlanta, a partnership of metro school systems, businesses and nonprofits working to improve student achievement. "It's going to be a long grind."