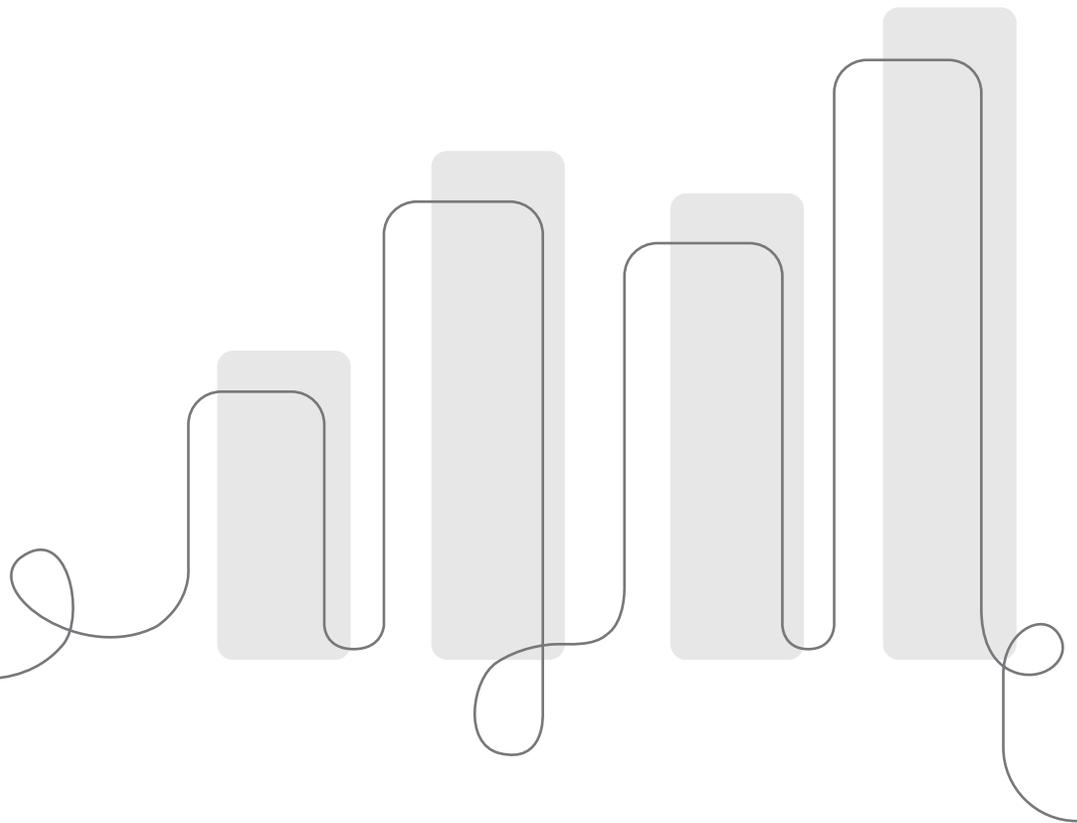


RESEARCH BRIEF

# COVID-19 means more students not learning to read

February 2021



# Youngest students, especially youngest Black and Hispanic students, losing most from school disruptions

In recent months, elementary schools across the United States have assessed 1.2 million students on their early literacy skills with Amplify's mCLASS®. The middle-of-school-year DIBELS® 8th Edition data, collected by teachers interacting directly with students one-on-one, either live or over video, reveals learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While more students in all elementary grades and demographic groups have fallen behind, the COVID-related reading losses are concentrated in Grades K and 1, and disproportionately among Black and Hispanic students in those grades.

**As compared to last year, there are now twice as many Black kindergarten students at great risk for not learning to read.**

The opportunities to learn that students have lost due to COVID may have life-long consequences for many of them, if they are not provided with additional instructional support. Several research studies show that, absent such additional support, there is nearly a 90 percent chance that a poor reader in Grade 1 will remain a poor reader.<sup>1</sup>

# 90%

**chance that a poor reader in Grade 1 will remain a poor reader.**

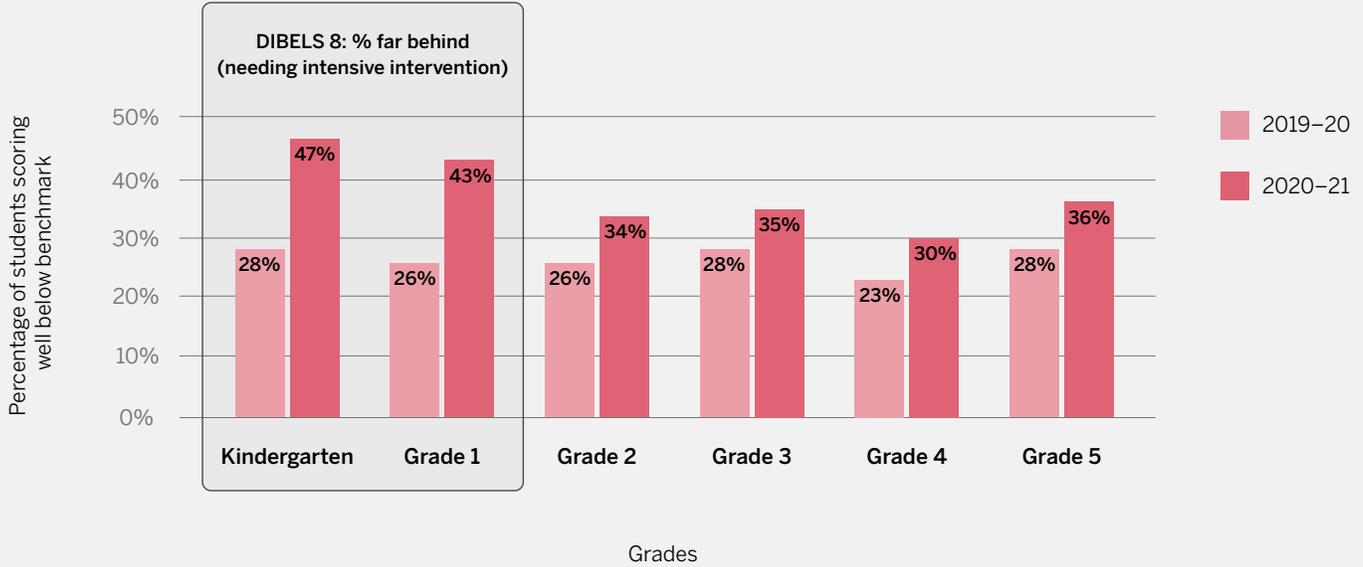
## How many more children are now at risk of not learning to read?

The percentage of students who were far behind at mid-year increased (as compared to last year) in all grades, with the biggest learning losses evident in Grades K and 1.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/waiting-rarely-works-late-bloomers-usually-just-wilt>

## mCLASS® DIBELS® 8 comparison to the prior middle-of-school-year (pre-COVID)



### About the data

This analysis highlights the effects of the COVID-19 disruptions by comparing DIBELS 8th Edition benchmark data from the middle of the school year 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years. Approximately 400,000 students in a matched set of over 1,400 schools in 41 states are represented.

The schools in the source data are more likely to be in large urban metropolitan areas. Demographically, the source schools serve approximately 17% Black/African American, 53% Hispanic/Latinx, and 22% white students, compared with 15% Black/African American, 27% Hispanic/Latinx, and 47% white students nationally.

The number of students assessed in the 2020–21 cohort is similar to the number in the 2019–20 cohort; as a percent of the prior cohort, the current year's numbers are approximately 90%, which implies an attrition rate of 10%, assuming that enrollment for both years was identical. That said, the differences could reflect changes in enrollment, attendance issues at time of assessment, and changes in assessment practices (some students, excluded here, have received only partial assessments).

Last year, 28% of Grade K students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. This year, it was 47%. That is a **68% increase in the percentage of Grade K students at greatest risk for not learning to read.**

Last year, 26% of Grade 1 students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. This year, it was 43%. Similar to Grade K, that is a **65% increase in the percentage of Grade 1 students at greatest risk for not learning to read.**

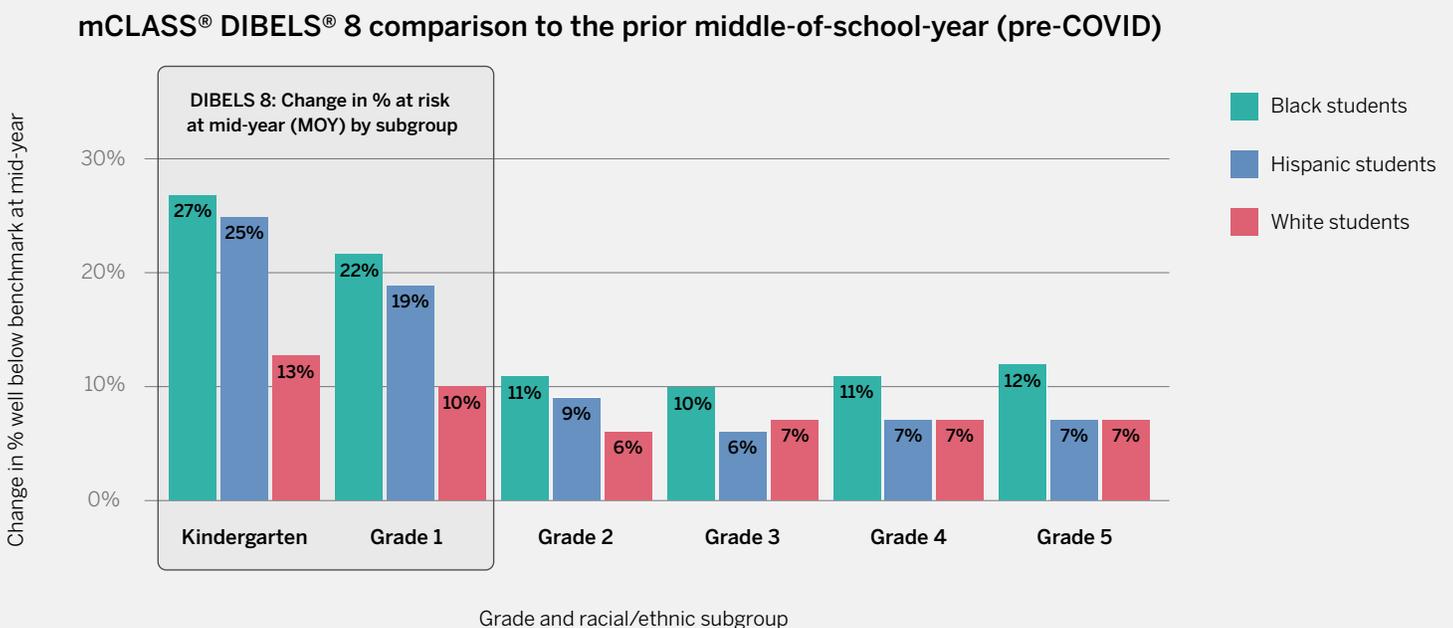
As a result, a school that needed to offer intensive intervention to 100 Grade K and 100 Grade 1 students in the spring of 2020 is faced with making up for the lost instruction for 168 students (Grade K) and 165 students (Grade 1) in the spring of 2021. Even small increases in the percentage of students well below benchmark—for example, the additional 7–8% in Grades 2 to 5—can overtax school resources.

There is considerable urgency to address these lags in reading skills: several research studies show that, without additional remedial support, there is nearly a 90 percent chance that a poor reader in Grade 1 will remain a poor reader.

## Demographic trends

### Disproportionate impact on youngest Black and Hispanic students

The percentage of students who were far behind at mid-year in learning to read increased across all demographic subgroups in all elementary grades, but learning losses due to COVID-19 disruptions were disproportionately concentrated among Black and Hispanic students in the early grades (K-1).



At the middle of the last school year, 27% of Black kindergarten students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. At the middle of this school year, it was 54%. So, as compared to last year, **there are now twice as many Black kindergarten students at great risk for not learning to read.**

Similarly, at the middle of the last school year, 34% of Hispanic kindergarten students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. At the middle of this school year, it was 59%.

At the middle of the last school year, 32% of Black Grade 1 students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. At the middle of this school year, it was 54%.

Similarly, at the middle of the last school year, 30% of Hispanic Grade 1 students were “well below benchmark” (the lowest category) in early literacy skills. At the middle of this school year, it was 49%.

As compared to their Hispanic and white counterparts, Black students in the other elementary grades (2–5) have also been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 disruptions to learning.

## Insights

Susan Lambert, chief academic officer of elementary humanities at Amplify, had this to say about the latest data about learning loss across the country:

*“With nationwide disruptions continuing, school districts should think about these challenges and make system-wide decisions informed by their data for the spring, summer school, and next school year. The bottom line is that classrooms will need to dedicate more time to reading instruction in the early grades.*

*Most students will need a double dose of strong core foundational skills instruction (grade-level instruction as well as the instruction they missed), and some students will need additional intervention. We can overcome this lost instruction, but it will take a deep commitment and changes to scheduling and staffing to help all our kids catch up and become the strong readers they can all be.”*

## The urgency is acute

We have long had significant reading gaps in districts across the U.S., but the increase in the number of students falling behind due to COVID disruptions (especially in K-2) is dramatic and calls for an urgent response. The instinct may be to focus on intervention exclusively, but if we do this, students will fall even further behind. We know the gap is easiest to close in K-2, and in later grades it gets harder and more expensive to catch students up. There is a discrete amount of time during which we can close the significant gaps in reading performance we are seeing now, and we need to act in a very committed, coherent way to make that happen.

**A call to action:** We have a once-in-a-generation chance to catch up not only students who have fallen behind due to COVID, but to overcome the persistent reading gaps we have had in many districts for many years.

Specifically, districts should make a **two-year, highly integrated plan** for the population of kids that are at high risk.

- Continue, or start, to administer benchmark assessments three times per year to identify and monitor levels of risk for reading difficulties.
- Spend more time on literacy instruction, and make sure it is evidence-based instruction (i.e. based on the science of reading).
- Organize the daily calendar to include time beyond grade-level instruction .
- Be creative about scheduling and staffing to ensure this time is prioritized.
- Support instructional staff in gaining knowledge about the science of reading .

## Elements of a coherent approach

Types of instruction	Scheduling/formatting options	Which students
Grade-level core instruction focused on both knowledge and skills.	During school day (literacy block)	All
Additional foundational skill instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• During school day (in addition to literacy block)</li><li>• Summer school</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All K-2 students</li><li>• 3-5 students performing below benchmark</li></ul>
Intervention opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• During school day</li><li>• Before and after school tutoring</li></ul>	Students performing below benchmark
Science of Reading based personalized learning (online program)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• During school day (as part of additional foundational skills)</li><li>• At home</li><li>• Before and after school</li><li>• Summer school</li></ul>	All
<b>Instilling a love of reading and of books</b> During all school-based programs Parent/caregiver support Community-based partnerships		

For more information on mCLASS,  
visit [amplify.com/mclass](https://amplify.com/mclass).

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