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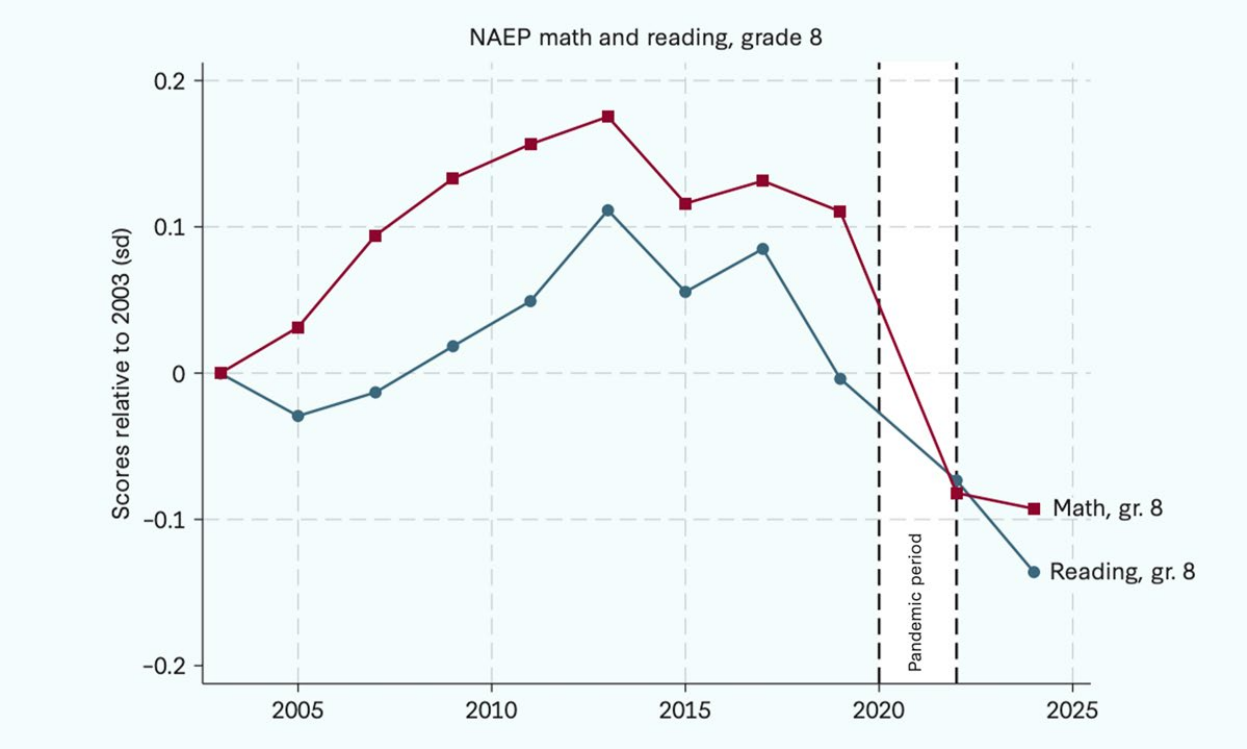
Opinion

The Pandemic Didn't Break American Education; It's Been in Crisis Since 2013

Hanushek: Focus on COVID learning loss missed the bigger picture: Students have been falling behind for more than a decade with no recovery in sight.



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When educators and policymakers talk about student achievement today, the conversation inevitably turns to pandemic learning loss. In response, the nation has largely

unsuccessfully poured $190 billion of federal funds into recovery from COVID-19 disruptions. But the uncomfortable truth is that American students have been significantly losing ground for more than a decade. The pandemic didn't break American education; it was already broken.

The data tells a sobering story that should fundamentally change how the country thinks about education policy.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, American students reached their peak achievement in 2013. Since then, they've been sliding backward. The pandemic accelerated that decline, but it was far from the whole story.

Since 2013, students have lost nearly three-tenths of a standard deviation in combined math and reading scores — the equivalent of more than a year's worth of education. Only about half of that decline happened during the pandemic years. The rest occurred before COVID-19 existed or since schools reopened.

In reading, less than a quarter of the total drop occurred during the pandemic period. The rest happened before and after, including significant losses from 2022 to 2024.

Only California, Hawaii, Mississippi and Washington, D.C., are performing better today than at the start of this century.

What does this mean for today's students? Based on research linking educational achievement to earnings, the average student in school today will earn about 8% less over his or her lifetime compared with students who attended school in 2013. For some states, that means lifetime earnings losses approaching 14%.

And the nation will suffer from a less skilled workforce. If it could return to 2013 achievement levels, the nation's GDP would be 6% higher every year for the rest of the century. The present value of what America is losing equals roughly three times the entire current economy.

But policy responses have focused almost entirely on pandemic recovery — summer school, tutoring and extended learning time. These miss the bigger picture. Even if these policies worked perfectly and returned students to 2019 levels, America would still not be addressing the decade of decline that predated COVID.

More troubling: Despite federal spending of $190 billion on recovery efforts, student achievement has continued to decline since 2022. This suggests, among other things, that the declines from 2019 to 2022 cannot all be attributed to the pandemic, but instead indicate more fundamental problems facing America's schools.

Perhaps it is time to admit that just adding new programs and mandates on top of a misaligned system is not working. Calls to reform the system date back at least 40 years, when “A Nation at Risk” warned about failing schools. The response has been broad and consistent. We’ve tried everything: stricter graduation requirements, smaller classes, better teacher pay, new curricula, technology, charter schools, consequential accountability systems and billions more in funding.

The result? After four decades of effort, 13-year-olds taking reading tests today perform no better than their counterparts in 1975. Math scores have also fallen back to where they were decades ago. And longstanding achievement gaps have failed to close.

This consistent failure reveals something important: We keep trying to fix a system that’s fundamentally resistant to change. Even when individual districts implement successful reforms that improve student achievement, other districts don’t copy them. When Washington, D.C., and Dallas introduced performance-based teacher systems that led to significant gains, such successful innovations didn’t spread.

This isn’t because educators don’t want students to succeed. It’s because the system doesn’t align incentives with student achievement. Schools and personnel are neither systematically rewarded for improving outcomes nor held accountable for poor performance in ways that drive meaningful change.

The nation must transition from input-based policies — mandating specific programs or spending — to outcome-based accountability, focusing on whether students actually learn. On results rather than compliance.

Instead of treating all schools the same regardless of performance, policymakers should pay attention to how well they are performing. High-performing systems should get operational flexibility. Low-performing systems need structured intervention.

The 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. Their model recognizes that because schooling is inherently local, the federal and state governments should support rather than micromanage, creating conditions for innovation while ensuring accountability.

America’s economy has thrived despite educational shortcomings, partly because of the strengths of its underlying economic system and partly because the nation attracts skilled immigrants. Foreign-born workers are not only central to many STEM fields but also leaders of some of the largest firms. For example, the current CEOs of Microsoft, IBM, Alphabet, Tesla, NVIDIA and Adobe are all immigrants to the U.S. But America cannot count on always being the location of choice for innovative foreign workers. Some U.S.-trained

graduate students from China and India are electing to return home rather than moving to Silicon Valley, and others who would like to stay are having trouble obtaining work permits.

This raises the distinct possibility that the U.S. will have to rely completely on workers who are born and educated here. Unfortunately, on recent international assessments, the United States ranked 34th in mathematics — below the average for developed nations. This placed U.S. 15-year-olds slightly ahead of the Slovak Republic but behind Malta.

Students in school today will compete globally with peers who currently outperform them. The economic consequences won't be theoretical — they will be these students' daily reality in the job market.

The nation has tried incremental reform for over 40 years. It's spent hundreds of billions. And still, American students are learning less today than they did decades ago.

It's time to stop adding programs to a resistant system and start building one designed for success. The nation can continue down the path of gradual decline, or it can build an education system that prioritizes what matters most: ensuring that every student learns. As the federal government retreats from mandates and regulations, it is time for the states also to reconsider their role.

The choice is ours. The question is whether we're ready to choose fundamental change over comfortable but ineffective incrementalism.