

ACADEMIC GROWTH FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Lessons from school-year learning gains and summer learning loss—Implications for COVID-19 recovery and beyond

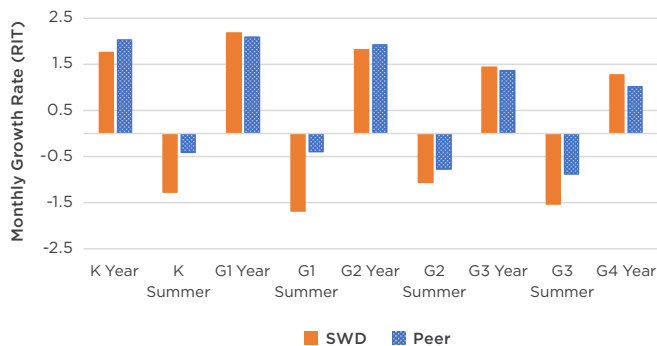
Students with disabilities who receive special education services¹ (SWD) make up approximately 14% of all students in US public schools.² Many studies that compare annual achievement for students with and without disabilities use a snapshot of year-over-year data and conclude that SWD grow academically at lower rates than their peers. However, recent research demonstrates that is not the case. NWEA researchers examined assessment data from a cohort of over 4,000 students from 2014 – 2019—including SWD who received special education services and students who did not receive special education—and measured academic growth during the school year as well as summer learning loss. The study found that SWD sometimes grow as fast or faster than their peers during the school year but lose more learning in the summer, resulting in widening achievement disparities over time. This new research provides critical insights to inform how schools, districts, and states support SWD through COVID recovery and beyond.³

KEY FINDINGS

Students with disabilities:

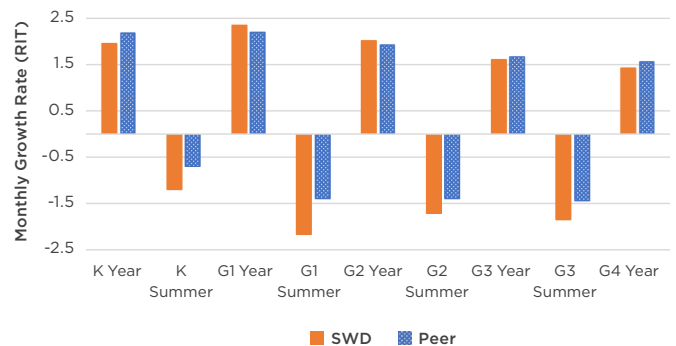
- Entered kindergarten with lower academic achievement than their peers in both reading and math.
- Grew at higher rates during the school year in reading and math compared to their peers, during some school years.
- Experienced larger academic losses during the summer than their peers, contributing to widening disparities in achievement.

Monthly Growth and Learning Loss Rates by Grade for Reading



- SWD grew at similar or higher rates compared to their peers in reading in 1st, 3rd, and 4th grades, and grew at lower rates than their peers in kindergarten and 2nd grade.
- SWD experienced greater learning loss in reading than their peers during summer.

Monthly Growth and Learning Loss Rates by Grade for Math



- SWD grew at similar or higher rates compared to their peers in math in 1st and 2nd grades, and grew at lower rates than their peers in kindergarten, 3rd, and 4th grades.
- SWD experienced greater learning loss in math than their peers during summer.

¹ NWEA researchers examined whether students were ever enrolled in special education (ever-SPED) or never in special education (never-SPED) from kindergarten to 4th grade.

² U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Table 204.70. Number and percentage of children served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by age group and state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1990-91 through 2018-19. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_204.70.asp

³ The monthly growth and learning loss charts illustrate the estimated monthly growth rates. The rates were estimated using scores from MAP Growth assessments, using RIT points.

Widening Disparities in Achievement over Time

Although SWD sometimes grew at higher rates during the school year, they entered kindergarten behind their peers and experienced greater summer learning loss. As a result, SWD dropped from the 50th to the 29th percentile in math and from the 50th to the 28th percentile in reading between the fall of kindergarten and the spring of 4th grade.



Recommendations for Supporting SWD during COVID-19 Recovery

The oscillation between learning environments has made it difficult for schools to provide SWD the learning services they need to succeed, and SWD likely suffered disproportionately from the reduction in instructional time and disconnection from their school communities.

While the new NWEA research demonstrates that SWD can grow academically at rates that equal or exceed that of their peers during a typical school year, the learning conditions of the pandemic have been far from optimal.



NWEA is a national, nonprofit, research-based organization working to disrupt educational inequities and close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. This resource was developed by NWEA's Policy and Advocacy team with support from NWEA Research and NCLD. Through NWEA's research, advocacy, technical assistance, and partnerships, NWEA's Policy and Advocacy team works to expand excellence and equity in education from preschool through post-secondary.

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The analysis also shows that SWD lose far more learning than their peers when they do not have the structure and support they would receive during a regular school year. Thus, supporting learning for SWD, both when school is in and out of session, should be a top priority of educators, school leaders, and policymakers in the months and years to come.

Fortunately, an influx of federal funds to K-12 education through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and additional funding for Parts B (preschool and older students) and C (infants and toddlers) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through the American Rescue Plan for COVID-19 recovery present an unprecedented opportunity. Deploying these emergency funds towards evidence-based supports could lead to sustainable changes that further learning for SWD. Based on the results of this study, educators, school and district leaders, and other policymakers should:

- Provide early effective support for struggling students before and in kindergarten, through [early kindergarten programs](#) or early intervention services.
- Offer extended school year services for SWD, including summer tutoring and enrichment camps.

Additionally, educators, school and district leaders, researchers, and policymakers should use data at the classroom, school, and system levels to understand more about how SWD are learning and challenge deficit narratives about the potential of SWD.

The [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#) (NCLD) has developed specific recommendations for how state and district leaders can use federal funds to support learning for SWD as communities recover from COVID-19. NCLD recommends that policymakers focus on four areas:

- High quality, accessible, and inclusive academic instruction
- Inclusive and culturally responsive social-emotional learning
- Effective progress monitoring and accurate evaluations for specialized instruction
- Meaningful family support and engagement.

The full recommendations are available on NCLD's [website](#).