NWEA Research Live

April 2026

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Before we begin

- 45-minute presentation, 15 minutes for Q&A
- Listen mode only
- Submit questions via the Q&A box
- Recorded and sharable
- Short survey at the end

Presenters

Dr. Karyn Lewis

VP of Research and
Policy Partnerships

Dr. Megan Kuhfeld

Director of Growth
Modeling and Data

Dr. Naomi Duran

Research Scientist

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Three assumptions about early learners – and what the data reveal

- **Assumption 1**: The youngest students were largely spared from pandemic disruptions
  What K-2 recovery data actually shows

- **Assumption 2**: Schools are not meeting the needs of young boys
  What early-grade achievement patterns reveal

- **Assumption 3**: Delaying kindergarten gives students a lasting academic advantage
  What research on redshirting finds

Chapter 1:
Were early learners spared from COVID?

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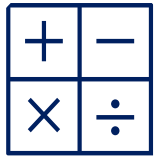
Key Findings in K-2 Recovery

KINDERGARTEN MATH & READING

Mostly steady during and following the pandemic



GRADE 1-2 MATH

Modest, incremental recovery

GRADE 1-2 READING

Stalled recovery with little rebounding to pre-COVID levels

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The MAP Growth National Dashboard

Goals: Track changes in achievement since 2019 to monitor long-term recovery.

Features: Multi-year view; RIT scores and standardized effect sizes; subgroup breakouts.

Trends Over Time

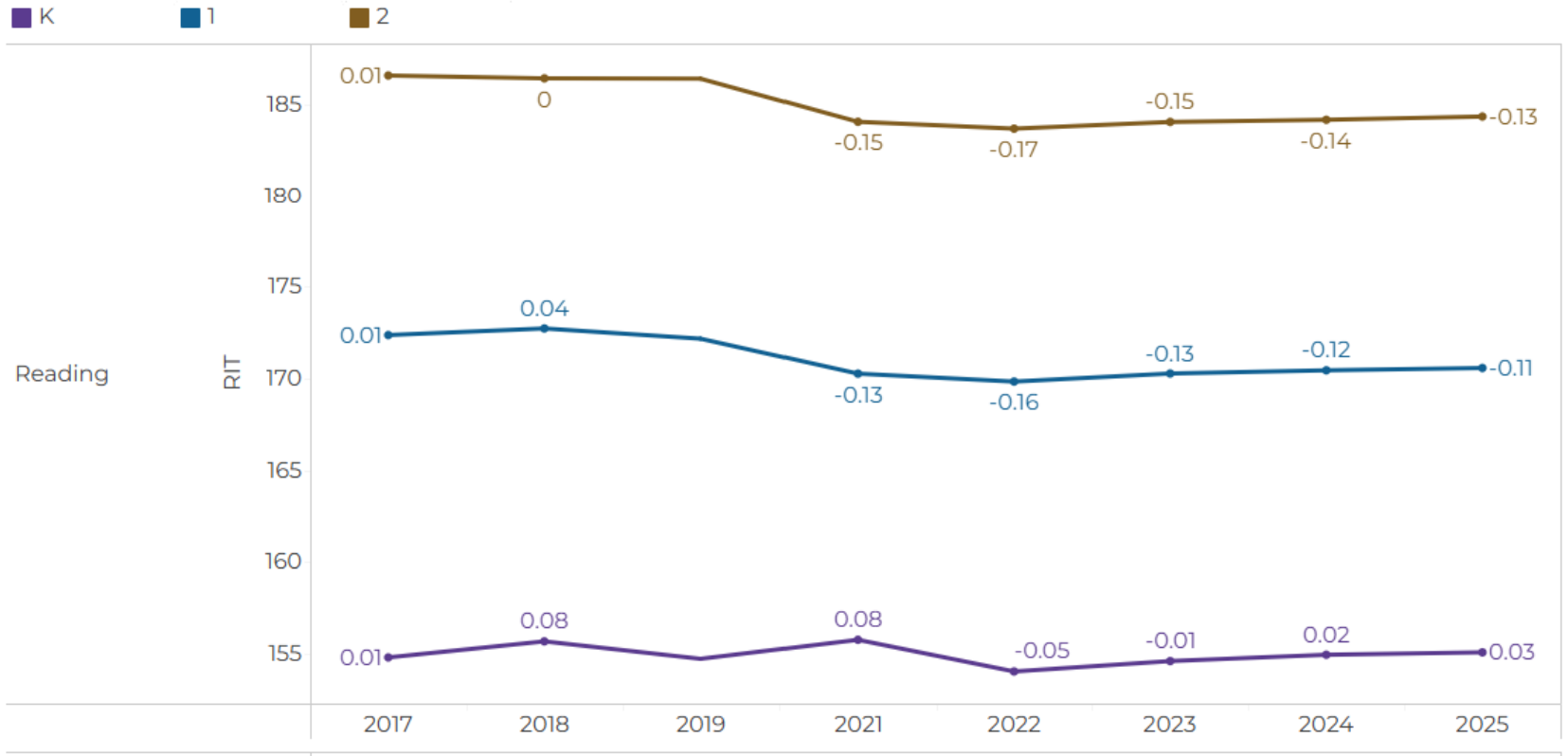
Explore national achievement over time, including comparisons anchored to pre-pandemic baselines to support recovery tracking.

Labels: Change from 2019 (in SDs)

Grades: Lower Elementary

Achievement

How has spring achievement changed over time across grades in reading and math?



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Goals: Track changes in achievement since 2019 to monitor long-term recovery.

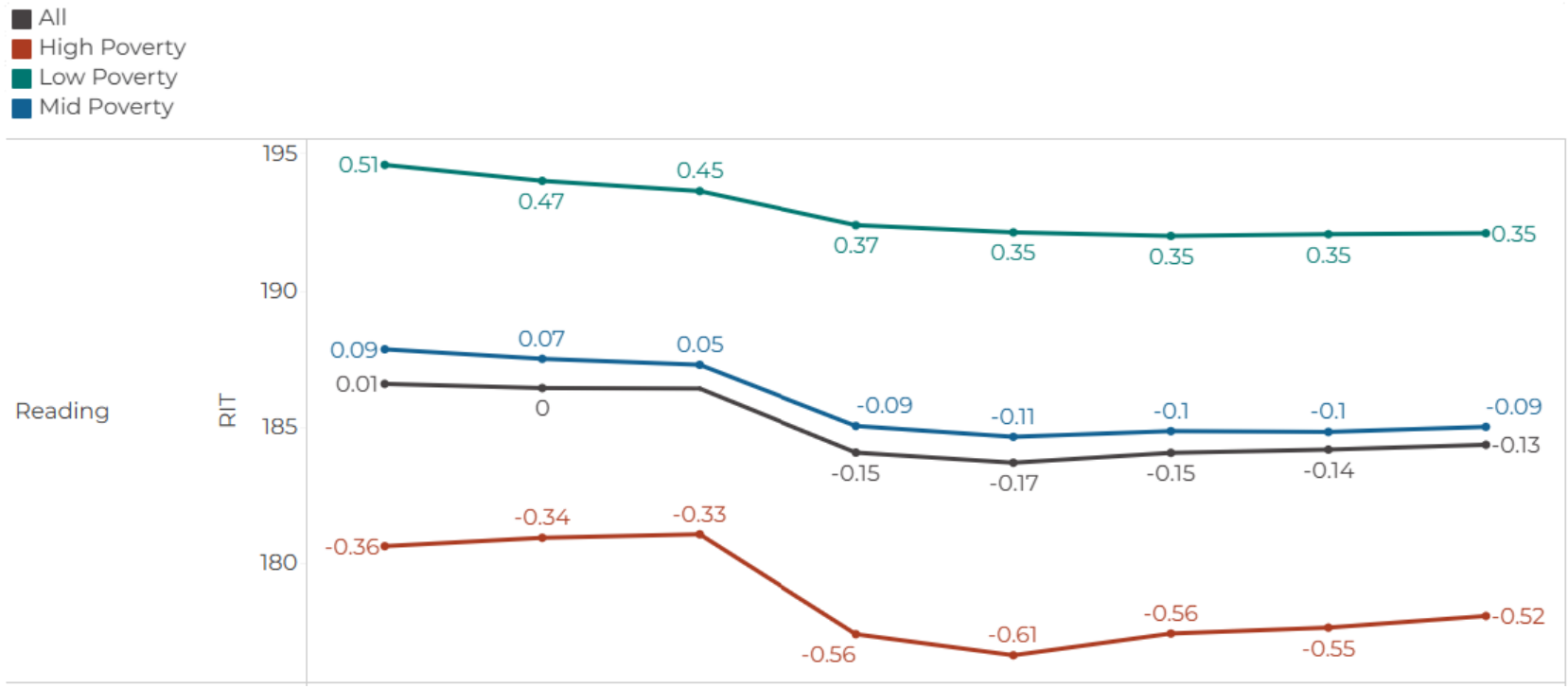
Features: Multi-year view; RIT scores and standardized effect sizes; subgroup breakouts.

National Trends | Group Insights | State Trends | State Groups | Trends Over Time

How has spring achievement for different groups changed over time?

Select group: Poverty

Select grade: 2



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Reading Trends in K–2

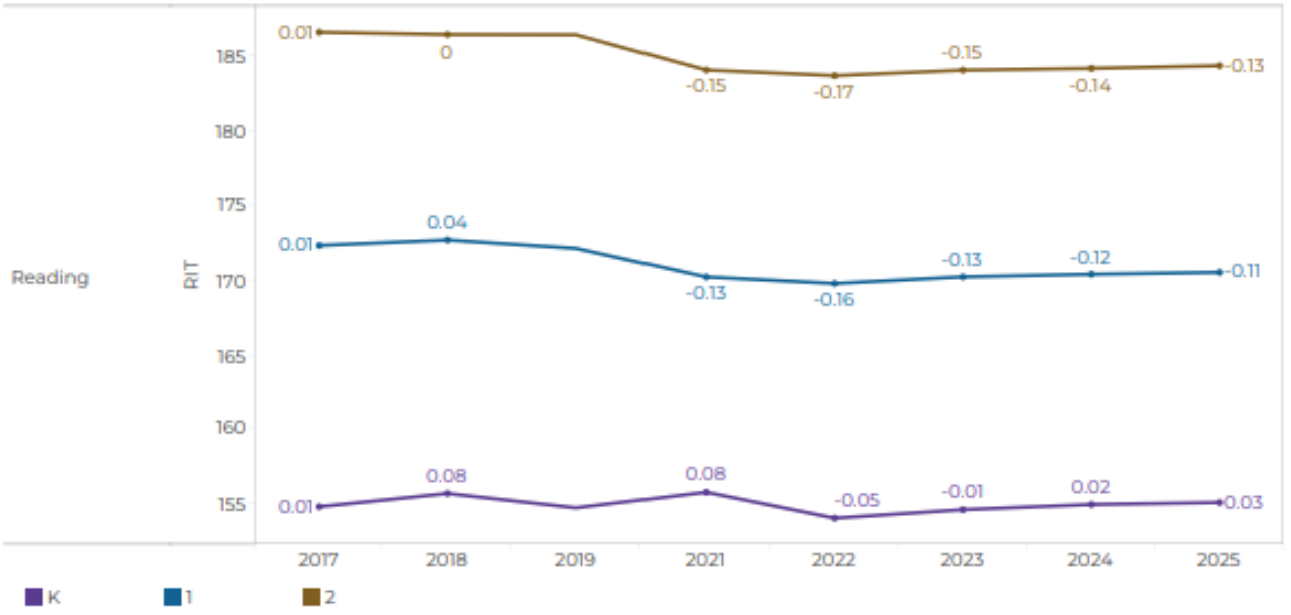
Kindergarten

- Reading achievement remained mostly stable since pandemic

First and Second Grade

- Larger drops in 2020, and little evidence of recovery as of 2025

AVERAGE K–2 SPRING READING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS, 2017–2025.



Note. Numbers next to each point reflect the standardized difference in mean achievement compared to the pre-COVID reference year of 2019, with negative values indicate that achievement in that year was lower compared to spring 2019.

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Math Trends in K–2

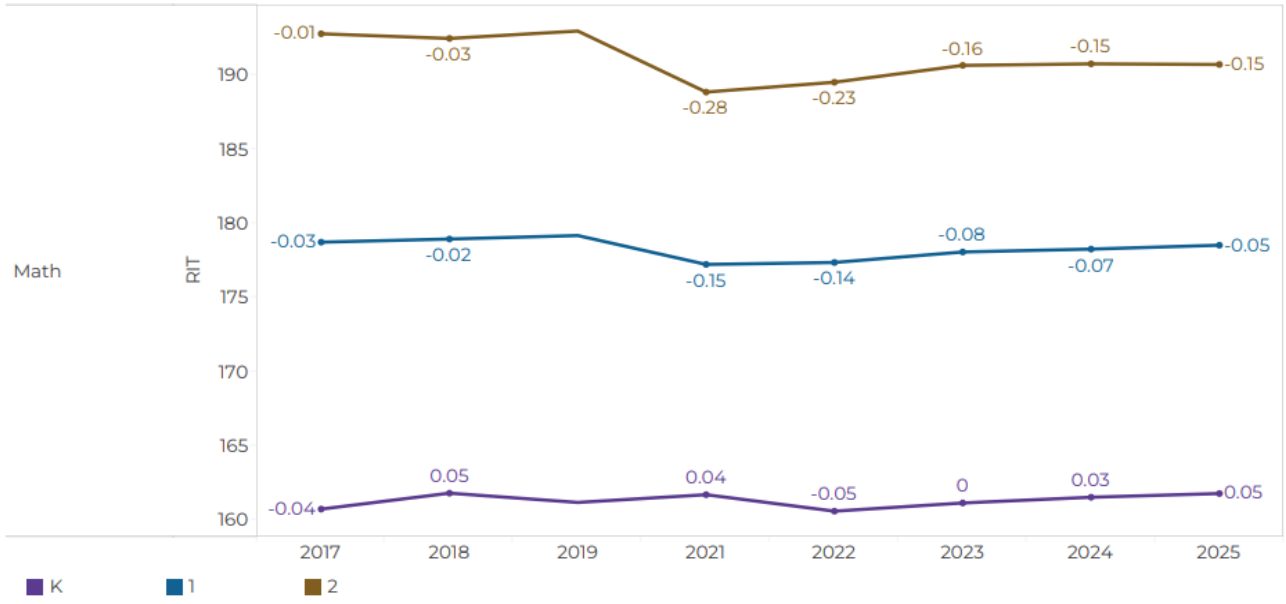
Kindergarten

- Math achievement showed little drop, remained mostly stable

First and Second Grade

- Although below pre-COVID levels, achievement gaps have narrowed significantly

AVERAGE K–2 SPRING MATH ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS, 2017–2025.



Note. Numbers next to each point reflect the standardized difference in mean achievement compared to the pre-COVID reference year of 2019. Negative values indicate that achievement in that year was lower compared to spring 2019.

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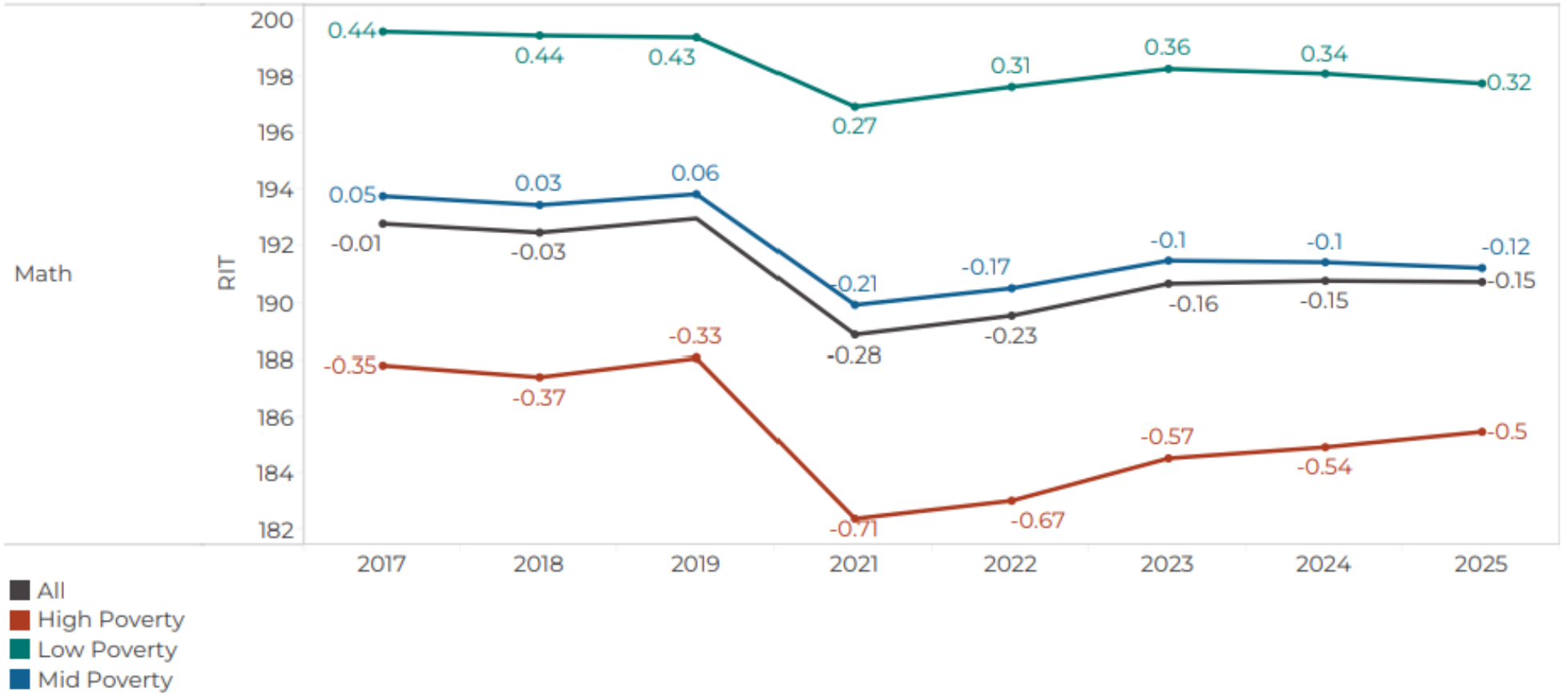
Math Recovery by Subgroups

AVERAGE SECOND-GRADE MATH READING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS, 2017–2025, BY SCHOOL-POVERTY LEVEL



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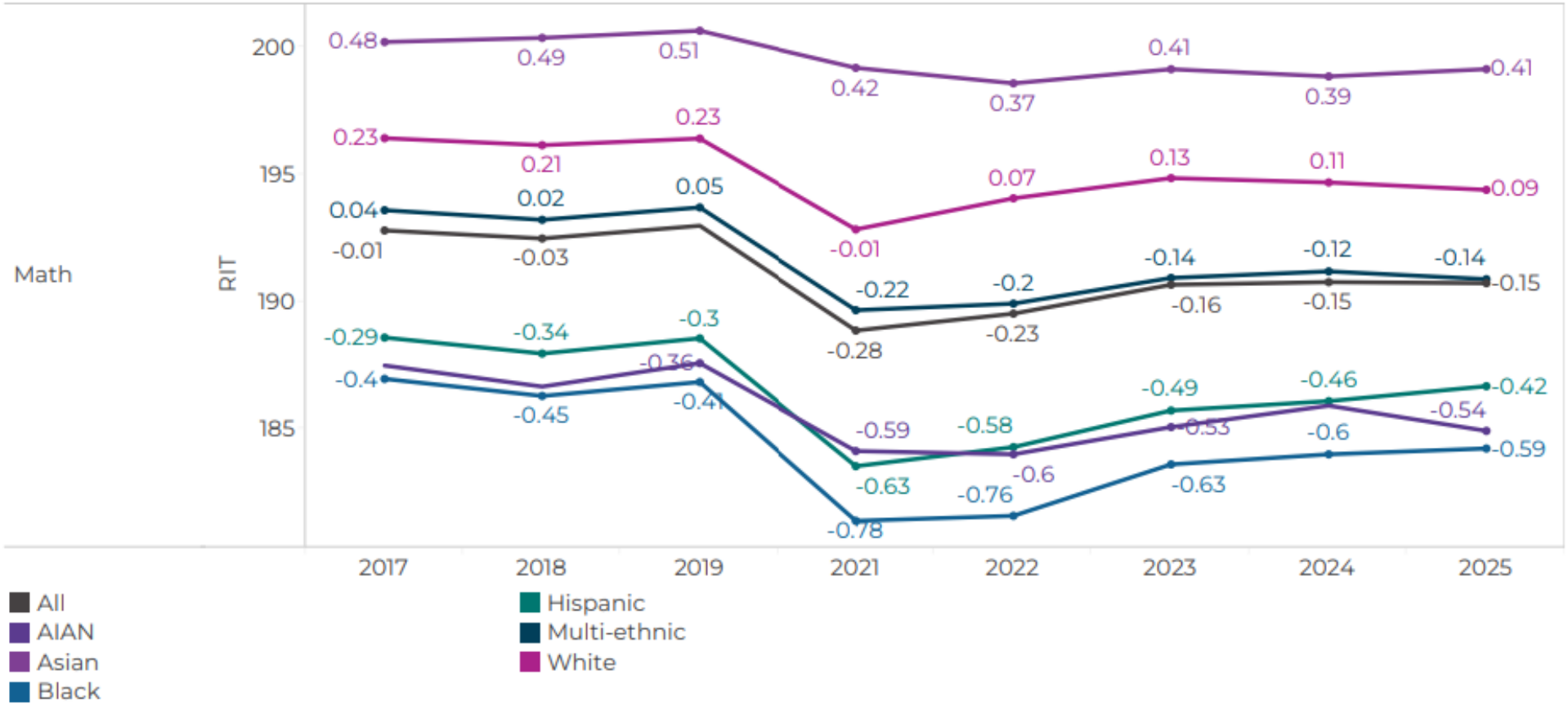
Math Recovery by Subgroups

AVERAGE SECOND-GRADE MATH READING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS, 2017–2025, BY RACE



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Revisiting Assumption #1:

Assumption 1: The youngest students were largely spared from pandemic disruptions

What K-2 recovery data actually shows:

- Reading achievement remains stalled with little evidence of recovery
- The magnitude of remaining achievement gaps in 1st and 2nd grade mirror that of older students
- Kindergarten stands apart, showing minimal initial declines and little remaining gap

Chapter 2:
Are schools failing young boys?

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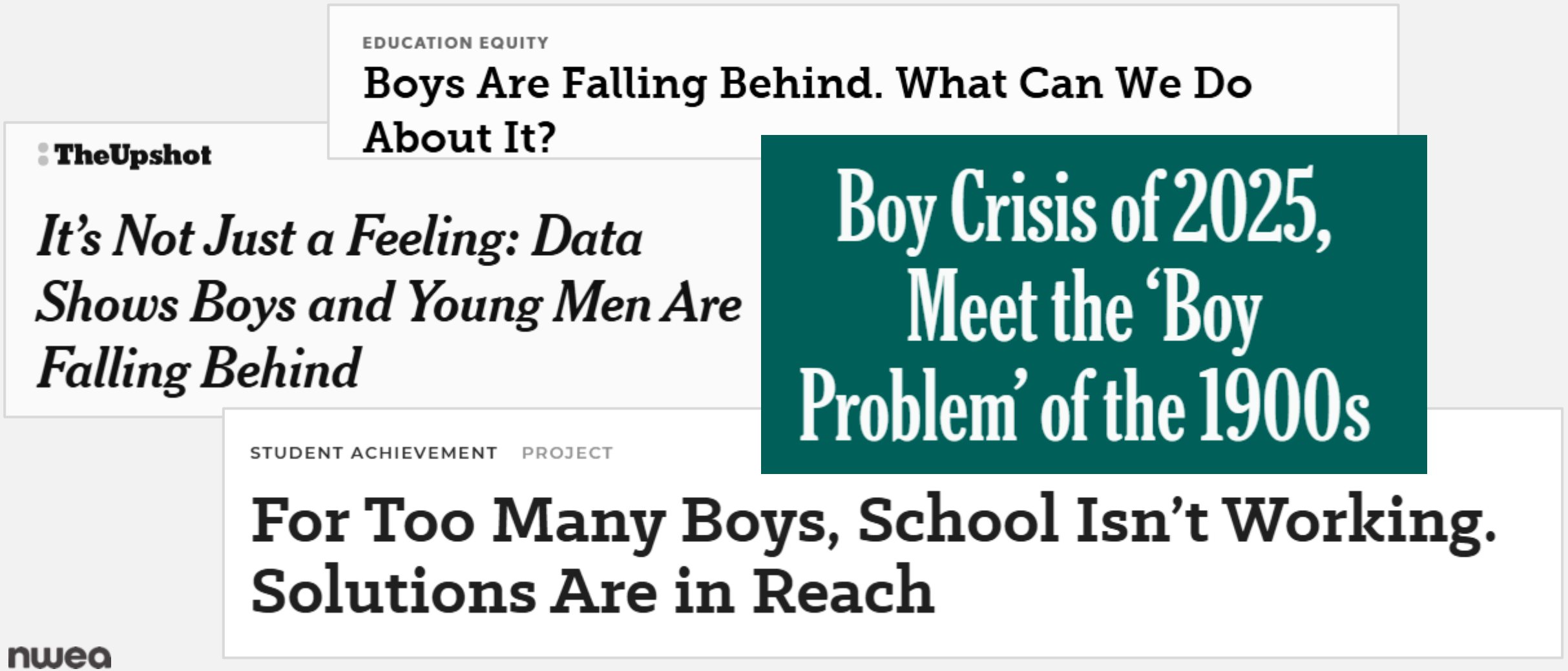
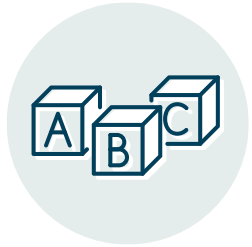
A growing narrative: schools are failing boys

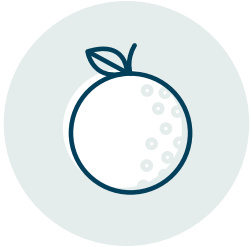


Girls now lead boys across many indicators from school entry through college



EARLY INDICATORS

- School readiness



ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

- Reading test scores
- GPA
- Suspension rates

ATTAINMENT

- High school graduation
- College enrollment

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What should we expect to see if schools are failing boys?

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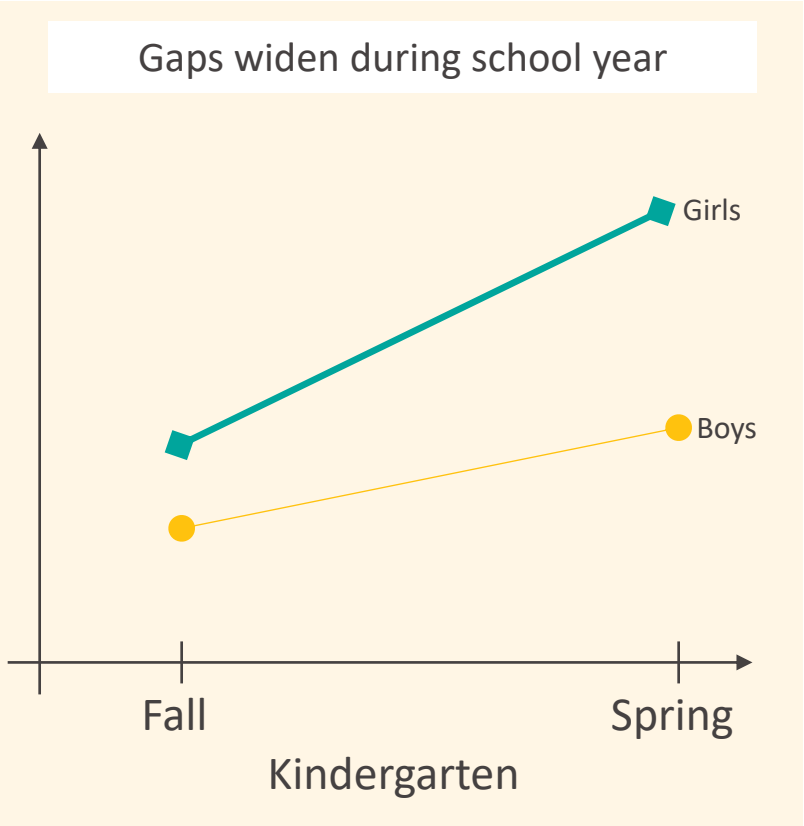
What should we see if schools are failing boys?

Prediction if schools are failing boys



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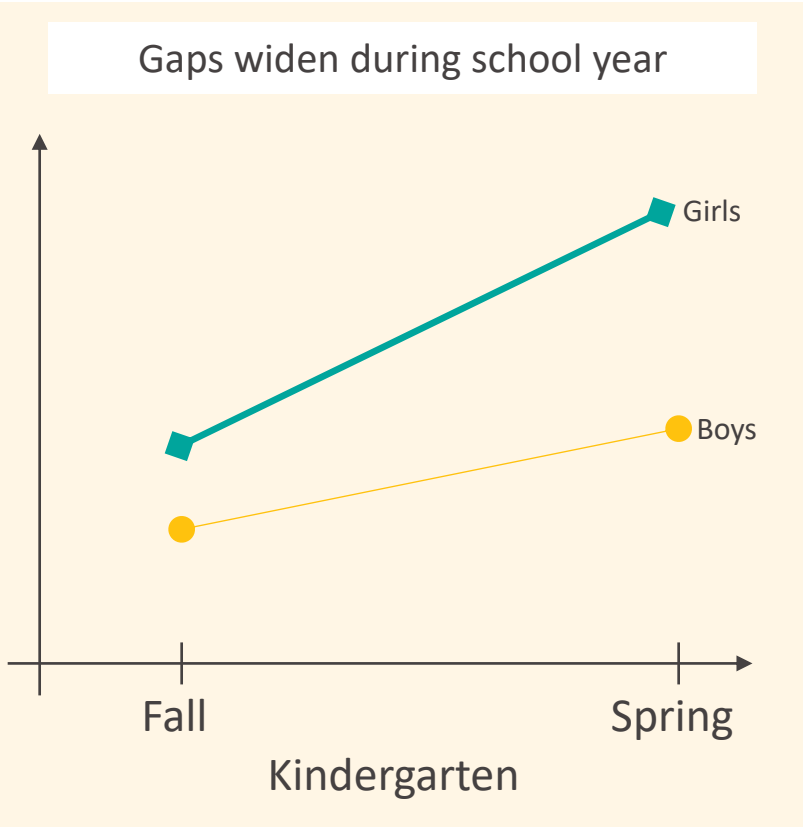
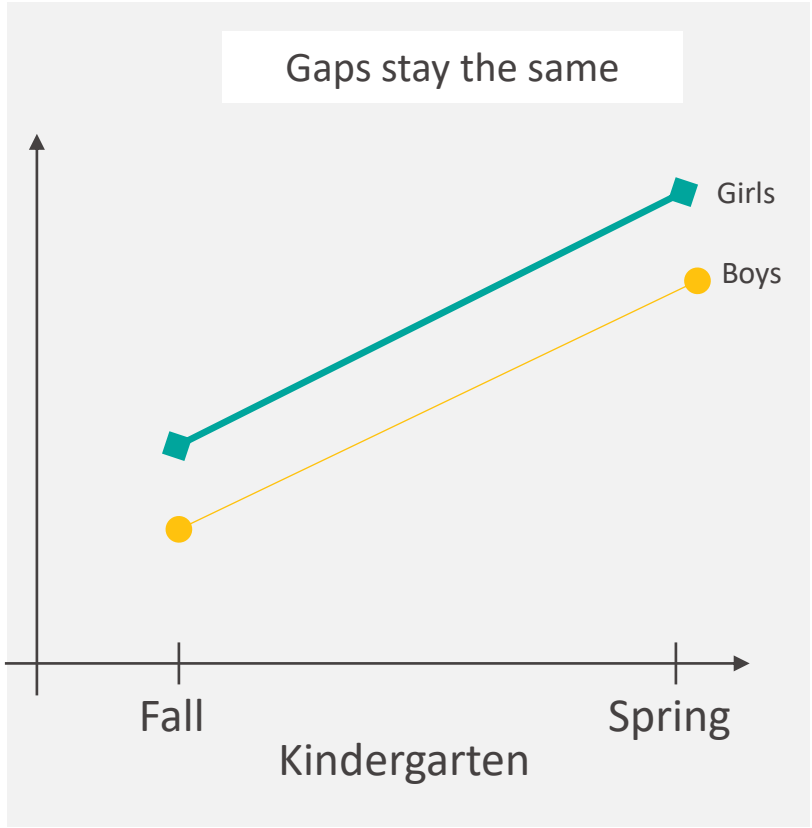
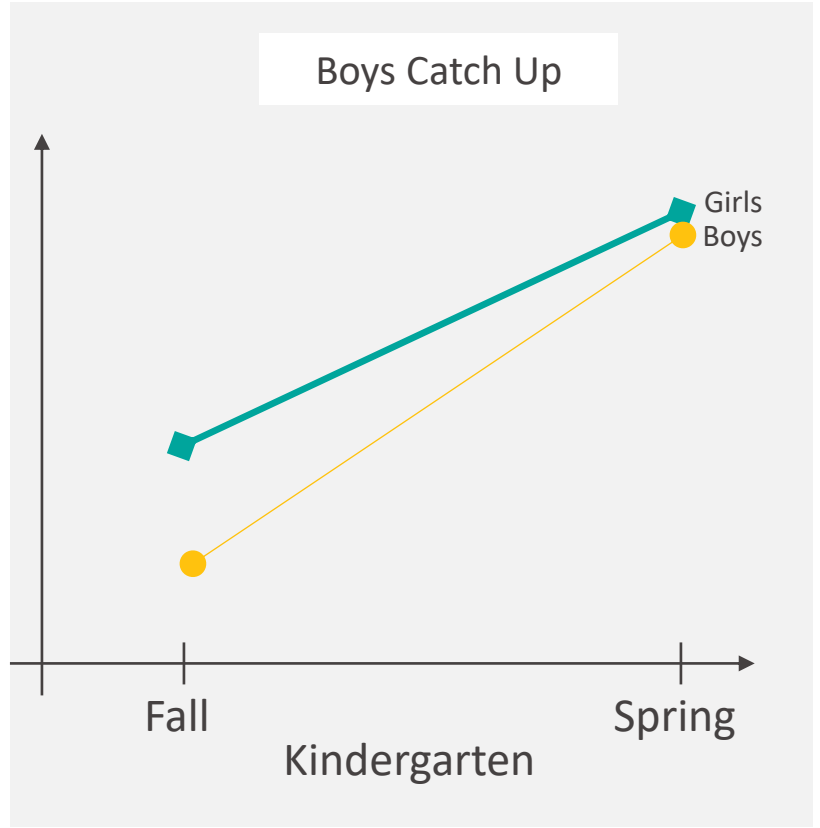
What should we see if schools are failing boys?

Prediction if schools are failing boys



Other possible patterns we might see





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What do the data actually show about how gender gaps shift as students enter school?

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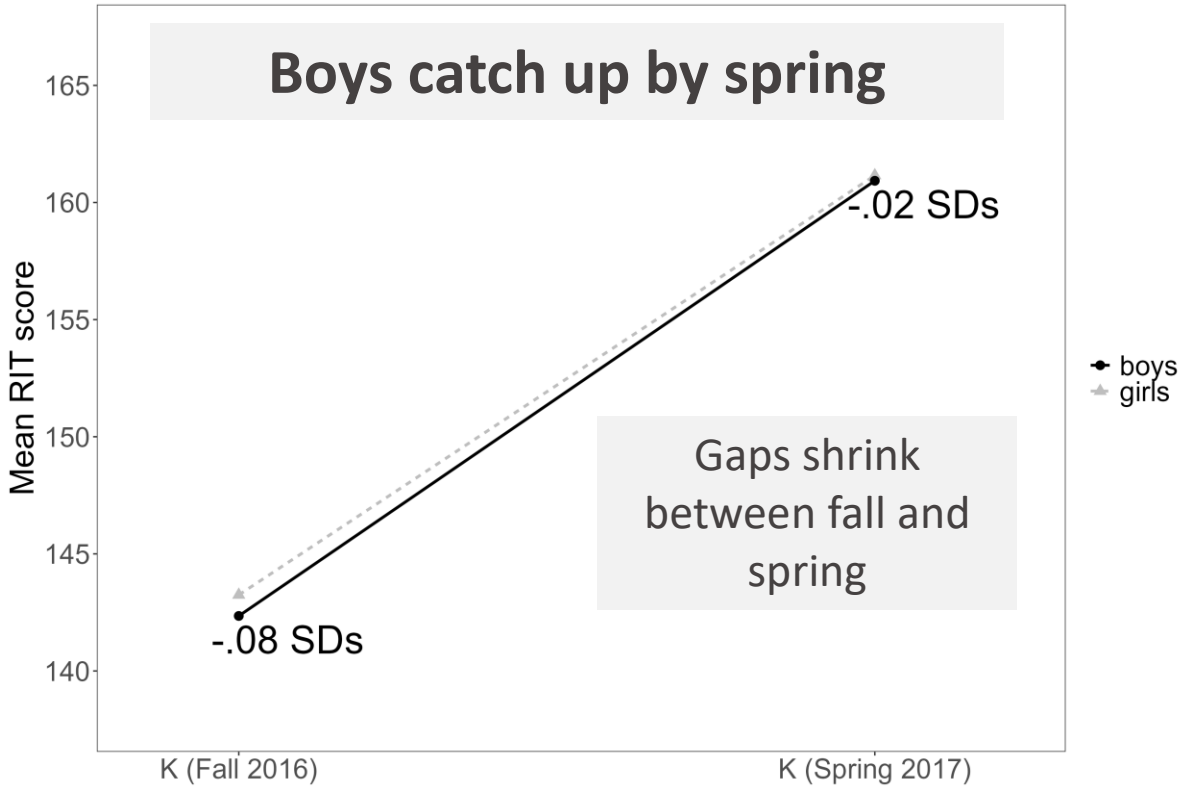
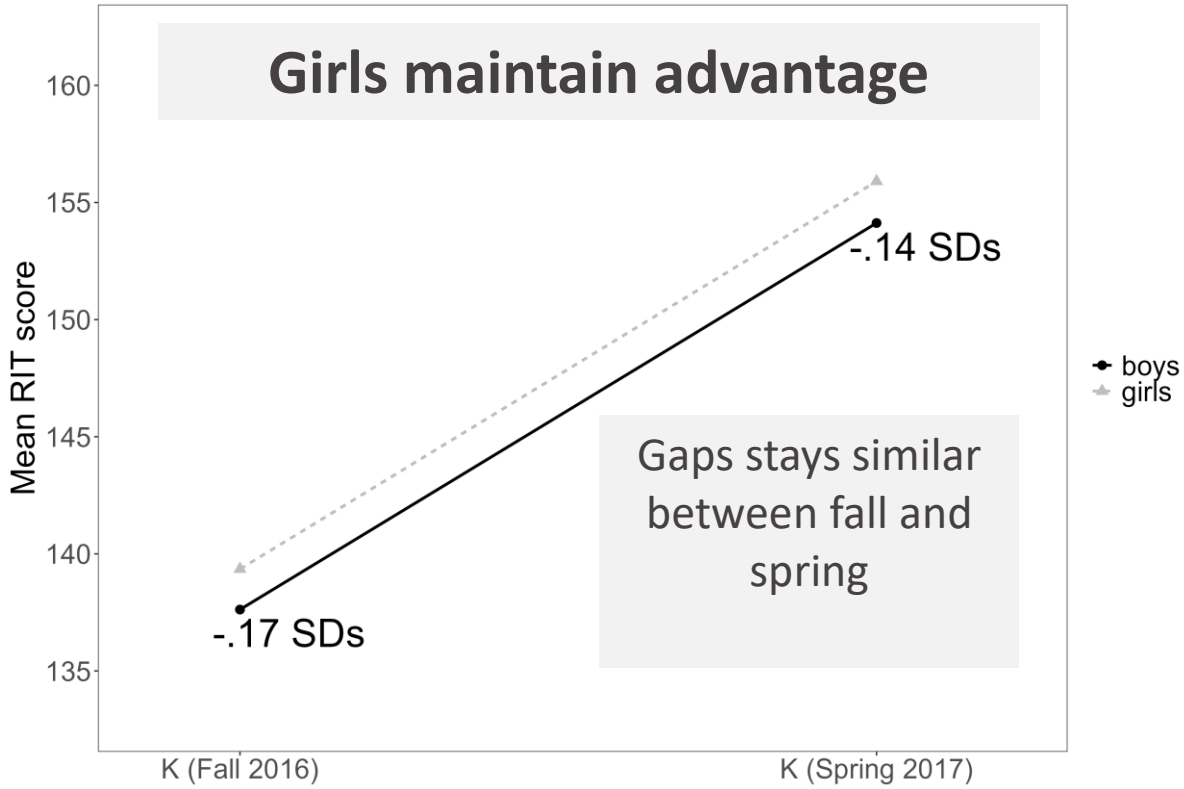
Gender gaps **do not widen** during the school year

Math



Reading



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What happens to gender gaps as students move through elementary school?

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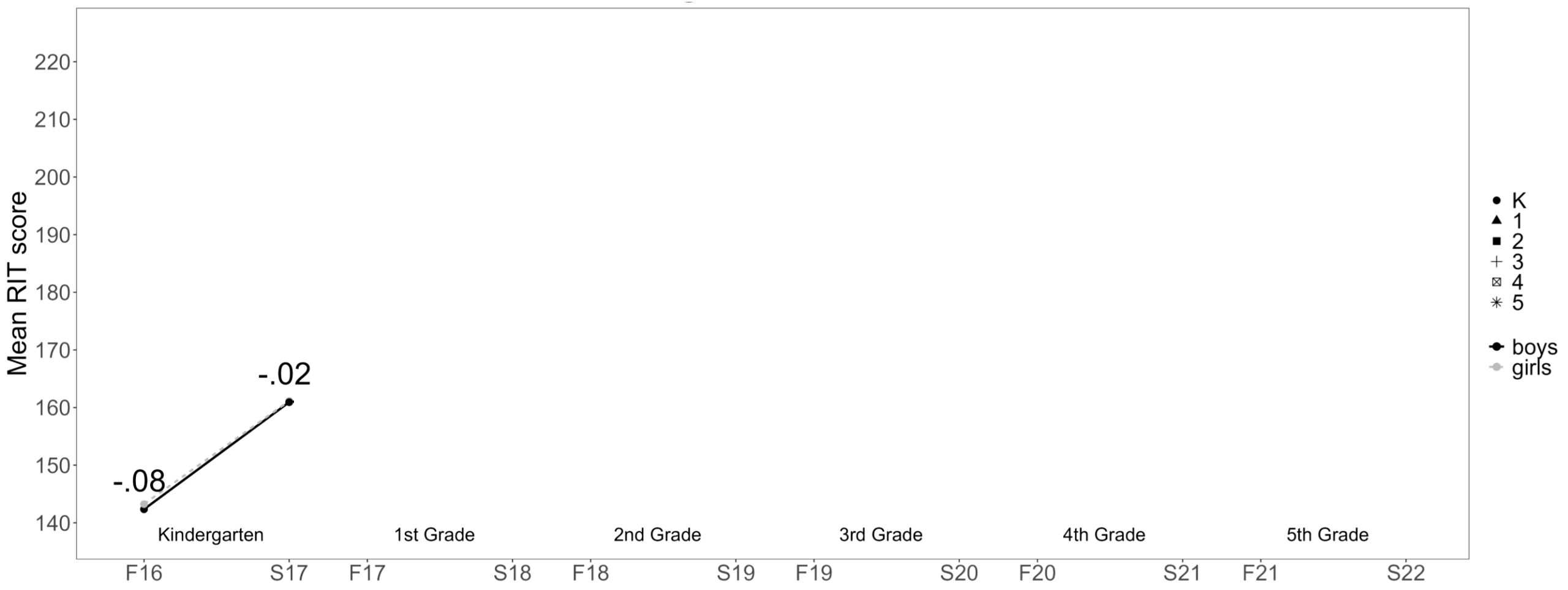
Boys move from slightly behind in **math** to ahead by the end of elementary



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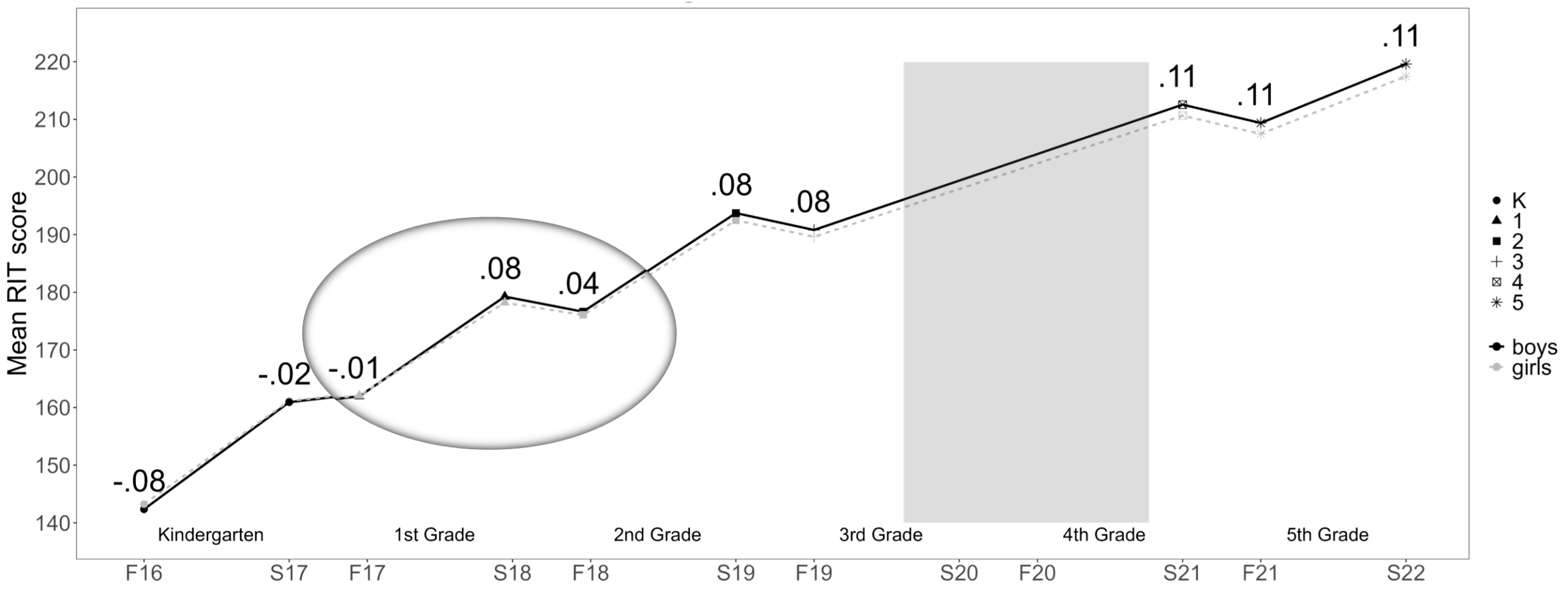

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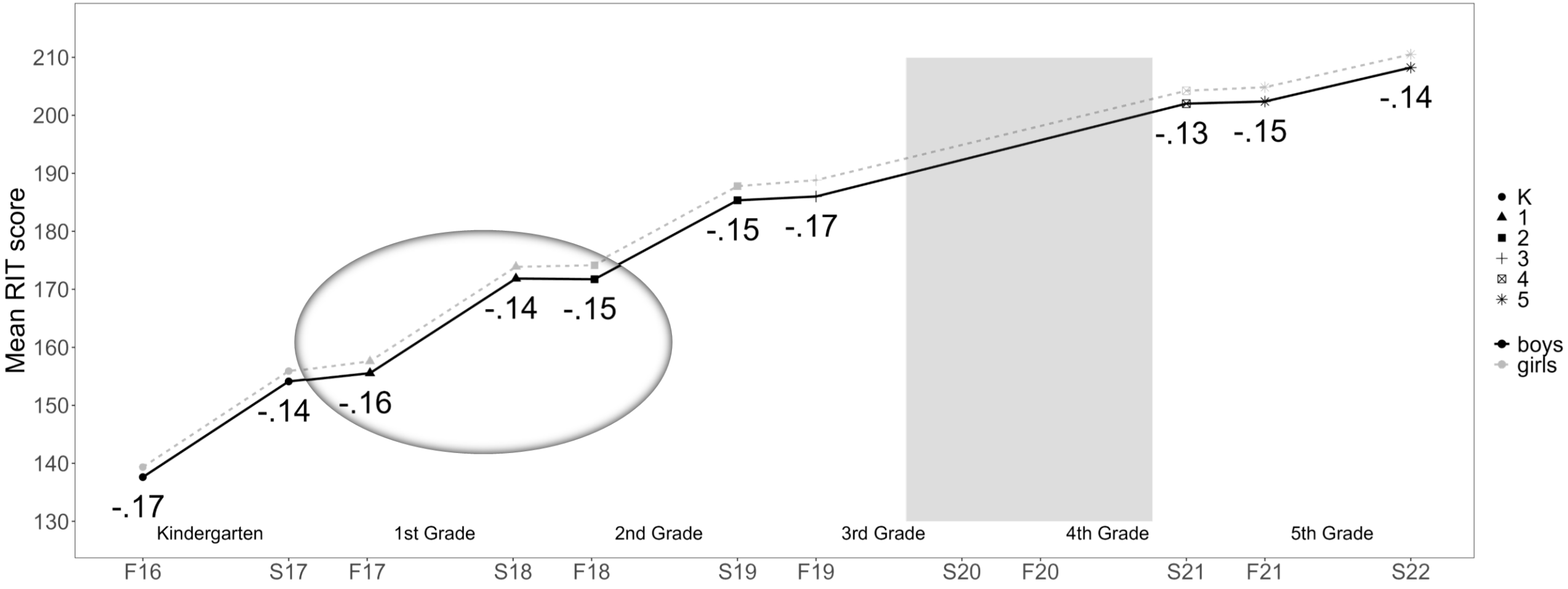
Reading gaps persist but do not widen over time



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Revisiting Assumption #2:

Assumption 2: Schools are not meeting the needs of young boys

What early-grade achievement patterns reveal:

- **Gender gaps do not widen during the school year**

This is a central test of the "schools are failing boys" narrative – and the data do not support it.

- **Small within-year changes can accumulate over time**

Boys catch up in math and eventually pull ahead; in reading, girls maintain an advantage.

- **Different patterns across subjects, but a consistent conclusion**

We do not see evidence that schools are driving widening gender gaps.

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Chapter 3:
Does delaying kindergarten entry pay off?

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What is redshirting?

Redshirting is delaying kindergarten entry by one year after a child is age-eligible.

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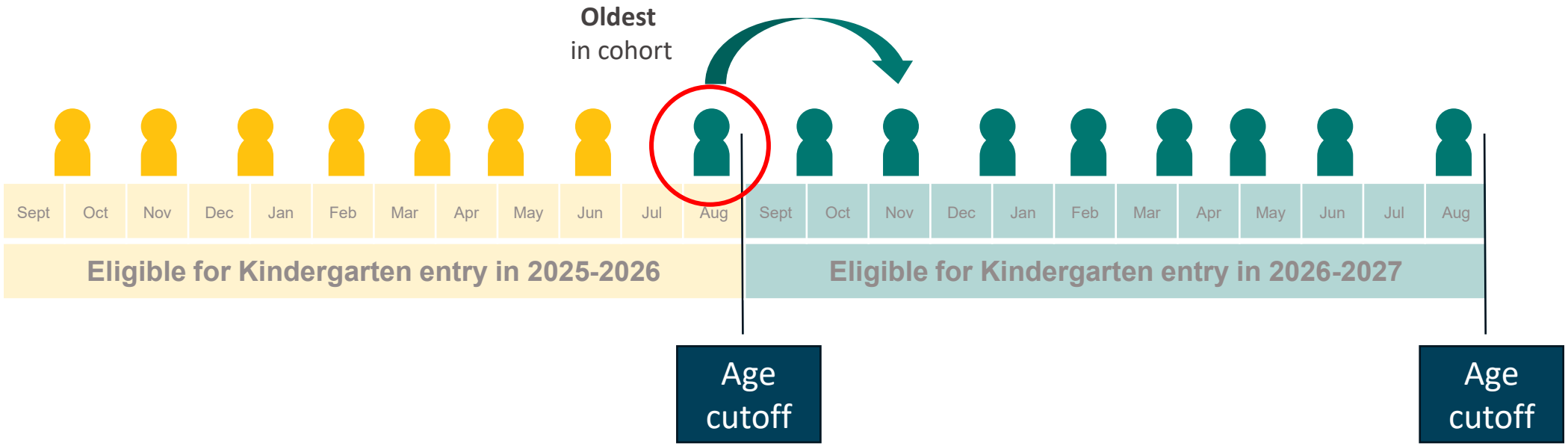
What is redshirting?

Redshirting is delaying kindergarten entry by one year after a child is age-eligible.



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Debates about redshirting

- Many parents eager to give their child any advantage see redshirting as a “gift of time”
- However, prior research has not found long-term benefits of redshirting.
- Redshirting also comes with potential costs, including an extra year of childcare

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How common is redshirting now?

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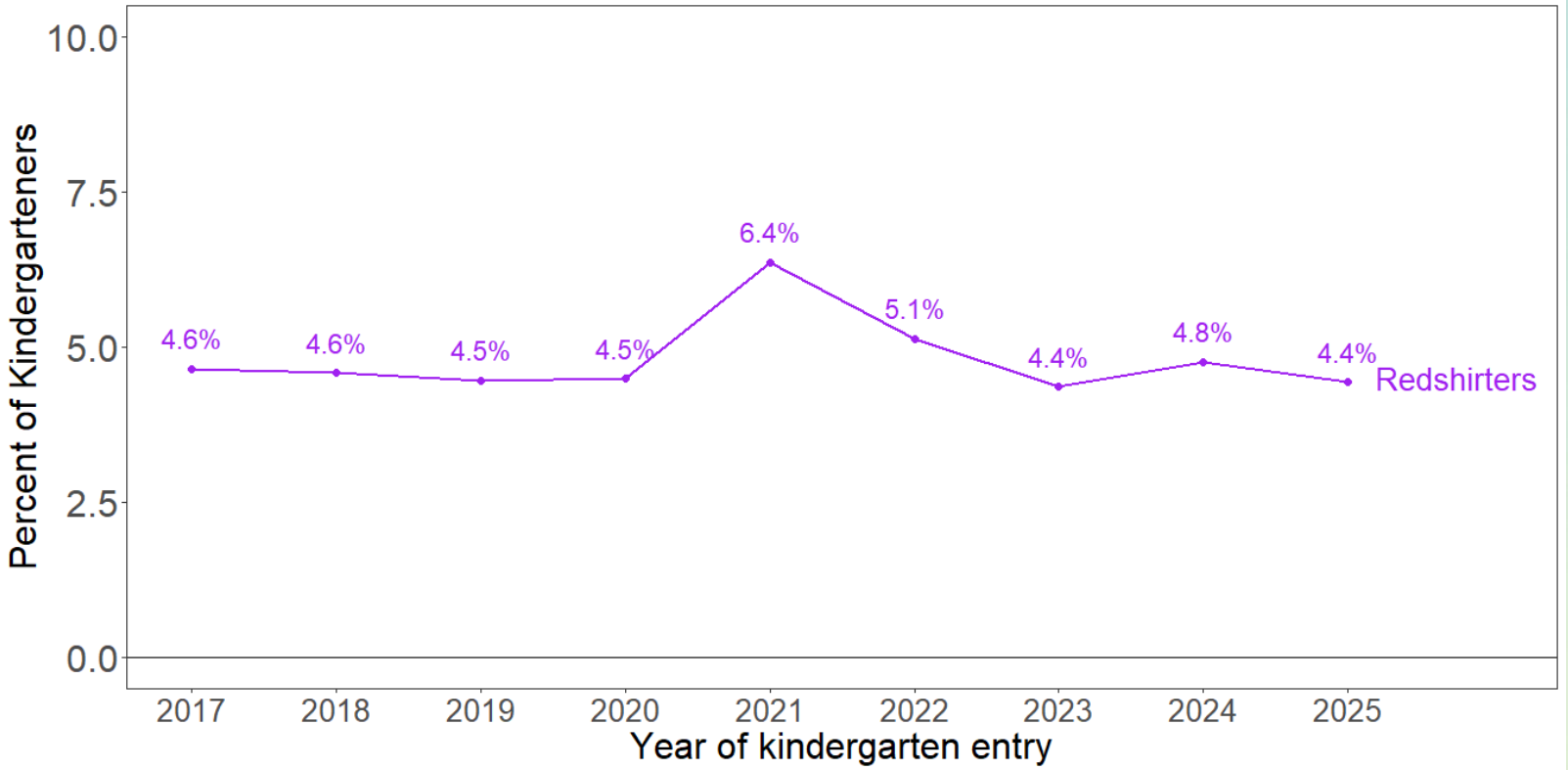
Approximately 5% of kindergartners redshirted between 2017-2025



The rate of students redshirting has not changed much in the last decade (except for during COVID-19)

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Who is most likely to redshirt?

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Who is most likely to be redshirted?

Boys were almost twice as likely to redshirt than girls.

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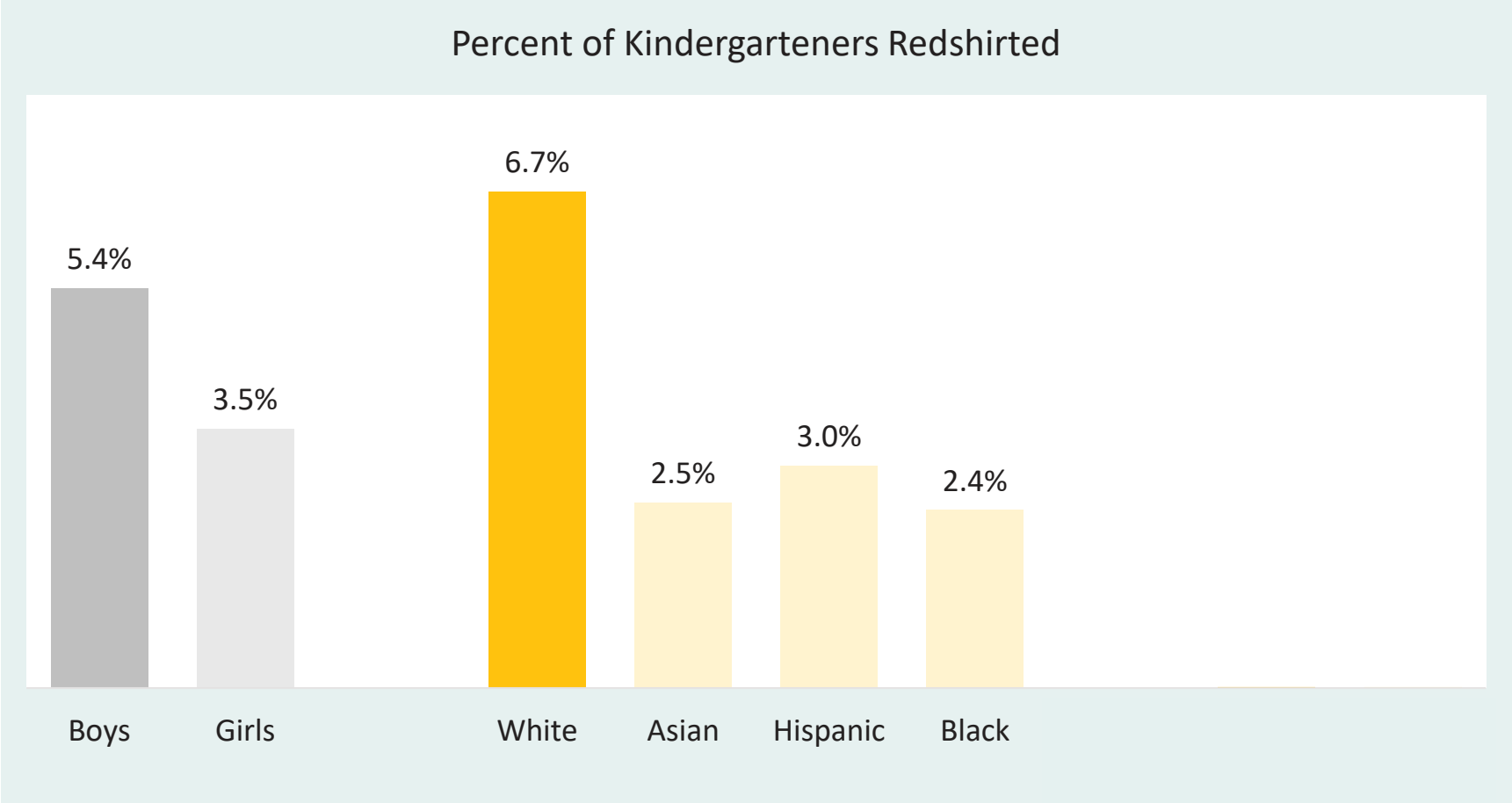
Who is most likely to be redshirted?

White students were 2-3x more likely to redshirt than Asian, Black, and Hispanic students.



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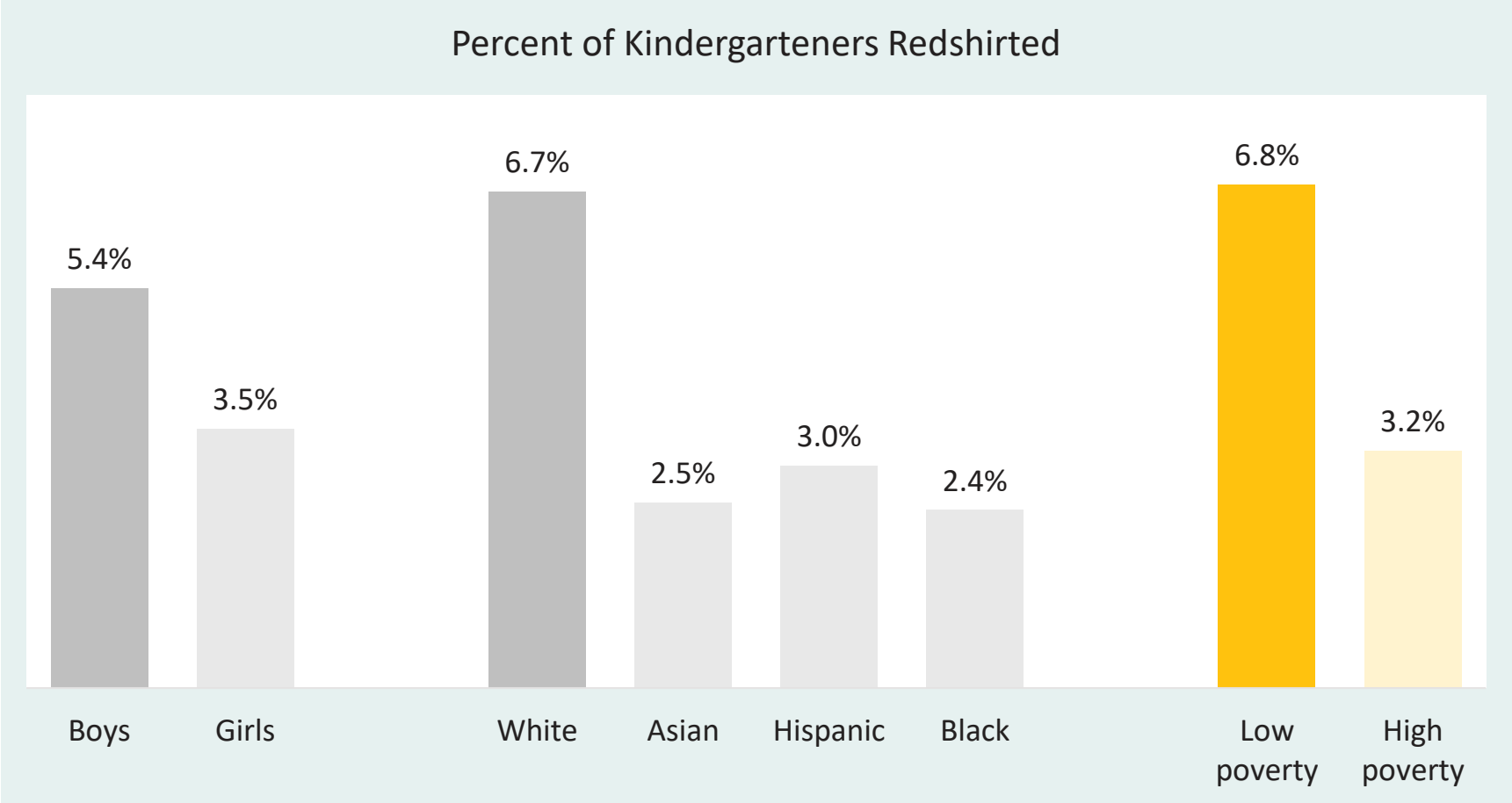
Who is most likely to be redshirted?

Students in **low-poverty schools** were twice as likely to redshirt than in high-poverty schools



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Do redshirters maintain an academic advantage over on-time entrants?

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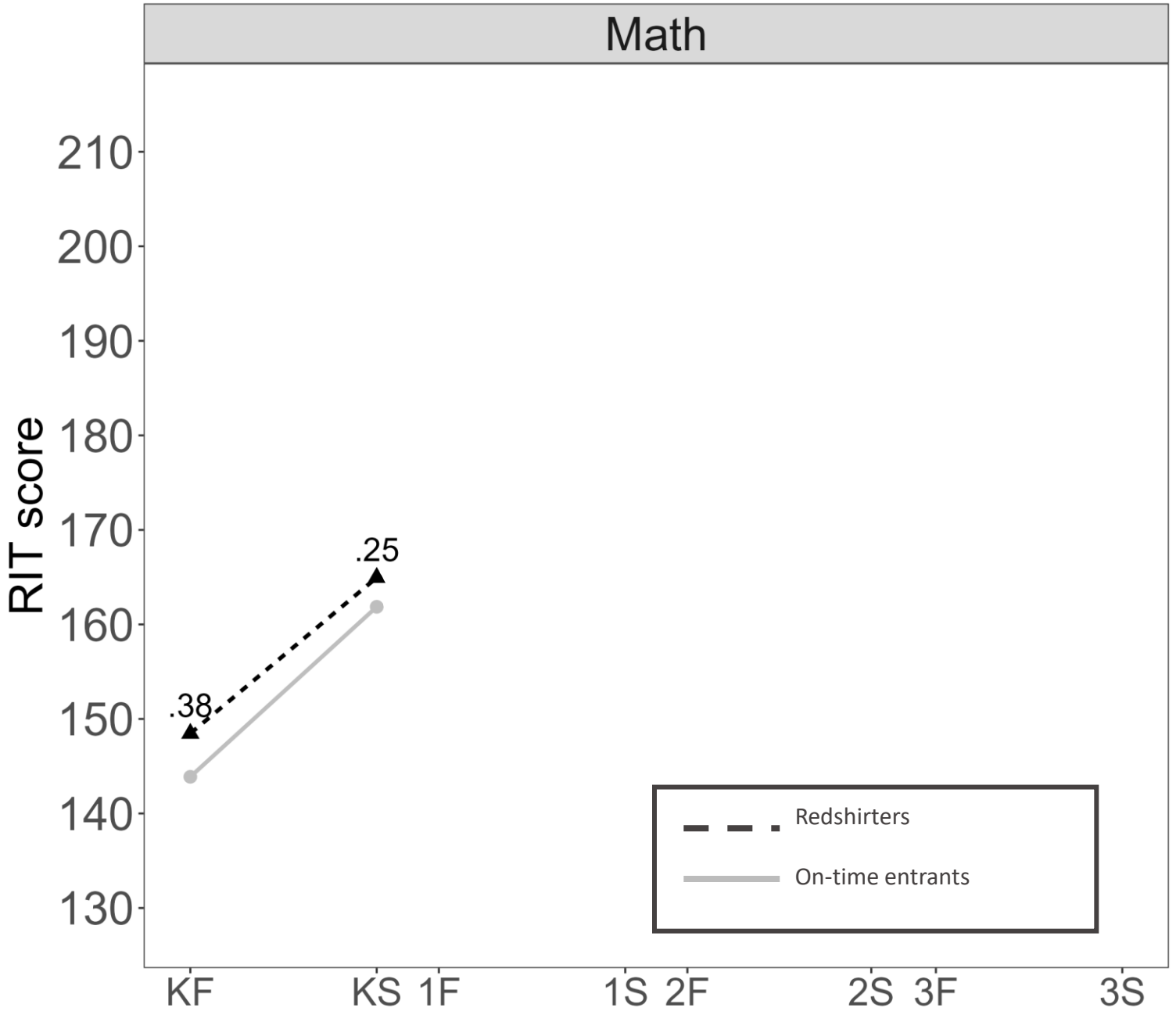
Redshirters begin kindergarten with a sizable achievement advantage



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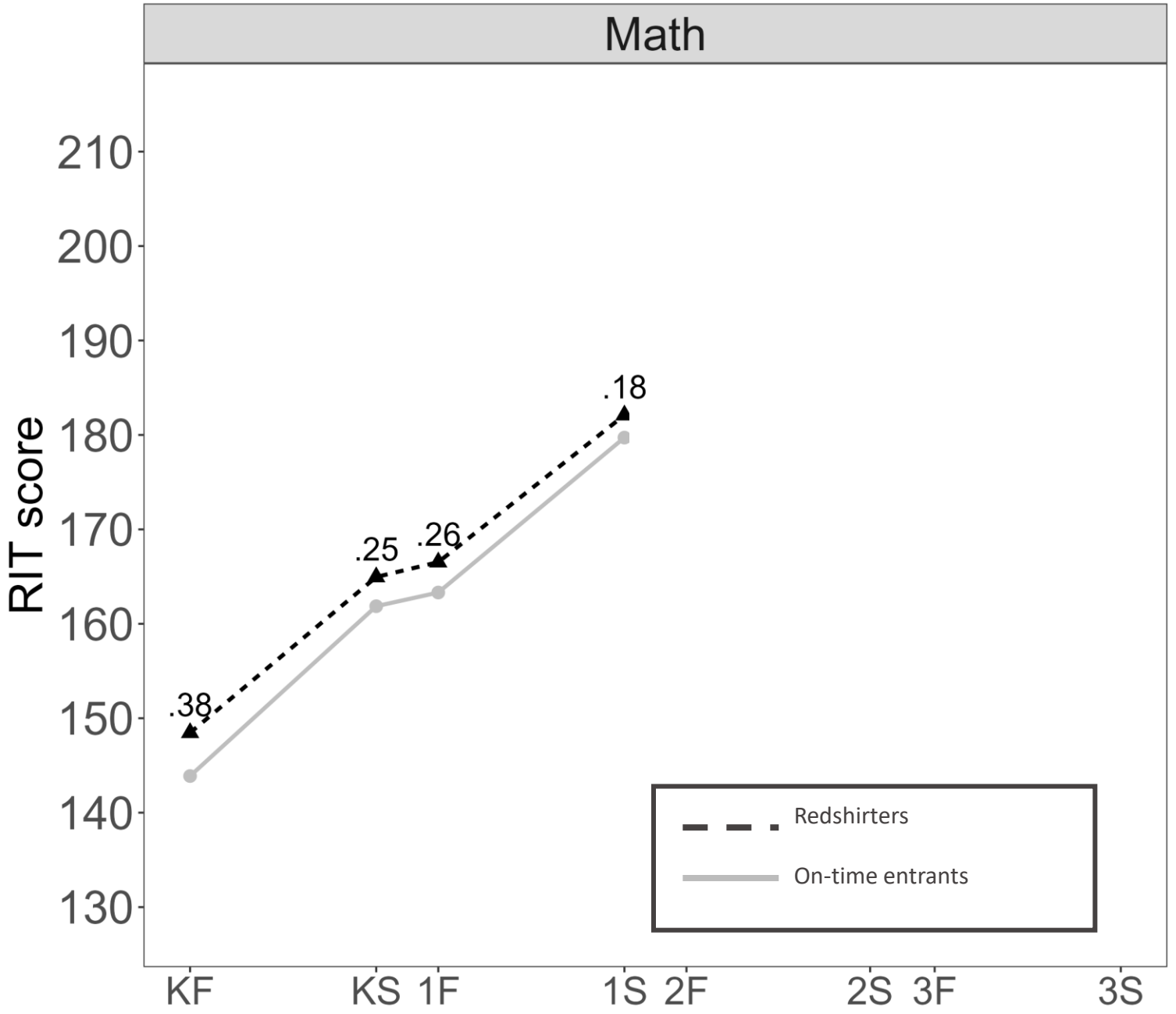
Redshirters begin kindergarten with a sizable achievement advantage, but it fades with time



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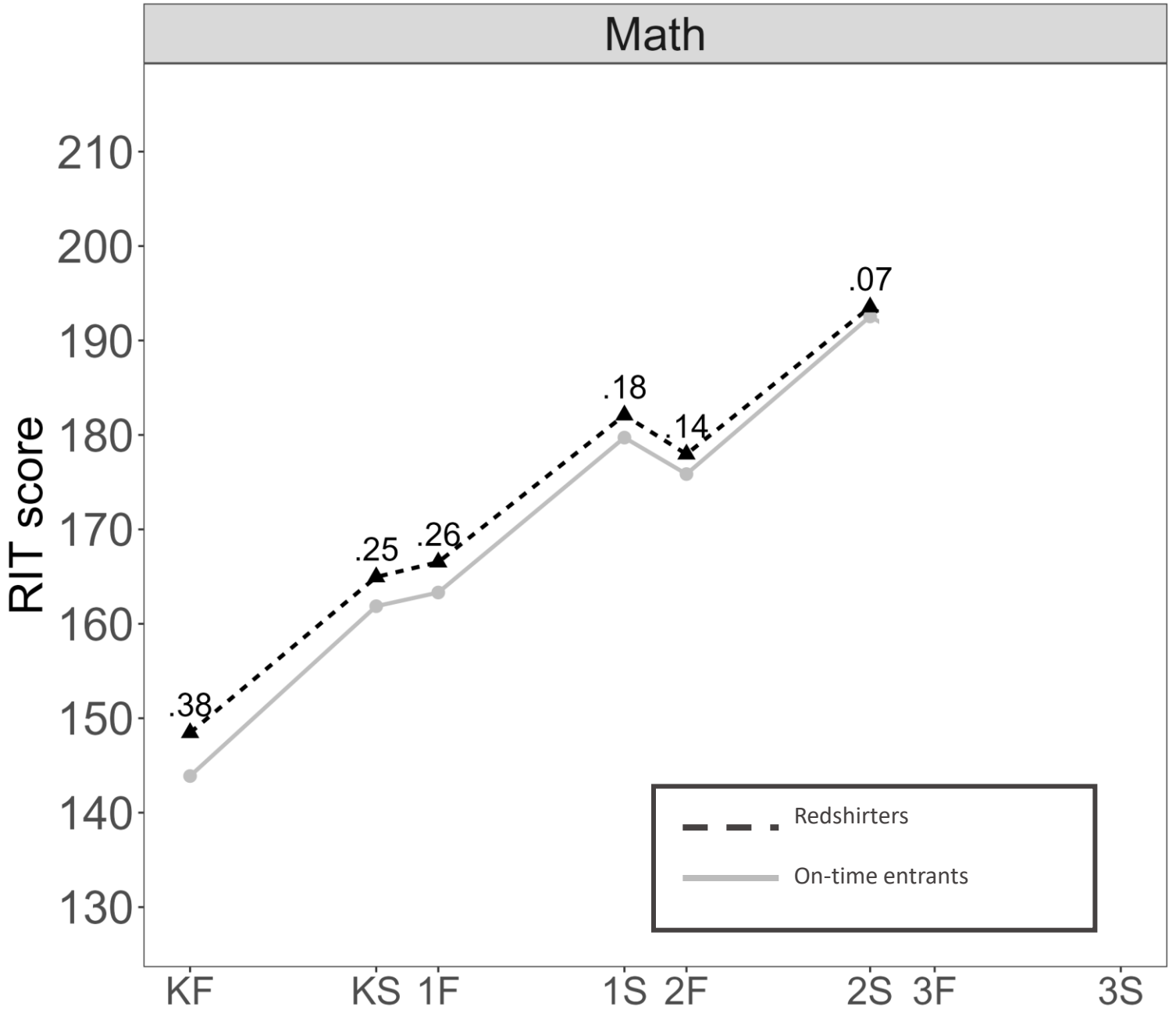

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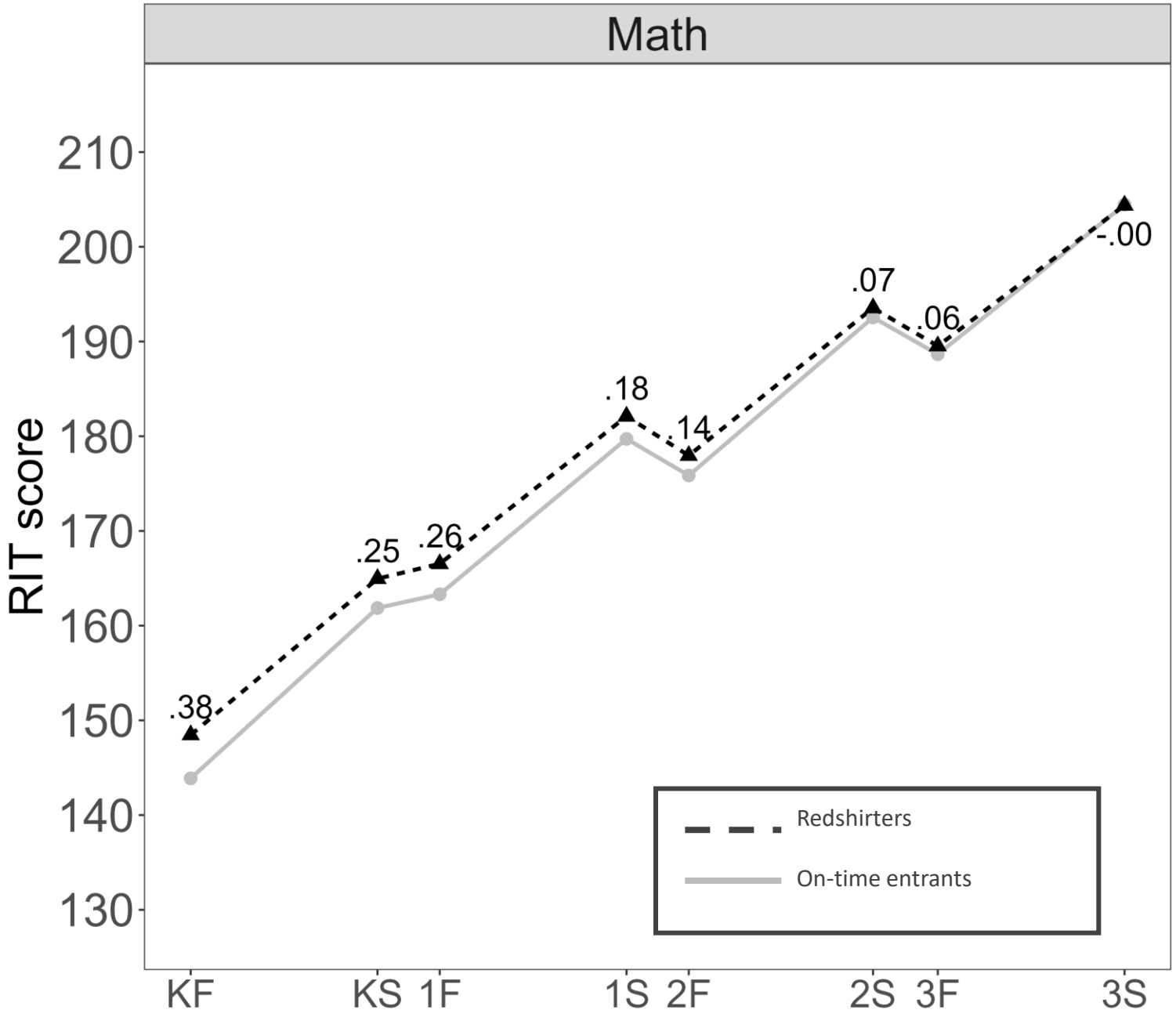
Redshirters begin kindergarten with a sizable achievement advantage, but it fades with time and is **nonexistent by the end of third grade**



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Revisiting Assumption #3:

Assumption 3: Delaying kindergarten gives students a lasting academic advantage

What research on redshirting finds:

- Delayed kindergarten entry results in initial academic advantage, but this advantage fades completely by 3rd grade

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What are the tradeoffs of redshirting?

ADVANTAGES

- Greater maturity at school entry
- Early academic advantage
- Potential advantage in athletics

DISADVANTAGES

- Additional year of childcare costs
- Benefits fade over time
- Slightly higher risk of negative long-term outcomes (e.g., HS dropout, earnings)

The key question is not whether benefits exist—but whether they last.

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How can educators guide families considering redshirting?

For most students, the academic benefits are unlikely to outweigh the costs.

Early advantages tend to fade over time and financial and long-term tradeoffs remain

Decisions should be based on individual student needs, not assumptions about age alone

Educators can help families evaluate a child's readiness, temperament, and specific needs.

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Three takeaways from today

- **Early learners were not insulated from COVID disruptions**
  Even the youngest students show lasting impacts on achievement

- **Narratives about boys in school don't always match the data**
  Early gender gaps are more nuanced than often assumed

- **Popular solutions may not deliver lasting benefits**
  Redshirting changes starting points, but not long-term academic outcomes


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