

TRENDS SNAPSHOT

Turning a corner in reading: MAP Growth data shows reading improvements after period of post-COVID stagnation

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Key findings

- After a long period of post-COVID stagnation in reading test scores, MAP Growth reading data showed sizable improvements between 2025 and 2026 across kindergarten to eighth grade.
- Historically underserved groups showed some of the largest reading gains from 2025 to 2026.
- Math achievement continued to show incremental progress toward recovery in kindergarten to fifth grade, but stagnation in the middle school grades.

Over the last few school years, national [MAP® Growth™ data](#) showed a [widening divide](#) in recovery patterns between subjects: math achievement had regained some ground, while reading had not budged. However, spring 2026 test score data from the [MAP Growth National Dashboard](#)¹ provide some promising signs that reading recovery has finally begun.

Reading trends

After remaining stuck at pandemic lows from 2022 to 2025, reading test scores in first grade to eighth grade showed meaningful improvement between spring 2025 and spring 2026 (see Figure 1). In just one year, about 15–33% of the remaining pandemic reading gap was erased.²

While the general pattern of improvements was consistent across grade levels, there was some notable variation. The biggest reading improvement was in eighth grade, which was also a rare bright spot in spring 2025. Kindergarten patterns also stand out as an outlier. Unlike the later grades in reading, kindergarten test scores never showed post-COVID stagnation. Kindergarten test scores have shown steady improvement from 2022 to 2026 and are now 0.05 standard deviations above the prepandemic (2019) mean.

How to read Figures 1 and 3

Figures 1 and 3 in this *Trends Snapshot* come directly from the “Trends Over Time” tab of the MAP Growth National Dashboard. They display standardized differences in mean achievement compared to spring 2019 (the pre-COVID reference year). Negative values indicate scores below 2019 levels.

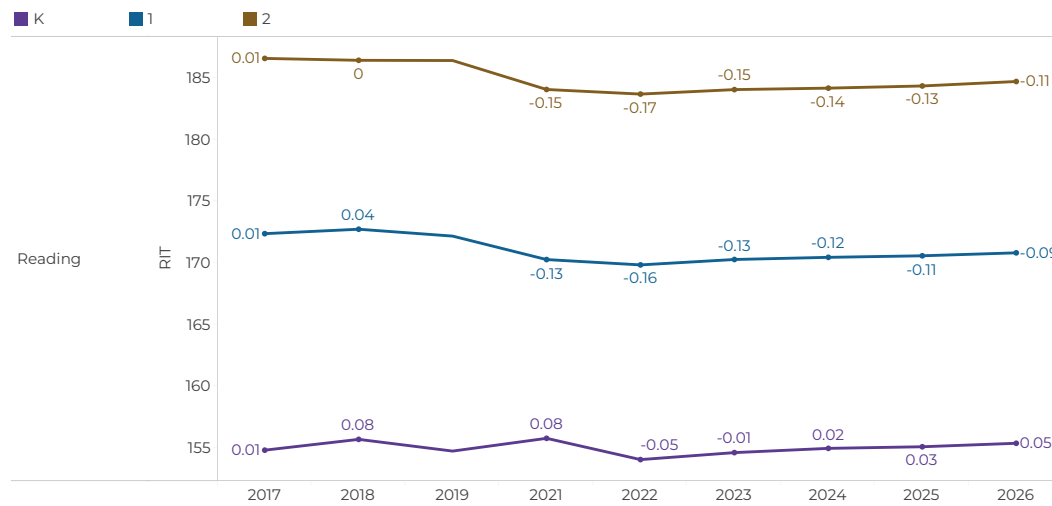
To put this in perspective, the [average intervention](#) raises student achievement by about 0.05 standard deviations. In most grades and subjects, the scale of unfinished recovery is three or more times that magnitude.

1 All figures come from the “Trends Over Time” tab of the dashboard and are based on results from over 20 million K–8 students in 30,000 thousand schools.

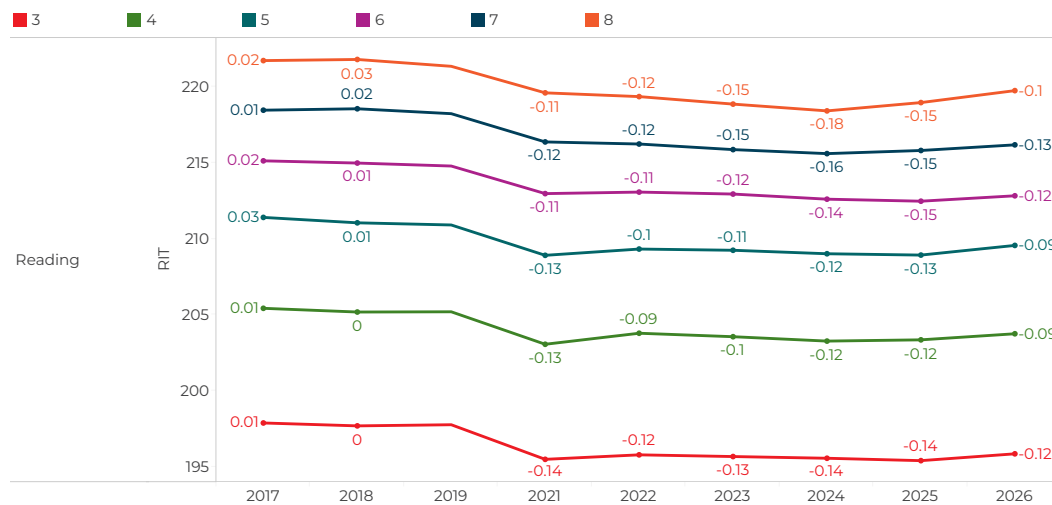
2 Percent recovery was calculated by dividing the difference in effect size between 2025 and 2026 by the size of the pandemic reading gap in 2025.

Figure 1. Average spring reading achievement levels, 2017-2026

(A) Kindergarten to second grade



(B) Third grade to eighth grade



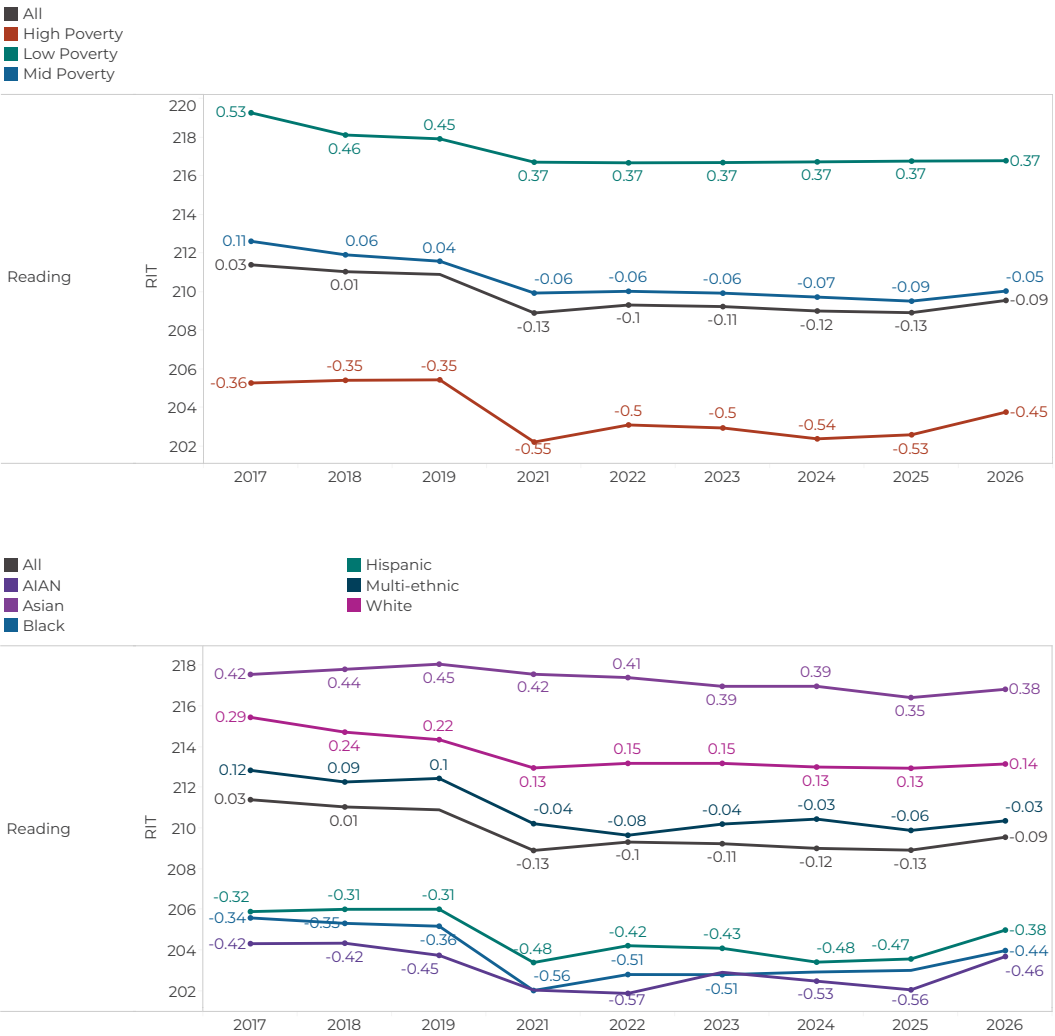
Note. Numbers next to each point reflect the standardized difference in mean achievement compared to the pre-COVID reference year of 2019, with negative values indicating that achievement in that year was lower compared to spring 2019.

Notably, improvements were concentrated among traditionally underserved groups, such as Black and Hispanic students and students attending high-poverty schools. While inequities remain, many historically underserved students have made sizable improvements in 2026. Figure 2 illustrates trends over time in fifth-grade reading achievement, disaggregated by school-poverty level (top panel) and race/ethnicity (bottom panel).

Among fifth graders in high-poverty schools, the gap relative to the 2019 national average remained between -0.50 and -0.55 SDs between 2021 and 2025 before improving to -0.45 SDs by spring 2026. During the same period, low-poverty schools showed no improvements in reading test scores, indicating that reading recovery over the last year was primarily concentrated in mid- and high-poverty schools.

Similar gains are evident for American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic, and Black students. For example, the gap for Hispanic fifth graders narrowed from -0.47 SDs in spring 2025 to -0.38 SDs in spring 2026, the most sizable improvement since 2021.

Figure 2. Average fifth-grade reading achievement levels, 2017–2026, by school-poverty level (upper panel) and race/ethnicity (lower panel)



How to read Figure 2

Effect sizes in Figure 2 are expressed relative to the overall national average in 2019. Values in 2019 capture pre-existing inequities between groups. The change in effect sizes between 2021 and 2026 reflects progress toward recovery within each group.

This figure shows grade three as an example; refer to the “Trends Over Time” tab in the dashboard to explore other grades and groups.

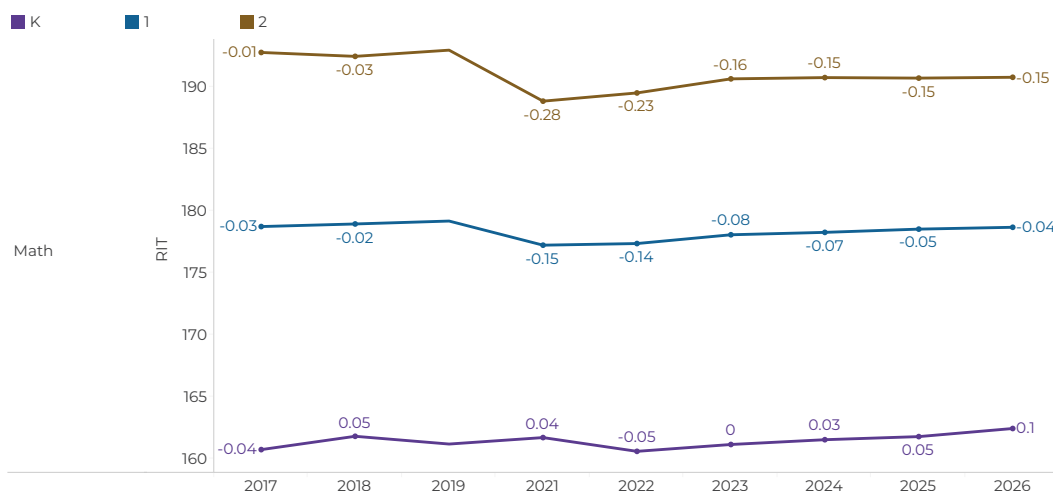
Math trends

Math achievement showed signs of steady recovery in the elementary grades. In kindergarten to fifth grade, there was a pattern of incremental reductions in achievement gaps each year since spring 2021 (when gaps were generally at their largest), and that trend generally continued through spring 2026.

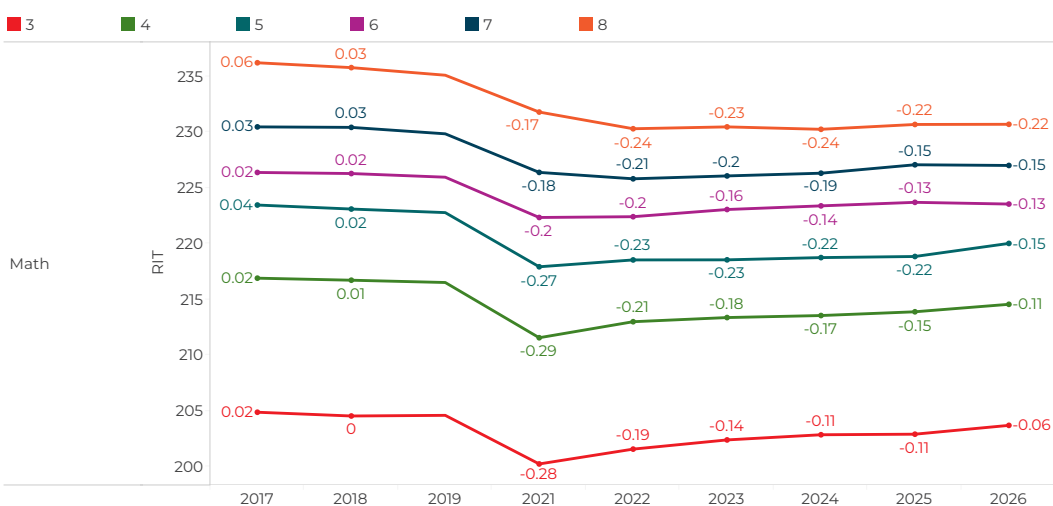
In the middle school grades, improvements were observed from spring 2022 to 2025 and then stagnated between 2025 and 2026. Test score stagnation in the middle school grades was observed across most racial/ethnic and poverty subgroups between 2025 and 2026.

Figure 3. Average spring math achievement levels, 2017–2026

(A) Kindergarten to second grade



(B) Third to eighth grade



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.

Summary and significance

Encouragingly, the spring 2026 results suggest that reading recovery may finally be gaining traction after several years of stagnation. The improvement is notable not only because it appears across grades, but also because many historically underserved groups—including Black and Hispanic students and students in high-poverty schools—made meaningful gains between 2025 and 2026. These patterns offer a more hopeful reading story than prior years, when reading achievement remained largely stuck even as math showed modest signs of recovery.

At the same time, these results should be interpreted with caution. The 2026 gains represent important progress, but they do not yet erase the full scale of unfinished recovery. Reading scores in most grades remain below prepandemic levels, and persistent gaps by race/ethnicity and school poverty level underscore the need to sustain attention on students who were furthest from opportunity before and after the pandemic. The findings also complicate, rather than overturn, prior findings around post-pandemic [adolescent literacy struggles](#). While average reading scores improved in 2026, older struggling readers may still require targeted, sustained supports that go beyond broad recovery efforts.

Together, these trends point to a dual imperative for education leaders. First, systems should study where reading gains are emerging and identify which practices, policies, and investments may be contributing to improvement. Second, leaders should continue building coherent K–8 literacy systems that sustain early-literacy reforms while extending assessment, instruction, intervention, and professional learning into upper elementary and middle school. The 2026 results are a promising sign that recovery is possible, but continued progress will likely depend on whether states and districts can move from short-term rebound to durable, systemwide improvement.

***Trends Snapshot* reports highlight key insights from the [MAP Growth National Dashboard](#). They are designed to provide timely and accessible information that district and state leaders can use to interpret national patterns, frame their own local results in context, and guide recovery strategies.**

Authors

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