BRIEF

Academically diverse classrooms, deeper needs: What teachers face after the pandemic

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KEY FINDINGS

- The typical classroom was academically diverse well before the pandemic, with students spanning a wide range of achievement levels.
- After the pandemic, the overall academic diversity of classrooms (e.g., the share of students who are on- and off track for grade-level proficiency) looks largely similar to prior years.
- Slightly more students in each classroom are off track, but those who are off track are now further from grade-level proficiency, increasing the instructional demands to accelerate learning.

Classrooms routinely include students with very different academic needs. In a single elementary school classroom, teachers are expected to support students who are far below grade level, those who are on track, and others who are already advanced. Meeting this wide range of needs is the everyday reality of teaching.

While academic diversity is widely acknowledged, it is rarely described in concrete terms. Conversations about differentiated instruction often rely on broad statements about "meeting students where they are," without clarifying what that actually looks like inside the typical classroom. How many students are struggling to reach grade-level proficiency? How many are on track? How wide is the range of instructional need teachers are managing at the same time?

These questions matter even more in the wake of COVID-19. Research has shown that pandemic-related school disruptions disproportionately affected lower-achieving students, widening the differences in achievement between low- and high-achieving students across the country. However, less is known about how those losses translate into instructional conditions for a teacher in a classroom. Were lower-achieving students more negatively impacted than high-achieving students in the same classroom, increasing the need for differentiation? Or did the pandemic impact low- and high-achievers in the same classroom similarly, resulting in greater needs to accelerate learning without increasing the need to differentiate?

In this brief, we use MAP® Growth™ test scores and classroom roster data to examine the academic diversity in elementary school classrooms before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical measures of variability

Glossary

Academic diversity: Spread of student achievement levels within a classroom

Grade-level proficiency: Mastery of academic standards/skills expected for a given grade level as defined by a student's state (typically measured through the state's summative end-of-year assessment)

On track for proficiency: A measure of whether a student is likely to score at or above the proficient level on the end-of-year assessment based on MAP Growth linking studies

"Typical" classroom: In this study, we use "typical" to refer to the average classroom within our sample

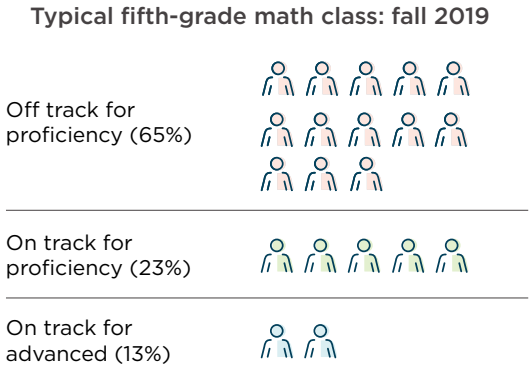
Differentiated instruction: the process of identifying students' individual learning strengths/needs and adapting lessons to match them

show that achievement distributions widened after the pandemic, particularly at the lower end.[1] However, these measures can be difficult to interpret in instructional terms. In this brief, we focus instead on classroom composition and distance to proficiency to better reflect the conditions teachers experience in practice. We ask three practical questions: What did academic diversity look like in a typical classroom prior to the pandemic? How did it change after the pandemic? And what do those changes mean for the instructional demands teachers face today?

The typical elementary classroom was academically diverse even prior to the pandemic.

We begin by establishing a baseline: what academic diversity looked like in an average elementary classroom before the pandemic. Figure 1 illustrates the academic composition of a typical fifth-grade[2] math classroom in fall 2019. We group students by whether they were off track, on track, or advanced relative to grade-level proficiency expectations.[3]

Figure 1. Even before the pandemic, fewer than half of students in a typical elementary math classroom were on track for proficiency



Note. This visualization shows the number of students in each category in a typical 20-student classroom. Estimates are rounded to ensure integer number of students.

In the average fifth-grade classroom, the majority of students in a classroom was off track to be proficient by the end of the year. Only about a quarter were on track for proficiency and even fewer were on track for advanced. In other words, even before COVID-19, teachers were routinely supporting students who were starting the year at very different points along the path to proficiency.

These patterns are not unique to fifth grade or math. We see similar ranges of achievement in third- and fourth-grade classrooms and in reading (figures presented in the technical appendix), underscoring that academic diversity was a defining feature of elementary classrooms across grades and subjects prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 In the technical appendix, we also present additional metrics of academic diversity, including (a) the average distance between the 10th and 90th percentile RIT score within the classroom and (b) the percentage of students in the average classroom within achievement quintiles defined by the 2025 MAP Growth norms.

2 Results for other grades and for reading are presented in the technical appendix.

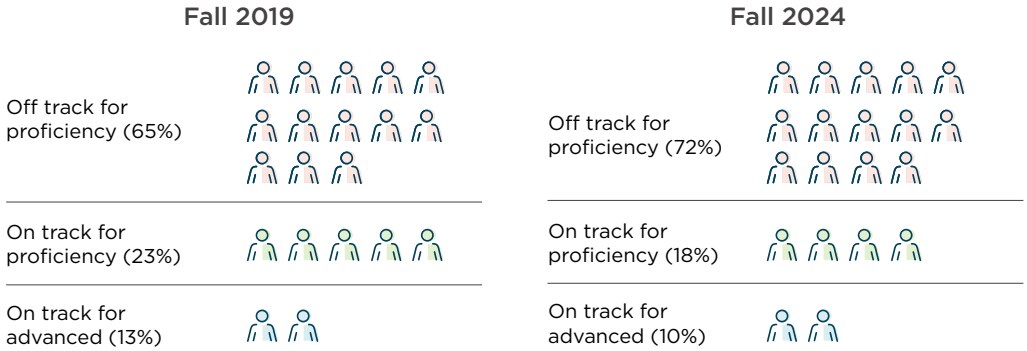
3 As described in further detail in the technical appendix, we classify students as off track for proficiency, on track for proficiency, or on track for advanced based on (a) students' fall MAP Growth test scores and (b) the default proficiency cut scores from the MAP Growth linking studies.

After the pandemic, academic diversity has not substantially shifted, but slightly more students are off track for grade-level proficiency.

Research on the academic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic consistently shows that achievement losses were not evenly distributed. Across multiple assessments, we see that students who entered the pandemic already behind experienced larger declines, while higher-achieving students saw smaller drops, or in some cases, made gains during the pandemic. Given these patterns, one might expect classrooms themselves to become substantially more academically diverse after the pandemic.

Figure 1 showed the academic composition of a typical classroom before the pandemic. Figure 2 places that same baseline (fall 2019) alongside a postpandemic classroom (fall 2024) to show how composition changed over time. While the overall range of instructional needs remains wide in both periods, the distribution across proficiency categories shifted modestly after the pandemic.

Figure 2. The share of students off track for proficiency increased modestly after the pandemic



Note. This visualization shows the number of students in each category in a typical 20-student classroom. Estimates are rounded to ensure integer number of students.

In 2024, the share of students who are off track for proficiency is about seven percent higher than it was in 2019 (a difference of a single student on average in a 20-student class). Over the same period, the share of students on track for advanced remained largely unchanged. In other words, the pandemic did not fundamentally change the distribution of students across proficiency categories within classrooms, but it did increase the proportion of students who are further from grade-level proficiency. Even modest percentage shifts like this matter instructionally because they increase the number of students who need accelerated growth within an already diverse classroom.

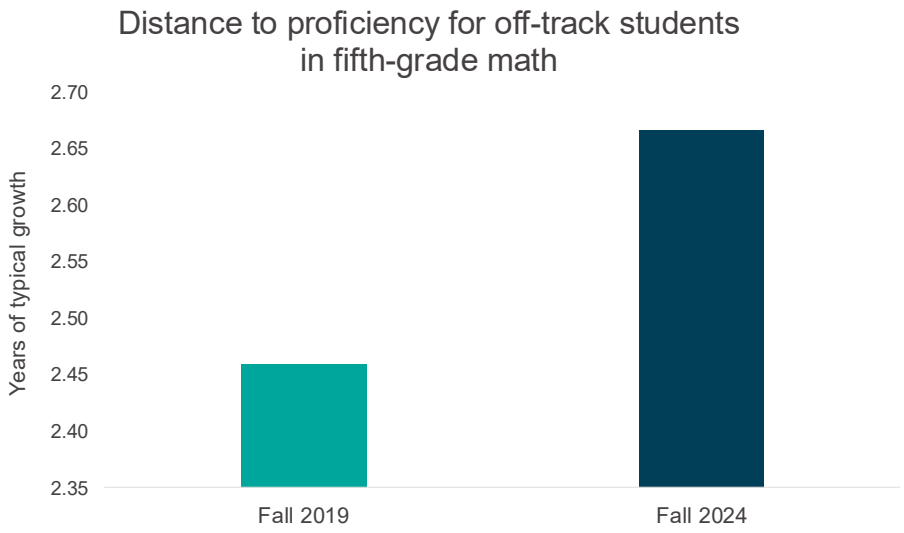
These patterns help reconcile two realities educators have been grappling with: classrooms did not suddenly become heterogeneous after COVID-19, but more students entered already diverse classrooms needing additional support to catch up.

The instructional distance to proficiency has increased for off track students.

Although the share of students who are off track for proficiency increased only modestly after the pandemic, the depth of need among those students grew. In practical terms, students who started the year behind now need to make more accelerated progress to reach grade-level proficiency.

Figure 3 shows how much growth off track students would need in a single school year to reach proficiency, relative to their expected growth rate. Before the pandemic, the average off-track student often needed to grow at roughly twice the expected rate to catch up within a year. By fall 2024, that required growth rate increased further, particularly in the upper elementary grades. For example, a student in fall 2019 in fifth-grade math would have had to grow two and a half times their expected fall-spring growth rate in order to reach proficiency. In fall 2024, the growth rate is now 2.7 times the expected growth rate.

Figure 3. Off track students now need more accelerated growth to reach proficiency



Note. This figure shows the expected fall-spring growth for an average off-track student benchmarked against the fall-spring growth needed for that off-track student to reach proficiency. For more details on the calculation, please see the technical appendix.

Conclusions

Elementary classrooms were academically diverse well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have long been expected to support students who begin the year at very different points along the path to proficiency, making differentiated instruction a routine part of instruction rather than an exceptional strategy.

What changed after the pandemic was not just how many students were behind but how far behind they were. Even modest increases in the share of students who are off track translated into greater instructional demands because more students now require accelerated growth to reach grade-level proficiency. This increased distance helps explain why teaching feels harder, even when the overall distribution of on- and off -track students has not shifted greatly during the pandemic.

These findings suggest that recovery efforts focused solely on returning to prepandemic routines may fall short. When more students require accelerated growth at the same time, teachers need structures, time, and supports that go beyond business-as-usual instruction. Yet it is not clear that professional learning systems and teacher preparation programs have evolved to match this shift. When more students require sustained acceleration at the same time, teachers need support structures that reflect that reality. They should not be expected to manage these demands alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Megan Kuhfeld is the director of growth modeling and analytics at NWEA. Her research seeks to understand students' academic and social-emotional trajectories and the school and neighborhood influences that promote optimal growth. Prior to joining NWEA, Megan also worked at Child Trends, the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and UCLA CRESST. Dr. Kuhfeld completed a doctorate in quantitative methods in education and a master's degree in statistics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Dr. Emily Morton is a lead research scientist at NWEA. Her research focuses on estimating the effects of K–12 education policies and programs related to instructional time and learning environments on student outcomes. She conducts much of her work in partnership with schools and districts, with the intention of producing actionable findings that will directly inform policy and practice and serve to reduce inequality. Before rejoining NWEA in 2025, Dr. Morton was a researcher at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes of Research. She holds a PhD in education and a master of public policy from Stanford University.

Dr. Karyn Lewis is the vice president of research and policy partnerships at NWEA. She leads a team dedicated to generating actionable, policy-relevant research that directly addresses critical challenges in K–12 education. Her team's work is strategically focused on bridging the gap between rigorous research and practical educational improvements, ensuring that insights translate into meaningful strategies for educators, policymakers, and school leaders. Prior to joining NWEA, Dr. Lewis was a senior researcher at Education Northwest/REL Northwest and a data fellow with the Strategic Data Project at the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research. Dr. Lewis earned her PhD from the University of Oregon in social psychology.

Dr. Scott J. Peters is the director of research consulting partnerships at NWEA. His research focuses on educational assessment and data use, gifted and talented student identification, equity within advanced educational opportunities, and effectiveness of educational policy. Prior to joining NWEA, for 13 years, Dr. Peters served as a professor of assessment and research methodology at the University of Wisconsin—Whitewater. He received his PhD from Purdue University in educational psychology and applied research methodology.

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