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Disrupted Learning During the Pandemic Causes Dip in State Assessment Scores

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LANSING – After a year and a half of disrupted learning due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, student state assessment scores from this spring dipped from the last time that students were given statewide assessments in the spring of 2019.

“In spite of the extraordinary efforts of educators, support staff, school leaders, parents, the broader community, and students themselves, the disruption of the pandemic has inevitably resulted in unfinished learning for many of our children,” said State Superintendent Dr. Michael Rice. “Results from the state summative assessments and the local benchmark assessments show that some students were able to make relatively normal gains, while many others will be working with their teachers to accelerate their learning to catch up to where they otherwise would have been in the absence of the pandemic. In Michigan and across the country, we have our work cut out for us.”

The percentages of 8th and 11th grade students who scored proficient or above this year on the English language arts (ELA) PSAT and SAT tests improved over 2019, while the percentages of students who scored proficient or above in ELA, math, and social studies in all other grades declined (see the table below).

Dr. Rice noted that precise comparisons to any previous years’ scores would be difficult. Students did not take the M-STEP in the 2020 school year, and the percentages of students who took the ELA and math M-STEP tests this year ranged by grade and subject from 64 to 72 percent.

“The 2020-21 school year was such an uneven year with high health risks for students and staff, inconsistent technology, and variations in teaching and learning across the state,” Dr. Rice said. “Any analysis of M-STEP results must factor in low participation rates in state testing.”

State Board of Education President Dr. Casandra Ulbrich and Dr. Rice requested that the U.S. Department of Education waive the statewide M-STEP assessments for the second straight year. The request was made in part to maximize student learning time, which had been adversely affected during the pandemic. In addition, the state legislature had mandated district-chosen benchmark assessments to give parents and educators a sense of where students were academically and how

educators needed to move forward with individual students. While the U.S. Department of Education (USED) granted MDE's request for waiver of high-stakes accountability requirements, it denied the request to waive state summative assessments. As such, the M-STEP was required to be administered by local school districts, but was optional for students to take depending on parents' beliefs about how safe it was to come into school to take the assessment.

Students who took the state assessments were more likely to be from districts that offered in-person or hybrid learning and less likely to be students of color, economically disadvantaged students, or English learners.

While achievement gaps appear to have narrowed among particular groups of students in different grades and subjects, it must be noted that all students did not test, and that groups of students who are historically lower achieving did not take the tests in the same percentages as some groups of historically higher achieving students. As such, the results should be viewed with caution.

"Districts are encouraged to dig into their data at the school and district levels to better understand and address gaps," Dr. Rice said.

"Educators know what we need to do and have already begun to do it, with longer summer school programs, accelerated learning, with greater creativity, for more children, and with earlier school year starts," Dr. Rice said. "Across the country, it will require intense focus to address the gaps so apparent pre-pandemic and, in some cases and places, more so after 18 months of the pandemic."

Benchmark Assessments

Separate measures of how students achieved throughout the past school year were the benchmark assessments, given to students in grades K-8 once in the fall and once in the spring. Local school districts could choose from four national off-the-shelf benchmark tests or chose/create their own assessment.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the state's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) partnered with the Michigan Data Hub and two university research partners—Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University and Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC) at the University of Michigan—to compile the benchmark assessment data provided by districts.

In the [report](#) produced by EPIC and released today, across all subjects and grades in these benchmark assessments, Michigan students appeared to make less than normal progress towards learning goals as measured and defined by all four approved assessment vendors. While learning as measured by the benchmark assessments did occur over the 2020-21 school year, the rate of learning appeared to be slower than in a typical pre-pandemic school year.

Results from the i-Ready and Smarter Balanced ICA benchmark assessments show that many of the students who were behind at the beginning of the year made

progress toward grade-level standards by the end of the year. However, according to the report, progress was likely slower than expected in a typical, pre-pandemic year.

The NWEA MAP Growth assessment—the benchmark test used by the majority of Michigan school districts—suggests that a greater proportion of students would score at the “not proficient” level on the end-of-year M-STEP than in the most recent year of full M-STEP administration. This is particularly true in mathematics. Although students’ fall 2020 MAP Growth scores indicated that they were on-track to reach similar proficiency rates to the last M-STEP administration, this was no longer true in spring 2021.

The report also found that students who participated in benchmark assessments in both the fall and spring were more likely to be white and less likely to be economically disadvantaged or eligible for special education or English learner services, compared to the overall population of K-8 students in Michigan.

EPIC’s next report, to be released in spring 2022, will focus on identifying the specific groups of students by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English learner status, and student with disability status whose learning trajectories were most affected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read By Grade 3

The 2020-21 school year was the first year that third grade students in Michigan were subject to the state’s Read by Grade 3 retention law. In total, 3,661 third graders across the state had scores that made them eligible to repeat third grade because of low reading scores.

A [report](#) on Michigan’s Read by Grade 3 law by EPIC paints a picture of the third grade students who scored 1252 or below on the ELA M-STEP. This is the first group of students potentially affected by the retention aspect of the law. Only 71.2 percent of third-grade students took the grade 3 ELA M-STEP test this year.

Overall, 4.8 percent of the tested population of third-grade students were identified as being eligible for retention based on their grade 3 M-STEP ELA scores. The analysis showed wide disparities in retention eligibility rates by ethnicity, with African American third-grade students the most likely to be identified for retention and Asian and white students the least likely.

Moving Forward

Actions to respond to the unfinished learning of students during the pandemic have begun at the local, state, and national levels.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Michigan state legislature negotiated over \$6 billion in state and federal funds appropriated to provide local school districts with resources to help Michigan’s students, teachers, and families begin to rebound from the pandemic through local efforts of:

- expanded learning opportunities over the summer;
- additional learning time this school year;

- increased access to early education for more children through the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP);
- additional literacy and math supports;
- expansion of social and emotional learning and children’s mental health supports with additional funding to hire more school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses, and professional development for teachers and support staff in social emotional learning;
- smaller class sizes, particularly at the lower grade levels;
- improved environmental conditions in schools; and
- higher educator salaries, particularly in the beginning years of the profession.

MDE has provided local school districts with regulatory relief and flexibility in the hiring of more educators to help address the teacher shortage exacerbated through the pandemic, and with guidance on how to best navigate the changes in federal and state laws this year.

School-level Assessment Data

For a complete look at this year’s assessment results, please go to www.mischooldata.org.

2021 M-STEP Results

SUBJECT	GRADE TESTED	PERCENT PROFICIENT OR ABOVE 2018-19	PERCENT PROFICIENT OR ABOVE 2020-21	SUBJECT	GRADE TESTED	PERCENT PROFICIENT OR ABOVE 2018-19	PERCENT PROFICIENT OR ABOVE 2020-21
ELA	3	45.1%	42.8%	Math	3	46.7%	42.3%
ELA	4	45.8%	44.2%	Math	4	41.8%	36.5%
ELA	5	46.2%	43.7%	Math	5	34.8%	29.6%
ELA	6	41.7%	38.6%	Math	6	35.1%	28.6%
ELA	7	42.7%	40.7%	Math	7	35.7%	32.3%
ELA	8	61.9%	63.6%	Math	8	41.4%	36.0%
ELA	11	55.3%	56.6%	Math	11	36.3%	34.5%
Science	5	NA	28.5%	Social Studies	5	17.4%	15.6%
Science	8	NA	22.6%	Social Studies	8	28.0%	25.9%
Science	11	NA	15.5%	Social Studies	11	46.6%	43.7%

*The COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges to instruction during the 2020-21 school year, and fewer than 75 percent of students took the assessment, with some subjects having as few as 50 percent taking the assessment. As a result, the data from the Spring 2021 PSAT 8/9, SAT with Essay, and the M-STEP assessments should be used with caution and comparing it to previous years’ data is not advisable.

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