

## EDUCATION FOCUS

# Schools push to restore learning loss in pandemic

By KYRA HAAS

khaas@azcapitoltimes.com

Faced with dips in proficiency across the board, educators continue to push back against the learning loss their students have experienced during the past two years of the pandemic.

The numbers show a tough journey ahead. Third grade reading proficiency dropped by 11%, to 35%, compared to 46% before the pandemic. Before Covid, 41% of Arizona eighth graders were ready for high school math. Now, it's down to 33%. High school graduation rates didn't change as much, dropping to 78% from 79%.

The Arizona Education Progress Meter, developed and maintained by Education Forward Arizona, tracks eight key education metrics to show the status of education in Arizona, including third grade math, eighth grade reading and high school graduation. While there was a gap in information after 2019, students were tested in math and reading in spring 2021, providing a glimpse into how the pandemic has affected them.

Erin Hart with Education Forward Arizona said the drops in performance don't speak to the abilities of teachers and students so much as they reflect the chaos of the pandemic.

"There has to be this balance of how we can support the overall health and mental health of our students, teachers and families while at the same time trying to help kids catch up," said Hart, who is the education group's senior vice president and chief of policy and community impact.

Hart said there isn't a quick fix.

"This is a multi-year effort that we're looking at," Hart said. "If we don't really intervene and do things to support our students and our teachers, we'll be feeling the repercussions of that for literally generations."

Federal Covid relief dollars are helping finance that intervention. Twenty percent

of the most recent wave of federal Covid relief for district and charter schools is earmarked for addressing Covid-related learning loss through evidence-based interventions like summer school, extended school year or school days or after-school programs.

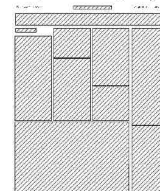
For example, Nogales Unified School District plans to use its set-aside funds to offer extended-time learning, targeted tutoring and summer school, and equipment to help ensure synchronous and asynchronous learning are of equal value. Each of its schools will also have a mental-social emotional health coordinator. The district plans to track students' individual progress and discuss them throughout the year.

"By viewing this data at not only the school and grade level, but also drilling down to the classroom and student levels, these data meetings will strengthen each school's ability to provide specific and timely interventions," the district stated in laying out its plan to the state Department of Education.

Ninety-eight percent of students in the district fall into one of the groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including minority racial groups, low-income families, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, migrant students and students with disabilities.

Dysart Unified School District in the northwest Phoenix metro is also no exception when it comes to students falling behind during the pandemic, Superintendent Quinn Kellis said. Across the board, he said there has been a 20% drop in student proficiency.

Kellis said students who did remote learning longer have generally been the ones struggling in his district. One of the priorities is to get them back in the classroom and assure parents that "it's safe to be back, it's good for their kids to be back, and we want them."



Addressing the learning loss once they're back in class is individualized to the student, Kellis said, and has brought new strategies for handling a range of student abilities.

"One teacher might take the higher performing for an hour, the others might take the lower performing for an hour so that they can combine and be more effective with helping all the kids grow," he said.

Kellis said the district's Covid relief dollars would support summer school and other interventions this summer and next, with the hope that students are caught up at the end of the district's three-year plan.

While much of the intervention is at a local level, the state Department of Education also has initiatives aimed at overcoming learning loss from the pandemic. One example is the department's partnership with Arizona State University to run Math Momentum, a program that focuses on improving the math skills of students in fifth to ninth grades. The program, run as a pilot last summer, now serves nearly 5,000 students and plans to expand this summer, according to the department.

Over the past two years, the department has also partnered with Discovery Education, which offers standards-aligned digital lessons and learning resources to schools and teachers at no cost. The department also launched a grant program this spring that distributed \$14 million Covid relief dollars directly to teachers in about 15,000 classrooms.

The department plans to announce additional investments in April regarding learning loss, comprehensive after-school programs, and summer enrichment, as required by the third wave of federal Covid relief for education.

In addition to the Department of Education's efforts, the Governor's Office is using Covid relief dollars to fund its AZ OnTrack Summer Camp program, which is distributing \$100 million to schools and community groups to help run free summer programming for students.

In October 2021, the State Board of Education released a report examining the pandemic's impact on students, complying with an executive order from the governor

to determine the extent of learning loss.

Overall, the board found that younger students were more heavily affected than older students and that math proficiency took a bigger hit than English. They also found that more students had moved during the 2020-21 school year compared to recent years and acknowledged bouncing back from learning loss would be a multi-year process.

The Helios Education Foundation, one of the groups that worked with the state board on their analysis, has said that early literacy, rigorous coursework and more access to college information and costs are three issues the state needs to prioritize in its recovery.

Education Forward Arizona President and CEO Rich Nickel said the progress meter can guide the programs, policies and funding aimed at catching students up.

"It's our collective responsibility as a state to implement policies and funding that will provide our school leaders with the strategies and tools needed to help our students respond to and recover from the pandemic," he said in a statement. 