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California Department of Education News Release

Release: #22-03

January 7, 2022

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CDE Releases Student Data for 2020–21 that Show Impacts of COVID-19 on Schools

Assessment scores, chronic absenteeism data, and graduation rates underscore the challenges of a year when most students accessed their education through remote learning

SACRAMENTO—The California Department of Education (CDE) today released student performance data that provide baseline indicators of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted schools and students.

To prevent the spread of virus before development and widespread distribution of vaccines, most students learned from home for most of 2020–21 and returned to campuses in the spring either full-time or with hybrid (in-class and remote) instruction.

The 2020–21 data affirm both the challenges created by the pandemic and California’s commitment to helping students recover from COVID-19 via a bold slate of historic investments in student learning, health, and well-being. The \$123.9 billion education package signed by Governor Newsom in July provides the highest level of K–12 funding in history, including the expansion of after-school and summer programs to accelerate learning and the creation of full-service community schools to address student mental health and wellness needs.

Today’s data release consists of results from the 2020–21 administration of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), which includes Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for English language arts and mathematics; the California Science Test; the California Alternate Assessments for English language arts, mathematics, and science; and the California Spanish Assessment as well as the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). It also includes information on high-quality interim and diagnostic assessments, chronic absenteeism, discipline data, and graduation rates.

Grade-level Smarter Balanced results in math and English language arts generally show academic progress but at a slower rate than in prior years. The scores also show a widening of achievement gaps between student groups.

The data is limited in both scope and use. COVID-19 not only created challenges for teaching and learning but also for the administration of the statewide assessments. The results are available to the public and posted on the [CDE Test Results for California's Assessments website](#) .

To provide essential background and factors to consider when interpreting California's 2020–21 statewide assessment results, the CDE created a new interpretation guide, which can be found on the [CDE California Assessment Results News Release web page](#).

Although the federal testing requirement was waived altogether for the 2019–20 school year, in 2020–21 the U.S. Department of Education required states to administer statewide academic assessments in English language arts, mathematics, and science as well as the English language proficiency assessments—with some accommodations. To ease administration of the assessments and lessen the impact of standardized testing on students at a difficult time, the California State Board of Education also approved shorter versions of both the Smarter Balanced English language arts and math tests.

To account for uneven participation when analyzing the information, the CDE matched the scores from the 2021 cohort of students assessed with their own scores in 2018–19 and over their school careers. This is the first time CDE has released matched cohort data. These analyses show that the rate of gain was lower for the 2021 cohort and that the differentials were greater for younger students than for older ones.

Another new addition to today's data release is a report by the Region 15 Comprehensive Center at WestEd that captures and reflects data from selected test publishers that supported districts that were unable to administer the statewide summative assessment in 2020–21 because it was not a viable option due to factors related to COVID-19. That information can be found on the [Center for Standards, Assessment, and Accountability Resource Library web page](#) .

Additionally, the state received a waiver of federal accountability requirements, including reporting state indicators of the California School Dashboard and removal of the penalty for the English language arts and mathematics state indicators for participation rates of less than 95 percent. The statewide four-year cohort graduation rate released today shows a slight decline of 0.6 percent. It is now 84.2 percent. The cohort rate examines the number of students who start together as freshman and graduate four years later. Meanwhile, the five-year graduation rate increased slightly, by 0.3 percent to 87 percent. The statewide suspension rate hit an all-time low, as might be expected for a year of mostly remote learning. And the statewide chronic absenteeism rate increased 2.2 percentage points in 2020–21 to 14.3 percent. Students are considered chronically absent if they miss 10 percent or more of school days per school year. More information can be found on the [CDE COVID-19 and Data Reporting web page](#).

More information about data gathering for this unusual year is available on the [CDE COVID-19 Accountability FAQs web page](#).

“Our road ahead is clear—we must continue to focus our energy and resources in supporting our students, families, and educators so they not only recover from the impacts of COVID-19 but thrive in days ahead,” said State Board of Education President Linda Darling-Hammond. “This must remain our top priority. I am grateful to the Legislature and Governor Newsom for last year’s [historic education package](#) (PDF) that provides a record-high level of funding to help transform our system to one dedicated to addressing all the impacts of COVID-19 on our students—academic, behavioral, social-emotional and physical.”

To help schools accelerate learning during the 2020–21 year, Governor Newsom signed [Assembly Bill 86](#) on March 5, 2021, which provided \$4.6 billion (of \$6.6 billion in total funding) to expanding student supports. Schools used those early funds to expand educational opportunities for the summer and the following school year. According to [summer data released by the State of California Safe Schools for All Hub](#), 89 percent of school districts reporting offered new learning opportunities over the summer, including learning acceleration (e.g., high-dose tutoring), enrichment, and mental health services.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond said: “The statewide performance data from last year confirm what we heard from school districts and county offices throughout the year. Namely, the challenges that students and educators faced during the pandemic were multi-dimensional and disruptive to learning and mental health. Our goal now is to move all students forward. We are thankful for the historic investments in education, and I am putting forward a bold agenda to address long-standing inequities that have caused disproportionate learning gaps for students of color and other student groups in California with a plan to transform California schools.”

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Last Reviewed: Friday, January 7, 2022
