Research Summary

December 2022

The Challenge of Implementing Academic COVID Recovery Interventions: Evidence from the Road to Recovery

The Road to Recovery Project (R2R) brings together school district leaders and researchers to study the design, implementation, and effects of academic COVID recovery initiatives. In the project's third report, we examine where school districts are on the road to academic recovery based on the 2021-2022 school year.

Learn more: https://caldercenter.org/covid-recovery

FINDINGS

Where Are The Districts on the Road to Recovery?

Evidence from the 2021-2022 school year suggests that, on average, students are now learning at the same pace they were before the pandemic, particularly in math. But overall test scores levels remain below pre-pandemic levels.

In the wake of three years of disrupted learning, a return to a pre-pandemic learning pace may be cause for celebration. But the gap between current test scores and pre-pandemic scores is not yet closing for most districts. In some cases, the gap has widened (See overall loss and recovery trajectories in Fig 1 and 2).

We estimate that making up the remaining recovery gap will take the equivalent of approximately 40 to over 100 hours of high-quality, high-dosage tutoring for the average student, with slightly lower estimates for reading than math. For the hardest-hit districts and students,

How Are District Recovery Initiatives Working?

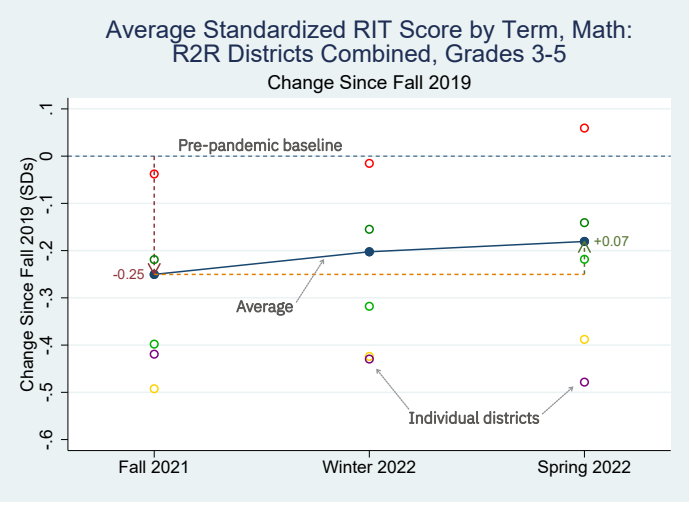
Districts and schools are implementing a range of initiatives to accelerate learning and make up the gaps. But there's little evidence so far that these interventions are having large positive effects on student achievement.

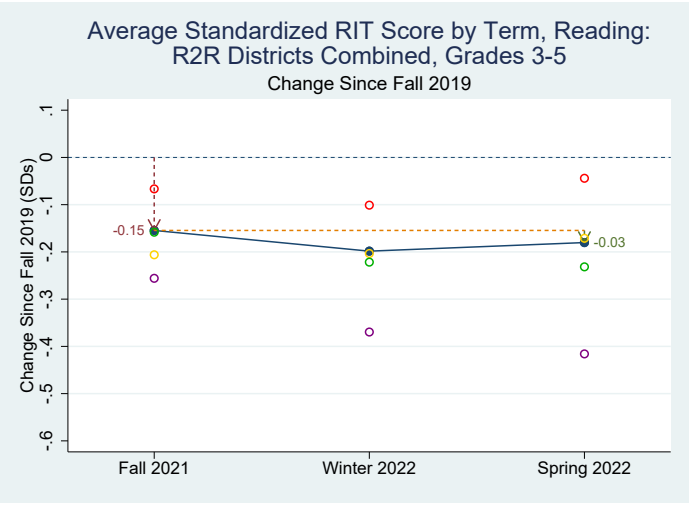
Across the various math and reading interventions we analyzed (e.g., tutoring, small group instruction, assigned software), we estimated small or null impacts on students' gains during the 2021-22 school year.

A closer look revealed that many district interventions served fewer students, and students received lower "doses" than originally planned.

Why? Interviews suggest that schools faced a range of implementation challenges in 2021-2022, including challenges reaching targeted students; staffing, and scheduling intervention services; engaging families; adapting intervention programs to accommodate other policies; and building central office capacity and internal systems needed to roll out interventions at scale.

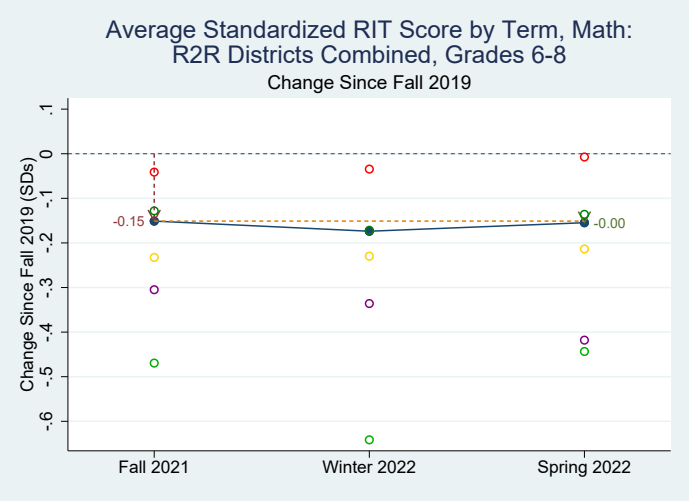
Figure 1.Standardized Achievement Loss and Recovery in Math and Reading, Grades 3-5.

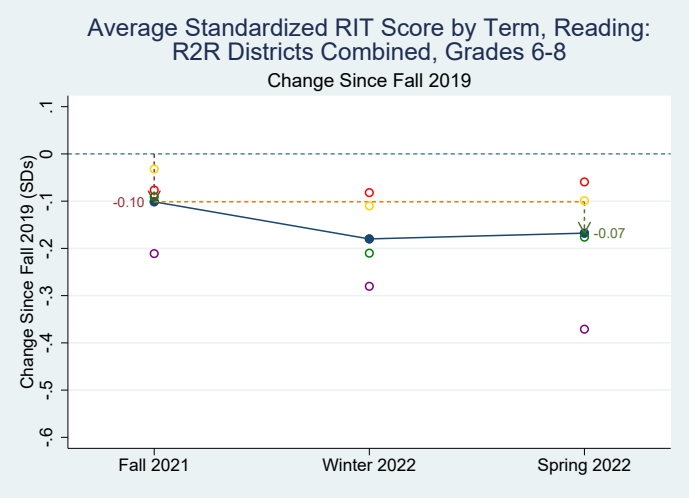




Source: Carbonari et al, 2022

Figure 2. Figure 1.Standardized Achievement Loss and Recovery in Math and Reading, Grades 6-8.





Source: Carbonari et al, 2022

What's Next?

Our findings suggest that the pace of student learning in most districts will need to accelerate beyond where it was pre-pandemic for students to catch up academically. In many cases, this will require expanding academic interventions to reach more students and provide higher doses of intervention.

Meeting these and other academic recovery demands will, in many cases, require more resources and staff. In addition to investing in schools, districts will need to invest in central office capacity and internal administrative systems (e.g., data systems, hiring procedures) to support academic recovery interventions at scale.

States and other civic leaders also have a role to play. They can help districts mobilize communities to support academic recovery by providing information, political cover (for example, on extending learning school days or years), and investing in the capacity of districts, schools, and communities to support and advocate for recovery. States and districts can both help motivate recovery efforts by providing transparent and accessible measures of students' academic progress and recovery to families and students.

Complete academic recovery—and, ideally, academic acceleration—is as urgent as it is challenging. Especially in the places hit hardest by the pandemic, academic recovery from COVID-19 is will require an all-hands-on-deck response for the next several years.

AIR nwea Center for Education Policy Research HARVARD UNIVERSITY

R2R is a joint project of AIR, NWEA, and Harvard University.

Data and Approach

This study draws on a rich set of data from 12 mid- to large-sized school districts to better understand academic recovery during the 2021–22 school year. We measured academic recovery using student test scores on the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth math and reading assessments in Grades 3–8. We describe recovery initiatives based on semi-structured interviews with 68 district staff. We also conducted supplemental in-depth interviews with leaders in charge of seven interventions from three districts to learn more about the implementation of the interventions.

Go Deeper:

Maria V. Carbonari, Miles Davison, Michael DeArmond, Daniel Dewey, Elise Dizon-Ross, Dan Goldhaber, Ayesha Hashim, Thomas J. Kane, Andrew McEachin, Emily Morton, Tyler Patterson, Douglas O. Staiger (2022). The Challenges of Implementing Academic COVID Recovery Interventions: Evidence from the Road to Recovery Project. CALDER Working Paper No. 275-1222.

Available at https://bit.ly/R2RImplementation