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Milestones scores confirm the impact of COVID-19 on Georgia students



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EDUCATION

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After more than a year of schooling in crisis, Georgia education officials released the results of state standardized tests that confirm what many feared: students lost a lot of ground during the pandemic.

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How much ground remains open to debate, even with these new scores.

Hundreds of thousands of students declined to enter their schools to take the Milestones tests, which are given on computers but were not offered online. The low participation rate has fueled doubts about the accuracy of the aggregate scores that are used to calculate the average performance numbers for schools, school districts and the state overall.

There were no consequences for skipping the tests. State officials had already announced that the resulting scores would be stripped of their influence over high school course grades, decisions about the promotion or retention of younger students and the evaluations of teachers and school principals

The tests are first given in third grade, where about a fifth of the students opted out. Participation rates dropped from there, with about 40% of eighth-graders skipping the tests. High school turnout was lower still.

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Even so, the scores in Georgia follow the general arc of those in other states, such as Louisiana and Tennessee, that have already released results: down.

Georgia's overall scores fell from the 2018-19 school year, the last time the tests were given. The percentage of failing students rose by 2 to 9 points, varying by grade level and subject.

The largest declines were in high school, where more students likely attended online.

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Among the key measures of future success that many observers look for is the performance in reading and writing in third grade.

In metro Atlanta, Clayton County saw the largest increase in the proportion of students — 23 percentage points — who performed in the lowest quartile for English Language Arts. These “beginning learners” failed to demonstrate proficiency in the knowledge and skills for the subject and will need “substantial” help preparing for the next grade, according to the state’s rating system.

Cobb and DeKalb counties saw double-digit increases in their third grade English Language Arts failure rates while Atlanta and Gwinnett County kept the increase in their failure rate at under 10 points. Fulton County’s rate was little changed from 2019.

However, the scores do not represent overall enrollment in several of those districts, with fewer than half of third-grade students taking their English test in Atlanta and fewer than a third doing so in Clayton.

Just over half the students took the test in DeKalb, fewer than two-thirds in Fulton and less than three out of four in Gwinnett. Cobb had the highest participation rate at 86%.

Ordinarily, the federal government wants participation rates of at least 95% but the requirement was not enforced for these tests due to the pandemic.

The main problem with using the scores to calculate averages: it is unclear who skipped the tests, whether the low-performing students who typically suppress the scores or the high performers who buoy them.

“Regardless of who got tested, you’re going to see lousy scores,” said Chester E. Finn Jr., the emeritus president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an educational research and advocacy organization. “Scores are going to be down and if they’re like everywhere else that I’ve seen and heard about there’s going to be very little if any growth.” In an interview last week, he predicted the Georgia scores would officially document the “learning catastrophe” depicted anecdotally over the many months of the pandemic. “It’s a bleak picture. There’re no two ways about it.”

In a statement accompanying the release of the scores Monday, the Georgia Department of Education warned about using the new scores for comparisons.

“While the scores show slight decreases compared to 2018-2019 — the last year Georgia Milestones tests were administered — it is essential that these results be interpreted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated learning disruptions, along with differences in participation,” the agency said.

The Georgia Association of Educators said in a news release that the new scores suggest that the public should not expect test scores to accurately measure the performance of teachers. The effect of the pandemic “shows the impact external factors often have on children’s performance on standardized tests,” the group’s president, Lisa Morgan, said in the statement.

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