

APS Should Immediately Focus More Resources, Most Importantly More Instructional Time, On Learning Loss

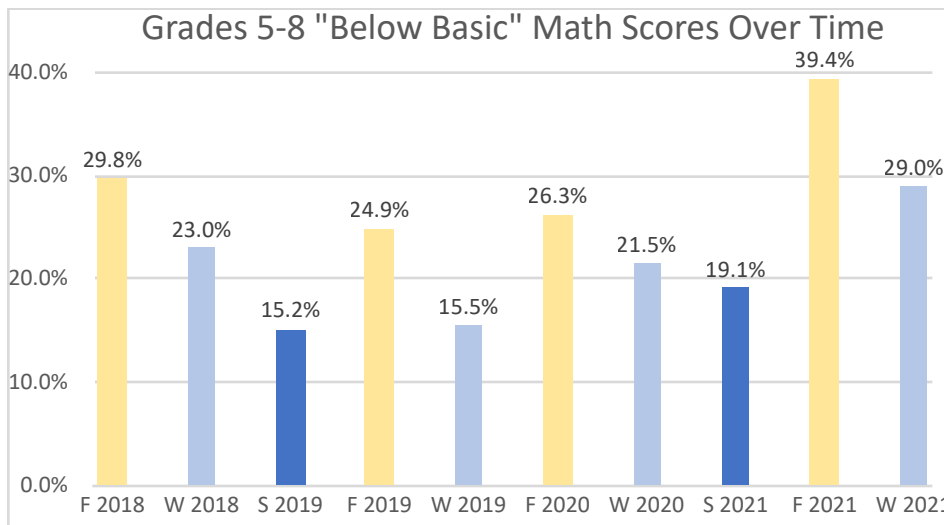
Learning loss is a serious problem confronting many APS students that, so far, APS is not addressing appropriately. Data shows that many APS students are currently behind and in need of intervention. However, federal money available to APS to address learning loss has largely been directed to other programs, and the level of planning APS has shown compared to neighboring school districts is inadequate. APS has likewise been too slow to react to its own data on student academic needs, and its proposed interventions rely too heavily on iPad apps that can be expected, at best, to result in only small gains. APS should use this upcoming budget cycle and its own data to create a robust plan to provide students with the needed interventions, including more instructional time, tutoring, and a strong summer program.

I. Assessment Data and SOL Scores Show Students Are Behind

Student performance was raising red flags over a year ago, from “[alarming](#)” declines in elementary students meeting literacy benchmarks to [falling grades](#) for middle and high schoolers. At the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, APS revealed [stark drops](#) in SOL performance. The APS Student Progress Dashboard is live and will serve as an important resource to track how our students recover from pandemic learning losses. This data and data obtained via [FOIA request](#) reinforces the urgent need for increased investment in recovery services.

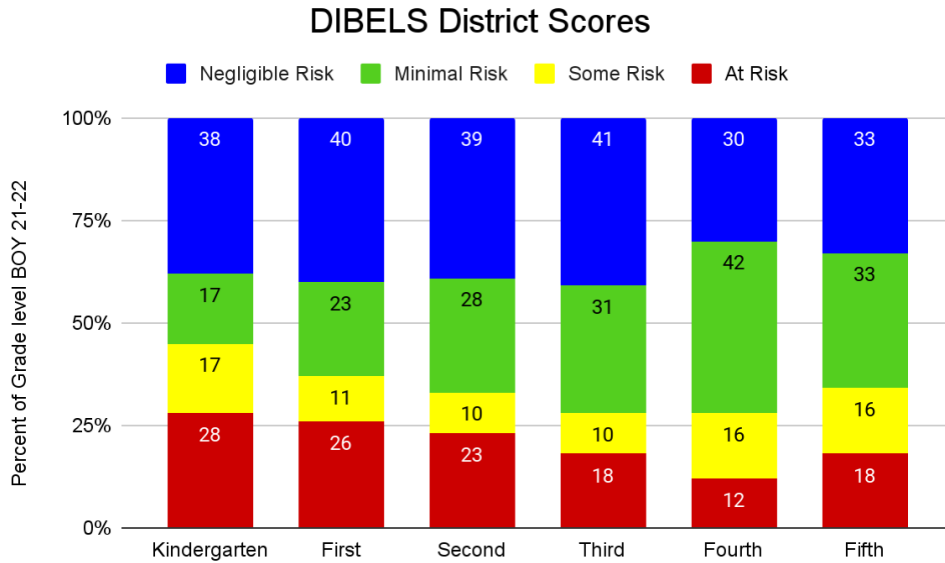
Math assessments show many students are behind. For Math Inventory (MI) scores, consistent with the SOL scores from last spring, this year’s data shows a dramatic increase in the percentage of students scoring “below basic” in grades 5 through 8. (APS has historically administered MI tests only in grades 5 through 8; this year it began administering the test in grades 2 through 4 as well, so there is no historic data with which to compare those results.) Specifically, 39.4% of students in grades 5-8 began this school year at the “below basic” level. For comparison, only 26.3% of students in grades 5-8 were “below basic” at the start of the 2020-21 school year, and 24.9% were in the “below basic” category at the start of the 2019-20 school year.

The winter math inventory shows that students are still behind where they normally would be, with 29.0% in grades 5-8 still at the “below basic” level, while during winter of the 2020-21 school year, 21.5% were “below basic” and during winter of the 2019-20 school year, 15.5% were “below basic.”

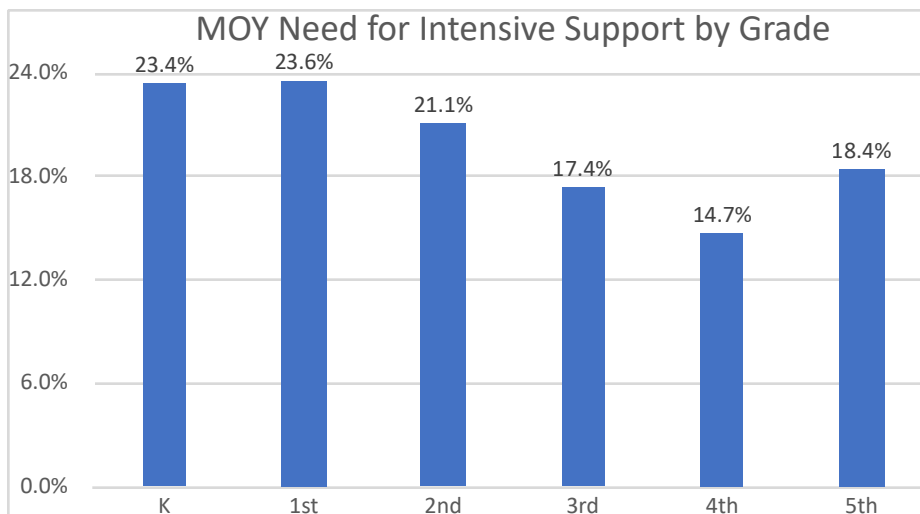


These results mirror nationwide studies [estimating](#) that K-12 students are, on average, five months behind in math as a result of pandemic school closures.

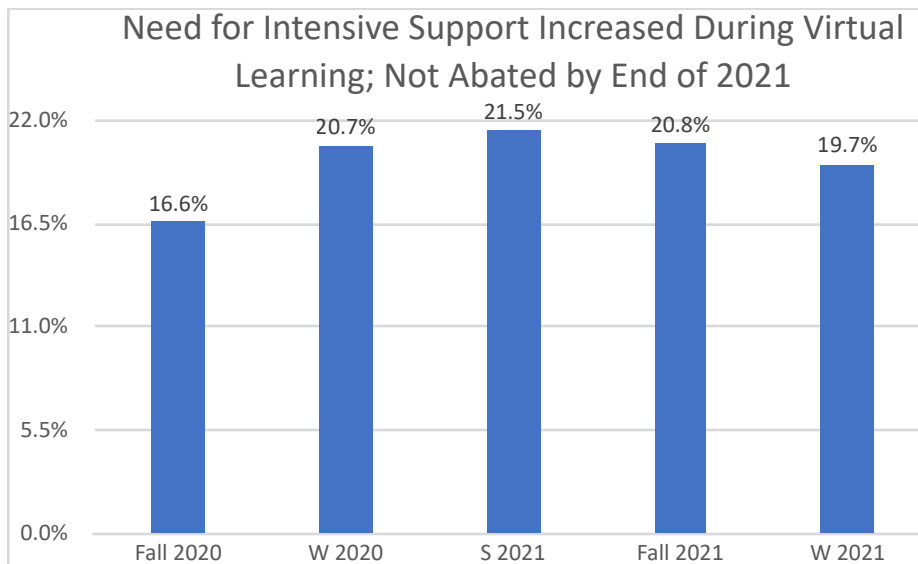
Literacy screeners reveal extensive supports are needed. APS DIBELS data shows a large percentage of students were categorized as “at risk” and in need of intensive support at the beginning of the year, including 27.8% of kindergartners and one quarter of first graders:



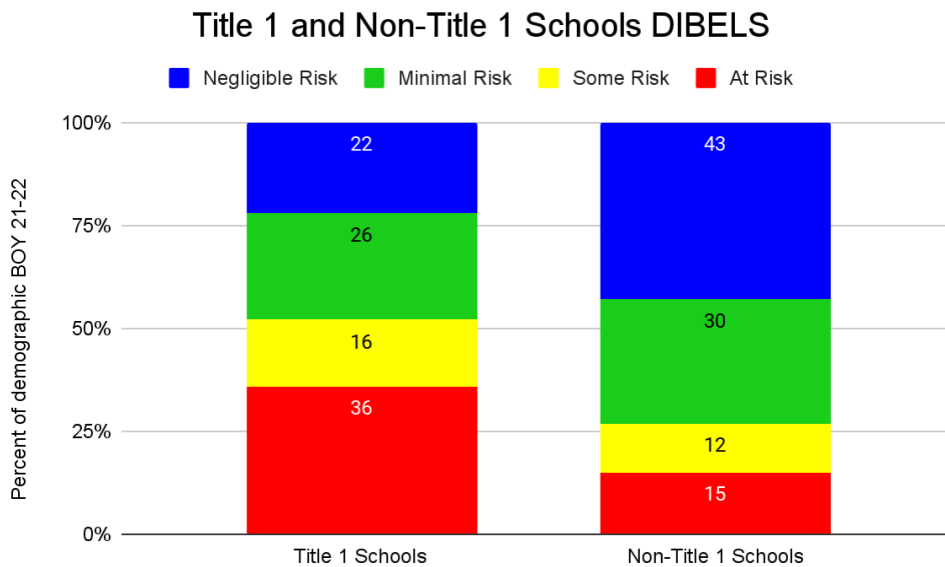
Mid-year data shows improvement at the younger grades, but 23% of kindergartners and first graders still require intensive support. More students in grades 4 and 5 require intensive support as of the winter assessments than at the beginning of the year:



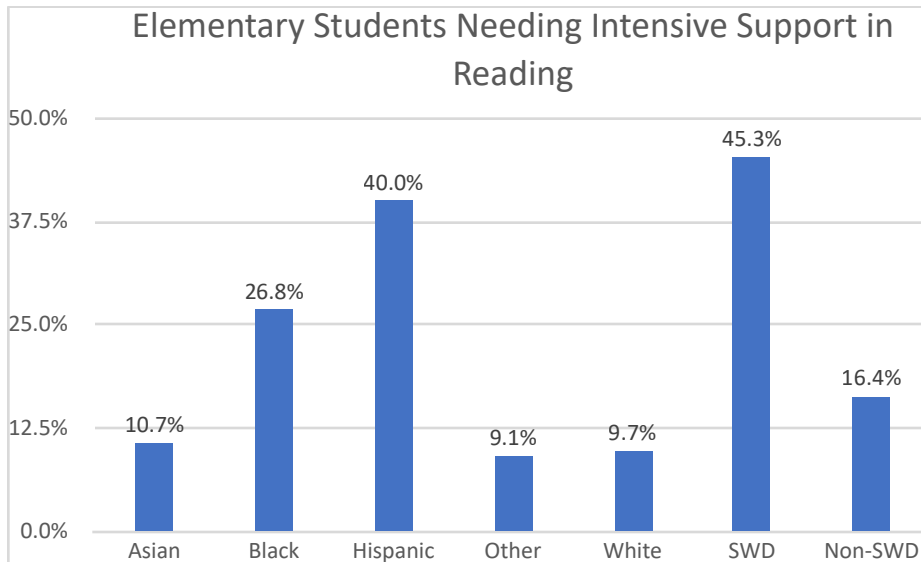
APS only recently began using DIBELS as an assessment, so historical data is limited. However, it is worth noting that from the beginning of the 2020-21 school year through the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, the percentage of elementary school students requiring intensive support **increased** during the period of time APS was all virtual, and has not subsequently been remedied:



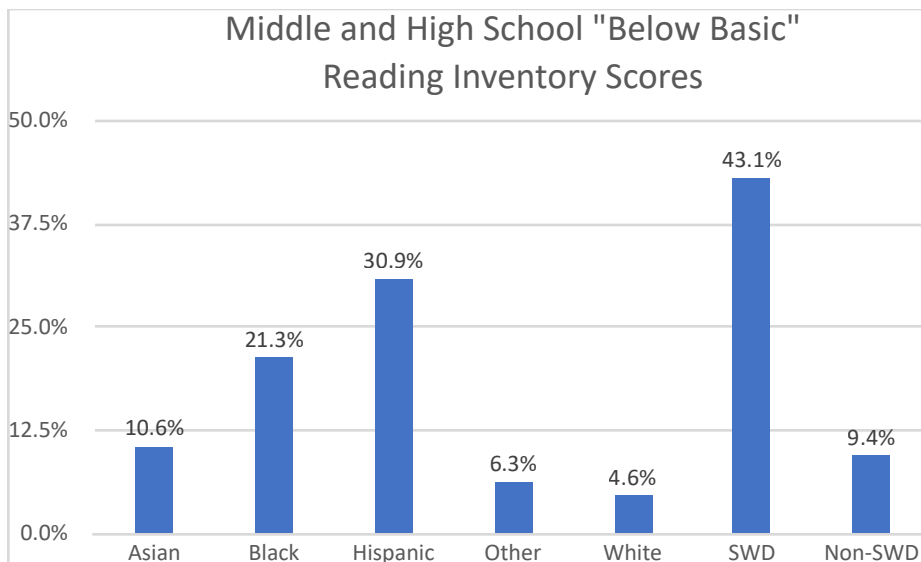
The level of need is greater at Title I schools than at non-Title I schools, greater for Black and Hispanic students, and greater for students with disabilities. These disparities can be seen at a high level through a comparison of Title I vs. non-Title I schools as of the beginning of year assessments:



As of the middle of year assessments, across all grades, larger percentages of Black and Hispanic students need intensive reading support in elementary school. The percentage of Black elementary students requiring intensive support is more than double that of white elementary students, and the percentage of Hispanic elementary students requiring intensive support is more than four times that of white elementary students (likely reflecting the higher needs of the English learner population, in part). Nearly three times as many students with disabilities require intensive reading support than students without disabilities across all elementary schools.

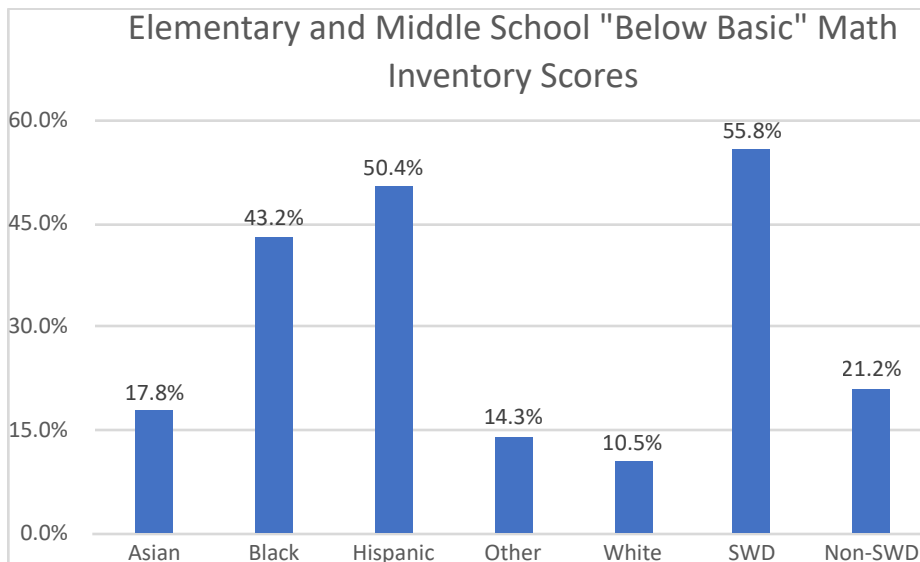


There are similar patterns in the middle school and high school reading inventory results:



These disparities predated the pandemic. They required attention then, and require urgent attention now.

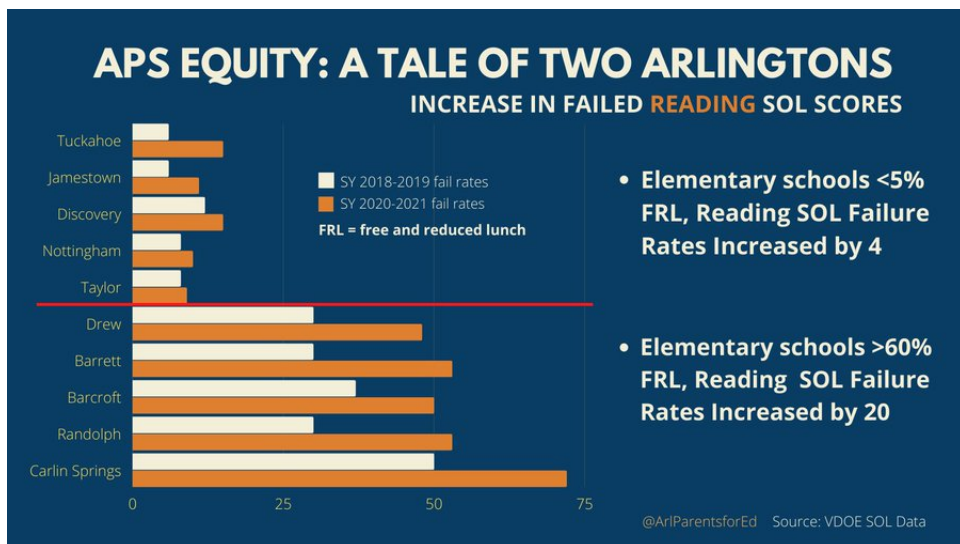
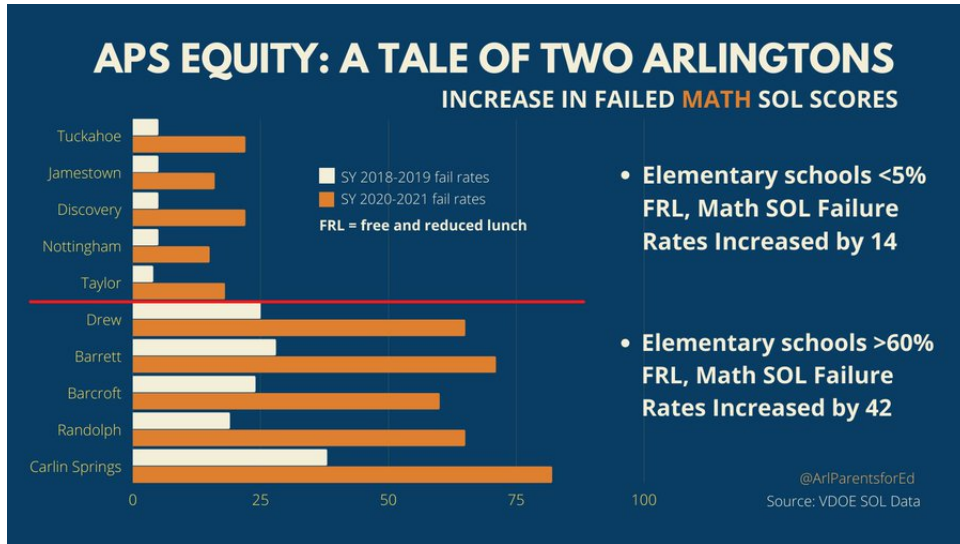
For math, the comparisons are similarly stark, with more than 43% of Black and over half of Hispanic elementary and middle school students in the “below basic” category, compared to only 10.5% of white elementary and middle school students. More than 55% of elementary and middle school students with disabilities are in the “below basic” category compared to 21.2% of elementary and middle school students without disabilities.



Most of these demographic groups have shown improvement over the course of this school year. However, the need remains acute for Black students, Hispanic students, and students with disabilities in particular.

State standardized testing showed high failure rates. Significantly more students failed both the reading and math SOLs in 2021 than in prior years. Specifically, the math pass rate [dropped](#) 21 percentage points (from 86.3% to 65.3%), an amount that is five times greater than the largest historical change in SOL scores. The reading pass rate [declined](#) 5 percentage points (from 82.8% to 77.4%), but this result underestimates the impact. The increases in reading failure rates appear to be less dramatic because of changes to the “cut” score needed to pass the exam; in November 2020, the Virginia Board of Education approved a [reduction](#) in the number of reading questions students need to answer correctly in order to receive a passing score, making it appear as though reading scores did not decline [as much as they did](#).

Finally, while failure rates increased sharply across APS schools, the percentage of students failing both math and reading SOLs were much higher in schools where a larger percentage of students receive free meals:



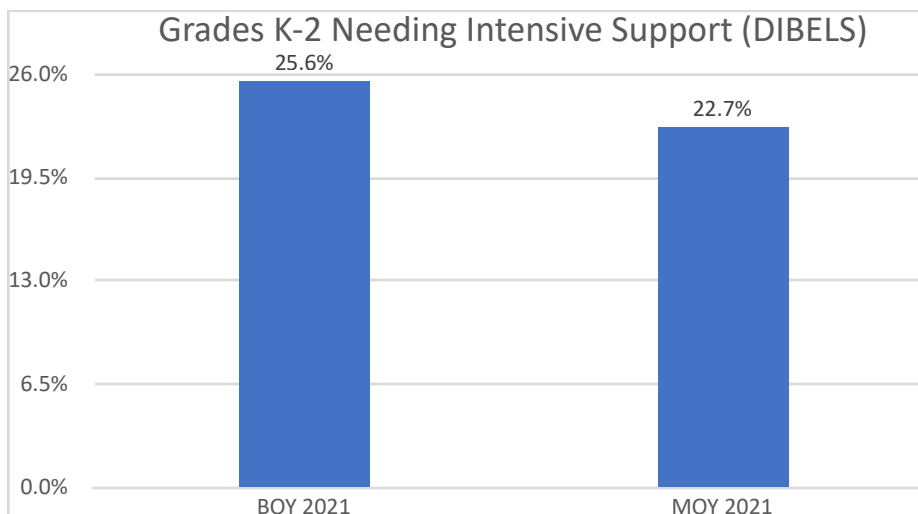
These disparate scores demonstrate the need for a focused and equitable approach to learning loss. It also points to longstanding inequities among APS schools that should have been remedied long ago, and deserve attention going forward.

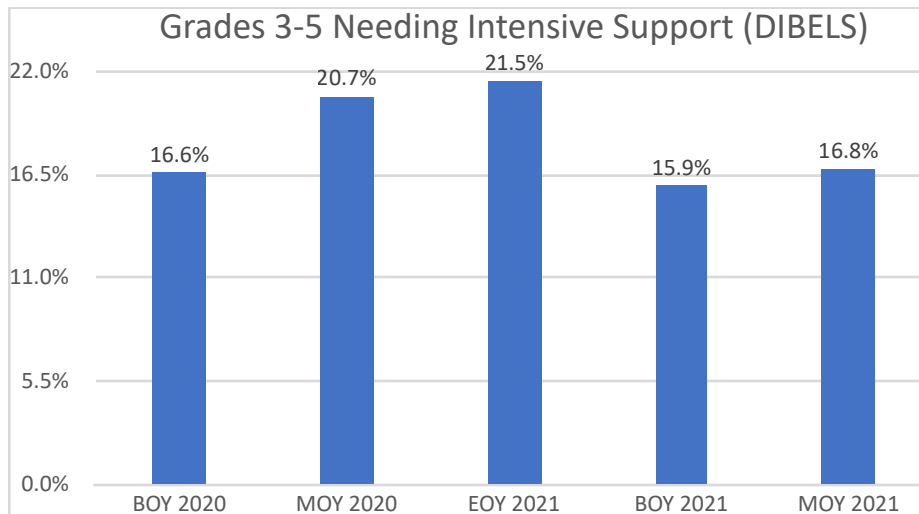
II. APS’ Plans to Address Learning Loss Are Not Enough

APS has been slow to respond to learning loss, and its business-as-usual approach threatens to once again leave Arlington students behind their peers at neighboring districts. APS this year tackled learning loss principally through “accelerated learning” and additional use of instructional software. APS previously said in [November 2021](#) that any student not meeting the benchmark on the BOY assessment would receive an intervention plan, which include additional iPad apps Dreambox and Lexia and targeted small group instruction. APS has offered its general education students little or no additional instruction through tutoring or after school programs. With respect to its students with disabilities, those students are in particular need of assistance, but the assistance APS is offering is reaching only a small fraction of the population that needs it.

At the March 24, 2022 School Board meeting, APS reported intervention plans have been implemented. However, progress as of the MOY assessments for elementary reading and math across all grades appears slow, and shows that some older elementary grades are **declining** in performance overall on reading assessments.

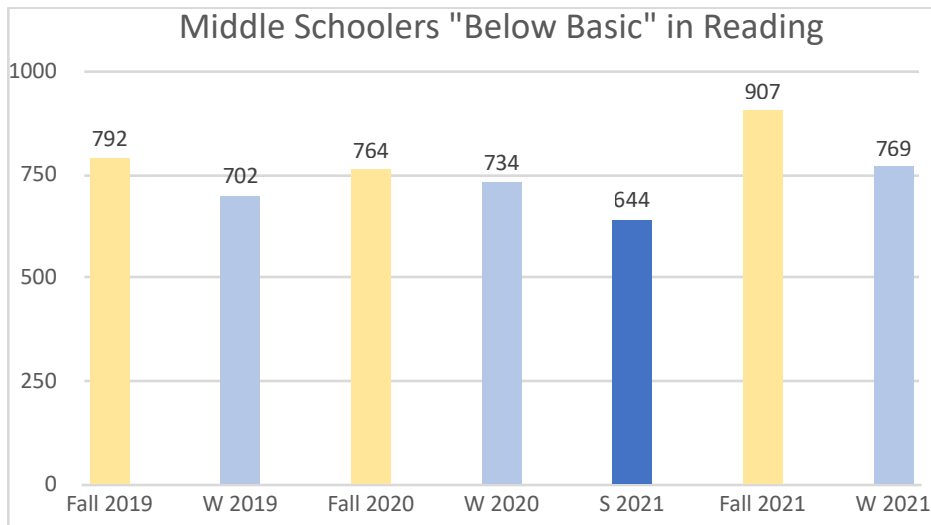
In particular, while lower elementary students who were “at risk” at the beginning of the year have shown improvement over the course of this school year, “at risk” upper elementary students are going in the opposite direction:



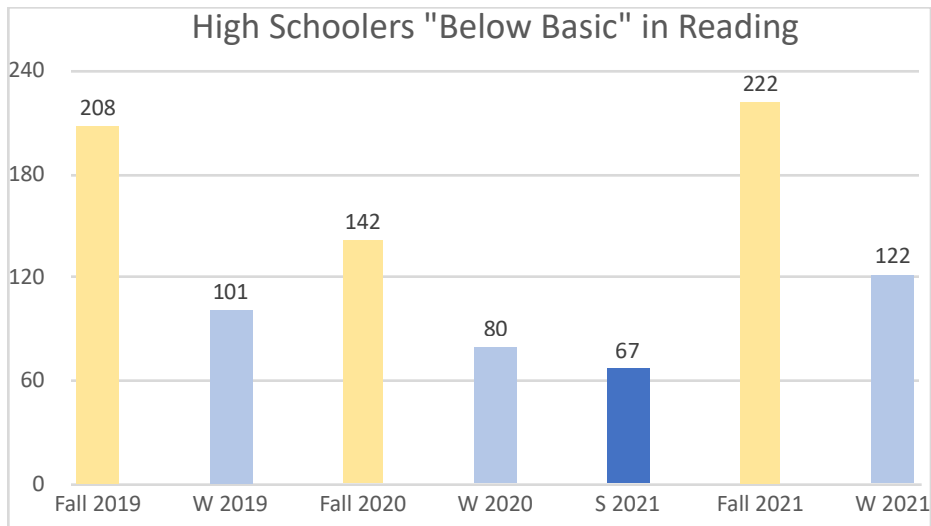


Our current third through fifth graders were our first through third graders when the pandemic began. This data suggests that students in these grades who were not yet fluent readers when the pandemic began have not made needed progress in reading since then. Particular attention should be paid to interventions for these grades as they approach middle school.

Reading Inventory data for middle and high schoolers presents a more positive picture of improvement. While larger than normal numbers of middle schoolers were at the “below basic” level at the beginning of this school year than at the beginning of prior years (with lower enrollment), more students than normal showed improvement between the fall and winter assessments.

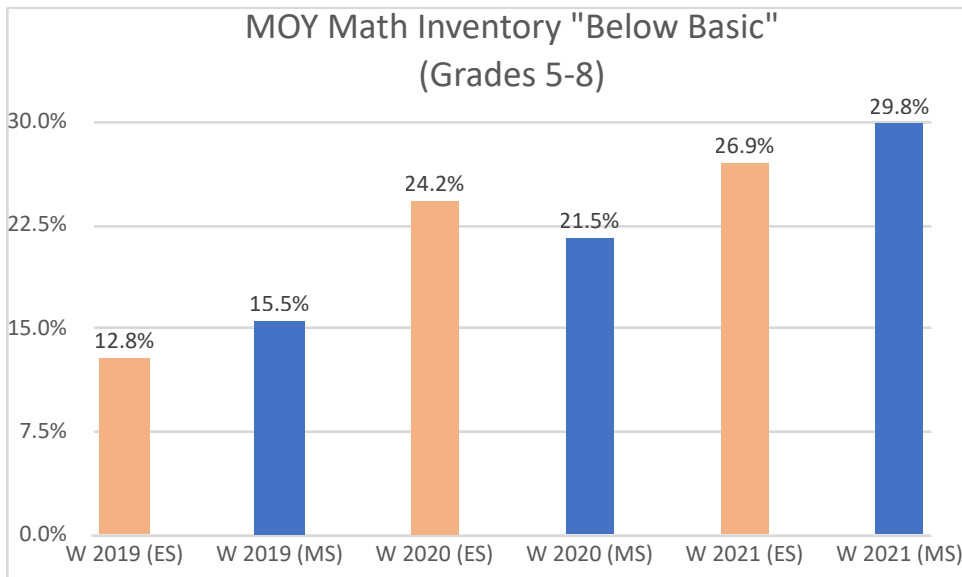


High school data shows consistent progress for students in the “below basic” category as in prior years.



(Note: students who score Proficient or Advanced on the Reading Inventory assessment in the fall often do not take the winter or spring assessments. For this reason, this data is presented as a student count rather than student percentages.)

In math, our students are showing improvement over the course of the school year, but substantially higher percentages of students remain in the “below basic” category as of the Winter 2021 MOY assessments than as of Winter 2020 and pre-pandemic Winter 2019 assessments.

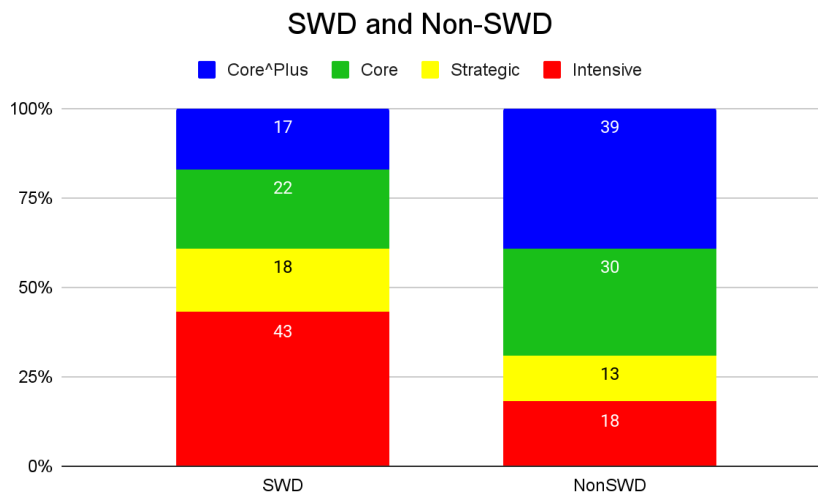


“Accelerated learning” is not sufficient. According to the APS website, [accelerated learning](#) “allows APS teachers to focus on teaching students current grade-level material, while reinforcing skills and concepts from the previous level that are necessary to master the new content.” “Accelerated learning” is [differentiated](#) from “remedial instruction” (which focuses on learning missed lessons), but otherwise APS’ description of it is little different than normal-course teaching. The APS website provides a [14-item list](#) of things that teachers will do and seven things that students will do, without any indication that teachers will receive additional support, or that students will have extra time, to achieve these items. Finally, several of the expectations described as part of accelerated learning tacitly acknowledge that “accelerated” means content will be skipped. For example, teachers are to utilize “reframed APS curriculum documents that emphasize the most critical skills and knowledge for each course or grade level,” prioritize “power standards” (presumably at the expense of non-power standards), and “utilize scaffolding strategies” to help students “master the key concepts.” This is a recipe for rushing students along without truly addressing pandemic-induced deficiencies, and for teacher burnout.

More iPad time is not the answer. As noted above, APS' primary tools for addressing were [described as](#) targeted small group instruction and additional Dreambox and Lexia. Targeted small group instruction is an important part of any teaching strategy, but without the addition of time for extra targeted instruction, it is unclear how this approach differs from the regular classroom experience. As for the iPad apps, research on effectiveness is mixed at best. There appears to be only one [study](#) on the effectiveness of Dreambox. The key takeaways are that (1) students tend to use Dreambox for less time than what Dreambox recommends, (2) data on the causal effect of Dreambox is encouraging but mixed, and (3) the data that exists suggests that Dreambox can move students up a few percentiles, at most, from what they would otherwise achieve. As examples, the study described students in DC-area public and charter schools who started at the 50th percentile on fall assessments and used Dreambox 6-7 hours during the school year; those students would, on average, end up between the 54th and 55th percentiles by the end of the school year. While this is better than nothing, this degree of progress is insufficient for our students' level of need. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education published a [2009 report](#) on Lexia that concluded Lexia has potentially positive impacts, but the extent of the evidence on Lexia is "small for alphabets, fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement." APS cannot rely solely on Dreambox and Lexia as solutions for learning loss.

APS Offers Little Additional Instructional Support. A recent FOIA request to APS asked APS to quantify the extent to which it is offering supplemental support services, such as tutoring or after school instruction, to students suffering from learning loss. APS surveyed all its schools, and across all them, APS has spent only \$31,531 for after-school instruction. Over a third of that amount was spent by Washington-Liberty, which offers a Saturday Academy support program, and college application help. There is little evidence that APS is offering any support services outside the ordinary course instruction offered during normal school hours.

Students with Disabilities. Students with disabilities have particularly struggled as a result of learning loss, yet APS’ response has likewise been inadequate. Beginning of year DIBELS data, for example, reflects that 43% of students with disabilities required intensive support, and 61% required either intensive or strategic support.



The MOY data shows that 45.3% of students with disabilities are now in need of intensive support in reading.

Based on presentations to the ASEAC committee, only approximately [300 students](#) with disabilities have received “recovery services.” There are approximately 4,200 students with IEPs in APS, and if 61% of students with disabilities require intensive or strategic remediation, this translates to over 2500 students in need of such services, 2200 of whom appear not to be receiving them.

III. APS Should Provide Additional Instructional Time to Address Learning Loss

Given the dramatic drop in SOL scores, and the decline in beginning-of-year math inventory scores (which have not been recovered by the winter testing), there is a critical need for APS to offer additional instructional time to students. The Thomas Fordham Institute [“Acceleration Imperative”](#) identifies “extended learning time and high dosage tutoring” as the critical elements needed to complement (not replace) in-school instruction. Many other leading districts have already devoted a substantial portion of their ESSER III funds to learning loss, an opportunity that APS missed. Ironically, APS has implicitly conceded the existence of learning loss, including by offering [after-school tutoring to VLP](#) students who [lost yet more](#) instructional time at the beginning of this school year, and the need for more resources to tackle the problem, including by [applying](#) for additional state funding to address learning loss. Yet even in its most recently released budget, it fails to devote funds—as other school districts have—to remediate the learning loss. APS needs to reverse course and invest the funds needed to fully address that learning loss, principally by offering additional instructional time as other districts have done.

Federal funding enabled investment in learning loss recovery. The federal government provided multiple rounds of funding to address pandemic education, including learning loss. These federal funds were required to be allocated at least 20% to learning loss. APS claimed to have allocated 24.7% to address unfinished learning. Yet almost all of those funds were devoted to funding the APS summer school program, which was the smallest summer school program ever offered by APS, and which even APS deemed to be [“low efficacy.”](#) APS used [58%](#) to establish the Virtual Learning Program, which was not properly staffed and has now been “paused.” Put simply, the APS [plan](#) was a lackluster effort that barely met the 20% minimum and did not comply with the community engagement requirement.

Other districts provide a model for APS to follow. Across the country, many of the leading districts have used ESSER III funds for tutoring and after school or summer programs that offer additional instructional time. A [survey](#) from September 2021 reflected that 44% of Superintendents planned to use their ARP funding to offer high-intensity tutoring and 42% are offering additional instructional time. [Burbio](#) has tracked ARP/ESSER III funding, and reports that a third of districts used ESSER III funding for tutoring, and almost 40% reported using funding for after school and extended day programs. Our neighboring districts highlight the potential services that can be offered:

- **Investing in Learning Loss Recovery:** Our neighboring districts allotted far more than 20% of their federal funds to learning loss. Prince William County Public Schools allocated [56%](#) to learning loss. FCPS allocated 45.8% on unfinished learning, 41.8% on student social/emotional and mental health needs, and 11.7% on other needs such as technology,

transportation, and communication tools (including translation/interpretation). [Fairfax](#) devoted \$55 million to academic intervention, which is 1.6% of its operating budget, and another \$46 million for special education instructors.

- More Instructional Time and High Dosage Tutoring. The [Fairfax](#) academic intervention plan allocated the bulk of its \$55 million to individual schools to provide tutoring (both in-house and external) based on school-specific plans. [FCPS's plan](#) (slide 4) highlighted the programs to be funded would include “evidence-based interventions, summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, afterschool programs, or extended school year programs.” FCPS defined “evidence-based interventions” (slide 29) as “extended learning time interventions,” “week-long acceleration academies staffed with highly effective teachers,” “double-dose math structures,” “high-dosage tutoring.” [Montgomery County](#) invested \$12 million on high dosage tutoring, and contracted with external partners to provide tutoring in math and literacy before, during and after school, in addition to extended school year and summer school services. It invested another \$5 million in tutoring for special education students. [Prince William County's](#) ESSER III plan similarly included “high dosage tutoring and extended/expanded learning time.” Prince George's County likewise implemented after-school small group tutoring programs in elementary reading and English language arts, for elementary and middle school students struggling in math, for middle school students in reading and writing, and for high school students in English language arts, math and social studies.
- Division of Labor. The FCPS plan assigns activities at the “division level” such as revision of curricula, guidance and resources, and professional development, and activities at the “school level” like collaborative in-school teams and communication of student progress. FCPS published plans to support its expectations through a combination of teachers, interventionists, and tutors. In contrast, APS places all of its accelerated learning [expectations](#) on teachers.
- Equity Orientation. FCPS acknowledges (slide 10) that “the pandemic and initial school closures have had a disproportionate impact on students with disabilities, English language learners, students of color and economically disadvantaged students.” To inform resource allocation, FCPS devised a five-factor formula (slide 19) as a proxy for academic need that includes but does not exclusively rely on Title I status. The APS plan does not address equity specifically. APS [states](#) the 12 additional reading and math coaches will be assigned to elementary schools with enrollment over 650 students and Title I schools.

These priorities and evidence-based interventions are examples of how APS should have addressed learning loss from the start. It is not too late to pivot in this direction, using budget carryover funds and additional recently-awarded state funding. APS itself recognizes that addressing learning loss requires substantial additional investment. In APS' most recent ESSER

application to the state, APS said that it asked the State for what it needed to address learning loss, and that amount was \$15 million. That the State only awarded APS \$2 million does not lessen the need for that investment – it just requires APS to find alternative sources to fund it. At a minimum, APS should fund the balance of the \$13 million to address learning loss, which would be just over 1.6% of APS’ \$746 million budget, on par with the amount spent by Fairfax.

We must have accountability. The new APS data dashboard is a significant and major step in the direction of accountability. It allows public insight into the scope of the problem and will permit tracking of improvement, or lack thereof, over time. APS should use this data to target the right student populations and grade levels that show the most need, and to obtain community buy-in for allocation of resources to address learning loss. It will also provide a baseline for comparison to evaluate whether we are effectively remediating learning loss, and serve as a model to take on persistent achievement gaps that predate the pandemic.

Second, a comprehensive and evidence-based plan should be devised and made public. One of the fundamental requirements under ESSER was for school divisions to publicly communicate their plans and obtain community input. Last year, APS claimed it did this through its normal budget cycle process, even though APS had not determined how it would allocate those ESSER funds until well after the budget had been voted on. This was a missed opportunity at good governance. Public comment would have informed APS that the demand for its VLP program was far less than APS projected, and that the demand for the summer program was far greater than that for which APS planned. It also would have facilitated a discussion on those areas that parents—who are closest to their students’ needs—prioritize. Again, other districts have shown how this can be done. FCPS had a community engagement process that [involved](#) a community online feedback form (held open for three weeks and advertised throughout the community in multiple languages), three focus groups with community members, and a public hearing specific to the spending plan. [Montgomery County](#) provided a community survey, and community navigator PopUp shops, and community door knocking, among other efforts.

Third, along with periodic efforts to evaluate how well APS is complying with the plan and whether the plan has correctly identified needs and applied appropriately targeted interventions. FCPS has already prepared an [accountability report](#) assessing how their funding allocations aligned with student needs. Among other conclusions, FCPS determined that at 76% of its schools, more than 30% of students have identified academic needs; FCPS is using this conclusion to identify new strategies for addressing this need while avoiding schools being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem.



March 2022

Finally, APS should publicly make learning loss a multi-year priority. This will invite widespread and needed attention to the problem, foster community engagement and involvement to address the problem, and encourage community partnerships, including partnership with the County for coordination and additional funding beyond what is typical in normal times. The 2021-22 school year is the third one interrupted by pandemic restrictions, and students' educations are still routinely being disrupted by quarantine and isolation. In addition, many students are behind socially and struggling emotionally; APS has rightly devoted extra attention to SEL needs, but the time devoted to SEL comes at the expense of time devoted to instruction.

Arlington Parents for Education is a volunteer-led, non-partisan coalition of parents, teachers, students and citizens dedicated to accountability, transparency and education excellence at Arlington Public Schools. Follow us **@ArlParentsForEd**