

# Differences in Learning Patterns in Illinois School Districts and What We Can Learn from Them

Aggregate national test score data have shown that student learning declined from SY19 to SY21,<sup>1</sup> and that recovery began occurring from SY21 to SY22. In Illinois, IAR averages for schools who serve grades 3-8 indicated a decline of 12% in both ELA and Math in SY21, and a small recovery of 2% and 4%, respectively, in SY22. Across Illinois high schools, SAT scores indicated a smaller decline of 2% and 3% in ELA and Math in SY21, and a continued decrease of 3% and 4% in SY22.<sup>2</sup> These differences confirm prior estimations that showed different learning patterns across grades.<sup>3,4</sup>

To further our understanding of how districts' performance has changed since the onset of the pandemic, we explored variation in districts' change in standardized test scores from SY19 to SY21 and SY21 to SY22. We compared each district's performance relative to other districts throughout the state in each time period. This means that we examined whether they declined more or less than the average in the first year following the onset of the pandemic (SY21), and whether they improved more or less than the average during the first year of recovery (SY22). While relative terms can be limited in scope—as they do not necessarily reflect

<sup>1</sup> SY19 refers to school year 2018-2019; SY21 refers to school year 2020-2021; and so forth.

<sup>2</sup> Rates are percentual changes using SY19 as the baseline.

<sup>3</sup> Upcoming IWERC reports will detail all trends in learning patterns as well as sociodemographic differences across groups of districts and their associated practices for recovery. More information



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changes in scale scores—they do reveal the extent to which districts were able to maintain or improve their position in the distribution of scores.

In turn, we classified districts into four groups reflecting performance in SY21 (above or below the average loss) and SY22 (above or below the average improvement), as shown in Figure 1. In this report, we highlight some of the practices implemented by districts in two groups that reflect improvements in recovery above average. These groups were (a) **The High-Flyer Districts**, which include districts with consistently high relative performance, which maintained or improved their position in the distribution in both time

at <https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/learning-renewal/>

<sup>4</sup> Cashdollar, S., Barragan Torres, M., Wang, Y., & Bates, M. (2022). Part 2: Does School Instructional Modality Predict Average School Achievement? *Learning during the Pandemic in Illinois Series*. Part 2. <https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/learning-modalities/>

periods; and (b) **The Comeback Districts**, which include districts that declined more than average from SY19 to SY21 but were able to improve more than average from SY21 to SY22. We also identified a group of schools that declined consistently in their relative performance by decreasing more than average across both time periods, and a group of districts that were able to maintain or even improve their position during the first pandemic period (SY19 to SY21) but declined more or gained less than average from SY21 to SY22.

To better understand strategies for recovery, we surveyed 95 districts in Illinois and selected districts from the two most *successful* groups to explore their practices for learning renewal post-COVID. Figure 2 shows the distribution of surveyed districts across all groups in ELA, which we use an example.<sup>5,6</sup>

**(a) A Comeback District:  
Johnsburg CUSD 12**

Johnsburg CUSD 12 is located in Northern Illinois and has a population of 85% White and 11% Hispanic students. Nearly 27% of students in this district were eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) in SY22 and 16% of their student population were enrolled in an Individualized Education Program (IEP). During the pandemic year (SY21), all schools in this school district were in the Substantially Remote modality group.<sup>7</sup> In the survey, the district reported hiring more teachers, social support staff including social workers, counselors or psychologists, and

<sup>5</sup> Since our goal is to highlight successful recovery, we are not showing the names of districts in the other groups.

<sup>6</sup> Districts across groups in Math were not always the same as for ELA.

<sup>7</sup> Modality groups are based on Barragan Torres et al. (2022). Students in schools that were Remote All Year participated almost exclusively in remote instruction during SY21. In the Substantially Remote group, the vast majority of students started the school year in remote learning and spent a substantial part of the year learning remotely, and by April, none of the schools in this pathway were

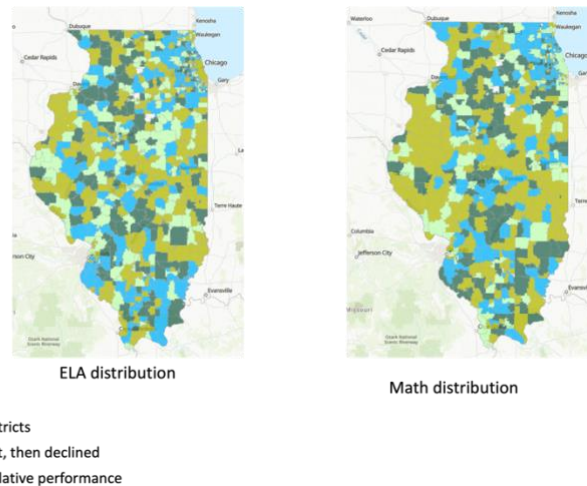


Figure 1. Distribution of districts for four recovery groups for ELA and Math

re-allocating staff to new or different duties. Teachers in this district received additional training, specifically related to technological training and peer professional development. Johnsborg CUSD 12 also implemented several curricular changes including the adoption of a new curriculum, focusing on specific classroom instruction strategies, implemented peer-mentor coaching structures, and upgraded non-software instructional materials such as books and study guides. Importantly, the district also made use of social-emotional learning (SEL) materials. The district also implemented summer learning and after school programs as well as efforts to improve attendance and enrollment and family communication initiatives. Johnsborg also implemented a series of technological upgrades. Importantly, district leadership indicated strong support to implement all these

instructing students exclusively remotely. Schools in the Mixed group were largely characterized by dual instruction (both in person and remote, in any combination) over the course of SY21. And schools in the Substantially In-Person modality group were those where all students attended school in-person most of SY21. While some schools in this pathway reported 100% in-person instruction, most schools reported a combination of in-person and remote instruction during at least one of the time points.

<https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/learning-modalities/>

strategies from the district staff and the superintendent of the district. According to ISBE's dashboard data, ESSER funding for this district was mostly used for instruction (60%), operations (26%) and attendance efforts (10%).

**(b) The Highflyers:  
Waltham CCSD 185 & Creston  
CCSD 161**

Waltham is located in central Illinois in LaSalle County and in SY22 had a population of 92% White students, with only 1% Black and 5% Hispanic students. About 11% of the students were eligible for FRPL and only 1.4% of students were classified as ELs. The district showed a strong performance located in the top 25% of district performance across the state in both subjects. In terms of strategies for learning renewal, Waltham CCSD 185 hired more support staff and paraprofessionals, including classroom support personnel. The district also provided teachers with technological training, classroom management training, peer professional development, and, importantly, training focused on SEL teaching and learning, including the implementation of a new SEL curriculum, which they plan to make permanent. In turn, Waltham's focus was on specific classroom instruction and incorporated specific SEL materials. The district shared that they did not substantively upgrade technology as all schools in this district were in the Substantially In-Person modality group during SY21. Waltham CCSD185 stated that they always make use of research and data to inform their practices and decision-making processes. ESSER funds were used 50% for operations and 46% in instruction; the district said they used local funds for addressing staffing and data, assessment, and research strategies, with buy-in from all involved stakeholders

including teachers, parents, and school and district staff.

Likewise, Creston CCSD 161 is a highflyer. Its demographics were close to those of the state of Illinois as 40% of students were eligible for FRPL in SY22, with 26% Hispanic students.<sup>8</sup> This district was in the top 25% of the distribution in both subjects across all time periods. In their survey responses, Creston indicated no changes in their staffing practices but considerable specialized and subject specific teacher training, classroom management training, and peer professional development. The specialized teacher training also led to the adoption of a new curriculum and focus on specific classroom instruction strategies. Creston implemented family communication initiatives, and they report they always use data and research to inform their decision-making processes. Like Waltham, they did not significantly upgrade their technology, as all schools in this district were in the Substantially In-Person group during SY21. To fund their learning renewal efforts, Creston CCSD 161 used mostly local funds and reported a lot of support from teachers and staff as well as school and district leadership. According to ISBE data, 90% of ESSER funds in Creston were used for instruction-related expenses.

**In Summary**

IAR and SAT data in Illinois tell more than one story of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, with districts following different patterns of relative performance compared to other districts in Illinois.

We provided an overview of the learning renewal practices employed by example districts in two successful archetypes of recovery (The High-Flyers and The Comeback Districts), as well as a summary of their ESSER spending patterns. These data highlight how successful learning

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<sup>8</sup> According to data from SY22, Illinois students in K-12 were 48% eligible for FRPL, 14% English Learners, 28% Hispanic, 17% Black or African

American and 48% White.  
<https://www.isbe.net/pages/fall-enrollment-counts.aspx>

recovery can manifest in more than one way and supports the need for more deep-dive research. IWERC will release a detailed research series in the upcoming months.

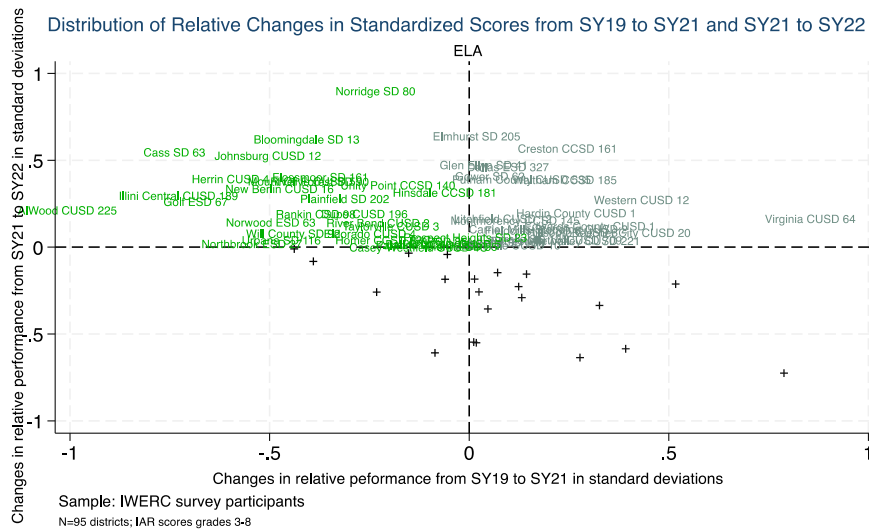


Figure 2. ELA distribution of surveyed districts across recovery groups

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