ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT?

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE
APRIL 2023
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The beginning of the pandemic marked a major shift in education, schools across the country appropriately pivoted and doubled down on their role as community organizations. Here in Fresno, schools rallied by providing food, health care, and other necessities. Emerging from survival mode involves its own set of complications, as we have begun this recovery it hasn’t be easy or quick, but we hope that this report invites you to join us in the work of crafting education policy that puts the needs of children first.

For the third and final report of Are the Kids Alright?, we are taking a look at what moving forward from the pandemic might look like. We have our eyes on the moment, understanding that looming changes in the fiscal landscape and contract negotiations provide an inflection point for positive change. The hope of this report is to start conversations about where students are, inspire hope in where we could be heading and to encourage those with decision making power to take the steps to ensure that Fresno’s kids are, in fact, thriving.
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

As student achievement data continues to roll in, it is clear that the pandemic and virtual schooling has impacted student achievement. From nationwide assessments to individual state standardized testing, achievement in both math and reading experienced a significant decline in the last few school years. While it is difficult to make comparisons across tests, all the results show some measure of decline in academic achievement. The most pressing issue is the distance from grade-level standard for a majority of students, illustrated in the graph below.

DISTRICTWIDE PERCENT OF STUDENTS ON GRADE LEVEL (i-Ready Dec. 2022)

Students who take the i-Ready assessment have their performance evaluated and compared to the expected performance for students in the grades that they are in. As students progress through the test the questions adapt to their performance. Students who answer questions correctly will begin receiving more difficult questions. Conversely, when students get answers wrong the questions get easier. Students are given the i-Ready three times throughout the year to create a picture of progress over time.

It is unsurprising that the adjustment to in-person school (and all that preceded it) would start with students behind grade level expectations. This is what we saw in Fresno and across the country. With the support of great teachers and involved parents, the number of students meeting or exceeding grade levels standards can continue to increase.
When we talk about equity in education, we are looking for an answer to the question: Is everybody getting what they need to succeed? This means physical accessibility for students using wheelchairs, language supports for students whose first language isn’t English, or breakfast for students who don’t get it at home (plus myriad other supports). Students whose needs vary from what tends to be viewed as “typical” often fall short of success because the system fails to provide what they need to achieve it. In Fresno, 9 out of 10 students are vulnerable in this way.

In California, districts are given money based on the number and percent of students in this category. This money is designated for programs and supports meant to improve education for the students who need it. However, across the district the academic achievement of these particularly vulnerable groups remains below the average of their peers. It is easy to blame the pandemic, but this inequity was present well before 2020. Our 2019 Kids First report highlighted the state of education for FUSD. The major takeaways include: “…too many of Fresno’s young people are unprepared for success in college and career... these readiness and completion rates are worse for the African-American, Latino, Southeast Asian, low-income, special education, and English Learner populations in our communities.” With few exceptions, this remains true as we continue through 2023.
INEQUITY

Particular groups of students have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and have struggled historically to be granted access to the tools for success they need. This is reflected in test scores, as well as per pupil spending and regional differences. In the absence of specific programs designed to address the needs of these groups, their academic potential will remain limited. This will have a detrimental effect on the richness of our school environments, broad economic effects for the Central Valley, and lasting personal toll on the students the system chooses to leave behind.

Additional funding is provided for students who qualify based on economic, language, housing, and disability status. As illustrated in the figure to the right, there is still much work to do to close the academic achievement gap.

ACROSS THE DISTRICT

When it comes to equity, the district is doing a better job of producing positive outcomes for students in certain areas of FUSD. Illustrated to the left, you can see that the difference between the highest achieving area in FUSD (Bullard) is greater than 1.5x the lowest (Fresno).
A CLOSER LOOK

The illustration below shows relationship between the percent of unduplicated students and the percent of students on or above grade level on i-Ready. Each dot represents a school. The size of the dot relates to per pupil spending. The color of the dots are coded by school board region.

Three things to note:
- Let’s begin with the concentration of schools in the lower right box. These schools have high percentages of unduplicated students who are not meeting grade level standards. Many of the schools are located in just two of the seven district regions, Fresno and Edison regions.
- The blue schools in the left hand box, representing the Bullard region, have several of the highest performing schools in the district, but do not represent the diversity of students throughout FUSD.
- There is an opportunity to learn best practices from schools in the Roosevelt and Sunnyside regions in supporting learners to achieve. They serve a large number of unduplicated students and have reading proficiency levels above the district average.

Unduplicated Students - Students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meal (FRPM), are English learners (EL), and/or who are foster youth which is used in the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). They create an Unduplicated Pupil Count (UPC) that qualifies the district for additional resources.
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Academics aren’t the only area where students require recovery plans. Across the country, we have seen the effects of pandemic-related school closures on children’s behavior and mental well-being. Along with a decrease in academic achievement, there has also been an increase in suspensions, absenteeism, and mental health concerns for children across Fresno.

“ABOUT HALF OF ALL STUDENTS ARE CHRONICALLY ABSENT.”

In Fresno, we have seen chronic absenteeism at increasingly high rates, with over 50% of students missing more than 10% of class time. These figures add to disrupted learning and further disconnects students from meaningful relationships with caring adults and peers. This disconnection can contribute to a drastic increase in reports of mental distress.

In an effort to combat this, new school psychologists and social workers were hired across the district. The necessity of these new positions cannot be overstated. Too often, school-based mental health providers get bogged down in unrelated administrative tasks (ex. proctoring standardized tests) and carry high caseloads. As we move through the current academic year, it will be imperative to evaluate the efficacy of these positions. GO Public Schools Fresno would like to see increased staffing until the recommended ratio of 1 school psychologist per 500 students is reached.
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We must remain committed to recovering the learning lost due to the pandemic. To achieve this, we must reestablish systems of accountability to monitor how all students are doing academically and behaviorally in preparation for college and career. We must also invest in the recruitment, retention, training, and support of high quality teachers.

HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS

Quality classroom teachers are the single most beneficial school-based factor for students’ success. As such, ensuring each student has a quality teacher is of utmost importance. To accomplish this, there must be meaningful investment in teacher professional development, collaboration time, and mentoring. Teachers need adequate time to plan, review student data, and make adjustments to curriculum and instructional strategies in service of increasing student achievement.

In particular for our English Learner students, we urge FUSD to increase the number of ELL credentialed teachers until the ratio of ELL students to credentialed teachers reflects the average district wide student to teacher ratio of 1:20.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The number of dollars flowing into school districts via ESSER funds and increases in LCFF have led to an increase in spending, programming, and personnel. The focus of these funds (pandemic recovery and specific student group support) and the time limitations (2024) make it essential that this money be spent to meet the highest needs. The goal, undoubtedly, is to improve education for students. However, this “kitchen sink” approach may not produce the best results. The district should consider an approach that is more narrowly focused on just a handful of initiatives with a proven track record, set measurable milestones for success, and change course as needed depending on results. This approach paves the way for the success of school site leaders, teachers, and our students.

Before implementing a new program, there should be clear parameters on what the measure of success will be. Some of this information, like academic performance, can be measured based on increased standardized test scores. Other measures could come from questionnaires, like school climate surveys, or follow-up reports.
CASE STUDY: TUTORING

As the district and individual school sites continue to plan for students' academic recovery, we encourage a commitment to making high-quality, small group tutoring increasingly available to students and families. This high-dose tutoring is available in 1:1 or small group settings, three (or more) times a week, for a minimum of 50 hours a semester. Furthermore, with adequate planning, a commitment to recruiting diverse tutors and reserving spaces for low-income students, tutoring may effectively mitigate some of the existing and persisting gaps that we see between student groups.

Research shows that tutoring continues to be one of the most promising ways to recover learning loss. We have seen that research ring true in Fresno Unified. In addition to its own tutoring options, the district provides tutoring through partnerships with various organizations. One of those organizations, Every Neighborhood Partnership, has seen consistent growth in the students who participate in their literacy tutoring.

EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD PARTNERSHIP (ENP)

As an example, one school served by ENP’s literacy mentors saw a clear increase in students i-Ready scores. Through this program students across multiple grades have shown an increase from 18-54 points over the course of a school year. Average expected growth is 19-27 points. There is a clear benefit to enrolling students in this type of program.

- Fall
- Spring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Spring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
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<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd-5th</td>
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<td>350</td>
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54 point growth
CONCLUSION

As the fog of the pandemic is lifting, we hope that schools continue to serve students and families in ways that help them thrive. After three school years during a public health crisis, we are optimistic about a continued return to a new normal that includes care for the whole child and a commitment to academic excellence. Last year we were concerned with whether the kids were alright? And it turns out they were still struggling. Now, we want to move forward. This starts with acknowledging the damage that COVID-19 has wrought and setting a path forward that focuses on the best way of meeting the needs of all children in Fresno.
Additional Resources

1. Research on School Attendance and Student Achievement
2. Are the Kids Alright? Part 1
3. Accelerating Student Learning with High-Dosage Tutoring
4. Mental Health and Academic Achievement
5. Pandemic Recovery
6. A Restorative Approach for Equitable Education
7. The Transformative Power of Tutoring
8. Are the Kids Alright? Part 2
9. Every Neighborhood Partnership
10. The Disparate Impact of COVID-19 on America’s Students