



**ARE
THE
KIDS
ALRIGHT?**

**A LOOK AT STUDENT PERFORMANCE THROUGH I-READY DATA
APRIL 2022**

Executive Summary

Given the release of the Winter iReady data we are issuing our second report in the Are The Kids Alright? series. This edition focuses on the new data, compares it to the previous data, and provides updated recommendations based on the state of education in Fresno since the reopening of schools.

The information in this report offers data-driven recommendations for the district, parents, and community as we continue to navigate what two years of irregular schooling means for students.

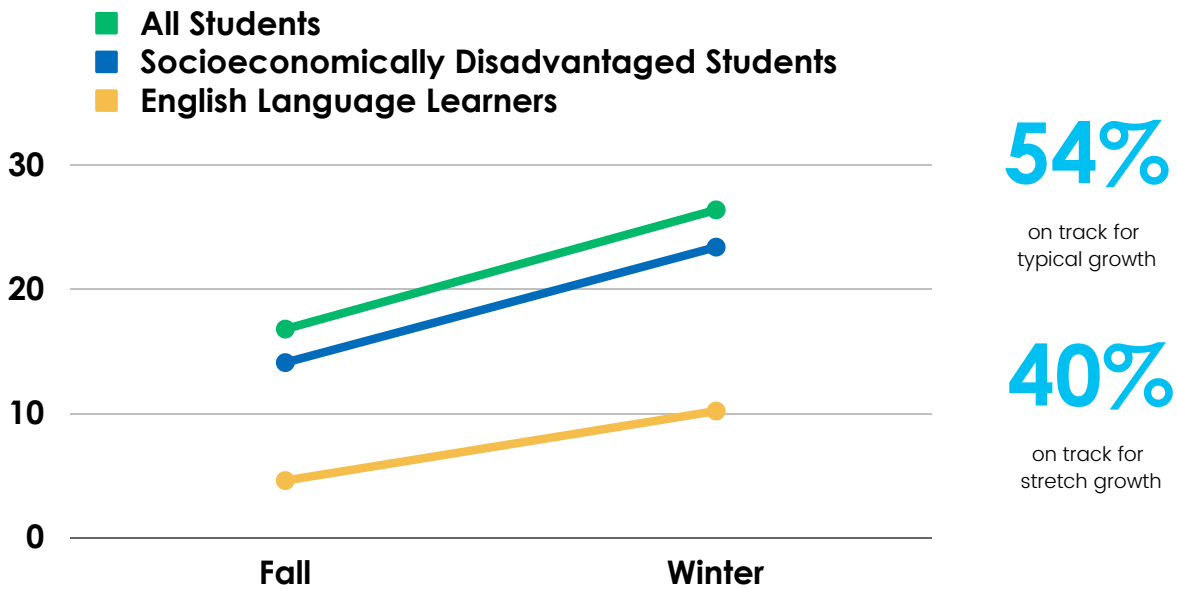


**HOW HAS THE
CHAOS OF
IRREGULAR
SCHOOLING
IMPACTED
FAMILIES AND
STUDENTS IN
FRESNO?**

Are the Kids Alright?

Overall student performance on the iReady assessment showed improvement from fall to winter. Only 17% of students started the school year on grade level in reading, while the winter test indicated that about 1 in 4 (26%) students met that standard. It is also promising that over 40% of students are on track for stretch growth, making up part of the ground lost due to the pandemic.

Students on or above grade level in reading (iReady, December 2021)



There is a stark difference between average achievement on the iReady test and the scores of special populations. The largest special populations in Fresno Unified include English language learners and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The scores for those students fall between 3-15 points below the Fresno Unified average. It is clear, then, that the current educational practices are not serving these students well. Attention must be paid to the specific needs of all special populations in order for meaningful academic recovery to occur for those students and for the district at large.

1 in 4

students are on or above grade level in reading.

Cause For Concern



Absenteeism

One of the most salient points of data in education is that students have to be in school to learn [1]. This is why absentee rates are tracked throughout the country. It is for this reason (among others) that the COVID crisis continues to have such an adverse impact on students. According to recent data, [the chronic absenteeism rate for Fresno Unified is 46%](#). That is nearly half of students missing enough school to significantly impact their learning. A first step to improving education is creating policies and practices that get kids in classrooms and make them want to stay.

Cause For Optimism



Bright Spots

Amidst the chaos of the last two years and the long road to recovery ahead of us, there are a few bright spots that warrant highlighting. Good things are happening at [Robinson, Holland, Lawless, and Jefferson Elementary Schools](#). These schools have higher than average shares of student populations for whom traditional education practices don't sufficiently meet all of their needs (ex. foster youth, students experiencing homelessness). Nonetheless, they had a higher than average increase in students who are reading on grade level. This emphasizes the importance of site leadership and teachers meeting the needs of diverse student populations to improve academic achievement.

Recommendations

We maintain that the recommendations made in the first *Are the Kids Alright?* remain the best ways to accelerate learning. To recap, those recommendations are **high-dose tutoring** [3] and increased **social emotional support** [4]. Not only do these recommendations meet the most common student needs as we return to school with fewer pandemic restrictions, but they are also proven to be effective. In recent months there have been developments locally that warrant new recommendations for schools, families, and the community to help kids get and stay on track academically and emotionally [5].

Mitigating Chronic Absenteeism

The return to school has exacerbated student behavioral and school climate issues, both of which contribute to chronic absenteeism. **A well documented solution to curbing school suspensions and improving school climate is restorative justice.** Restorative justice facilitates the creation of stable relationships with adults in the school community and has been shown to increase academic performance and participation, decrease suspension rates, reduce disparities and improve school climate. Fresno Unified has begun implementing restorative practices in a handful of schools which is an opportunity to successfully address chronic absenteeism [6,7,8].

Quantity Over Quality

The number of dollars flowing into school districts via ESSER funds and increases in LCFF has and will continue to increase spending, programming, and personnel. The focus of these funds (pandemic recovery and specific student groups, [10]) and the time limitations (2024) make it essential that this money be spent to meet the highest needs. FUSD is rolling out myriad new programs and has committed to hiring 300 new positions [11]. 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.

Quality Over Quantity

An example for the decision making process using the districts proposal for 300 new full time positions [11]. Under this proposal each elementary and middle school site will have 1 additional school psychologist. Each high school will have 2. additional school psychologists [10].



01. Parameters to Measure Success

Before implementing a new program, there should be clear parameters on what the measure of success will be. One goal of hiring a cadre of new school psychologists would be improving student mental health and a secondary effect might be improved academic success. Some of this information, like academic performance, can be measured based on increased standardized test scores. Others could come from questionnaires, like school climate surveys or follow-up reports.



02. On Ramps/Off Ramps

It could be that introducing school psychologists exceeds our expectations on all the measures laid out in number one above and the improvements are better than the social-emotional curriculum introduced earlier this year. Then, we might want to increase the number of school psychologists. If there was no impact we may consider reducing the number. Plans need to be created before implementing a strategy for how to either expand or bring to end programs or personnel.



03. Implement Based on Need

The district's proposed plan assigns the new school psychologists to buildings based on level of instruction (high school sites get 2, middle and elementary 1). This plan doesn't differentiate by what an individual building might need. Perhaps a larger percentage of students and families have experienced the negative effects of COVID at a particular elementary school. This school may need three 3 psychologists. An evaluation of need must be included before implementing any new program.

Let's Focus On The Main Thing

There has and continues to be a significant debate about controversial political issues that, while of varying degrees of importance, are often out of the control of an individual district and more importantly take attention away from the most important issues.

Certainly, we can all agree our children must be prepared academically. It's time to refocus our time and resources to push for and make the changes necessary to improve learning and mental well-being. Rage is a dirty fuel [12]. Let's clear the air, to ensure that the kids, indeed, will be alright.



"Putting what is best for students above our personal agendas is the only way to salvage the future. Low academic performance is the biggest threat our community is currently facing."

-Joanna Kendrick

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. Building a Positive School Climate Through Restorative Practices
8. Evaluation of a Whole-School Change Intervention: Findings from a Two-Year Cluster-Randomized Trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention.
9. Restorative Practices
10. This applies only to schools with more than 55% of students who qualify as low-income, English learners, and/or foster youth. Baird, Bullard Talent, Forkner, Malloch, and Starr do not meet this threshold.
11. Board Meeting Materials 16 Feb 2022 ; pp 230
12. Credit for this phrase goes to Angela Blanchard, professor of practice at Brown University.