**Research Brief: Examining early reading skills in the wake of COVID-19: Virginia Fall 2020 state-wide screening key findings**.[1], [2]

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) K-3 assessments are used in 131 of 132 school divisions in Virginia to evaluate students' risk for reading failure prior to third grade. The PALS assessment tools identify students at-risk in early reading (i.e., below the 'benchmark') and results guide the allocation of state funding in support of early intervention through the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI). *All students below the PALS benchmark are at high-risk for third grade reading failure, in the absence of effective intervention; students at- or slightly above the PALS benchmark also have elevated risk.*

Key Takeaway #1:
PALS data from Fall 2020 show significantly more kindergarten and first grade students starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure compared to last year. The increase translates to 37,894 kindergarten and first grade students identified as at high-risk for reading failure this fall, an increase of 11,000 students. This is the largest single-year increase in students below the PALS benchmark in the history of PALS.

Students At High-Risk for Reading Failure:
Fall 2019 versus Fall 2020
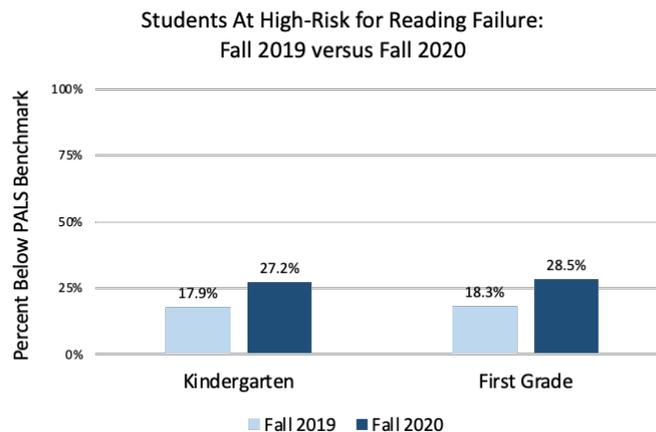
Key Takeaway #2:
The increase in kindergarten and first grade students starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure was largest among students who are Black, Hispanic, economically-disadvantaged, and English learners (EL). From Fall 2019 to Fall 2020:

- The increase in Black kindergarten students starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure was 1.2 times the increase seen among White kindergarten students.[3]
- The increase in Hispanic kindergarten students starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure was almost twice the increase seen among White kindergarten students.[3]
- The increase in economically-disadvantaged first grade students starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure was 2.5 times the increase seen among not economically-disadvantaged first grade students. These differences were not as notable in kindergarten; however, data show substantial drops in kindergarten enrollment for economically-disadvantaged students.
- The increases in EL students in kindergarten starting the school year at high-risk for reading failure was 1.5 times the increase seen among non-EL kindergarten students.

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[1]: Key findings are taken from McGinty, A.S., Gray, A., Herring, W., Soland, J., & Partee, A. (2021, expected February). *Examining early reading skills in the wake of COVID-19: Virginia Fall 2020 state-wide screening findings and implications.* Report of the PALS Office at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
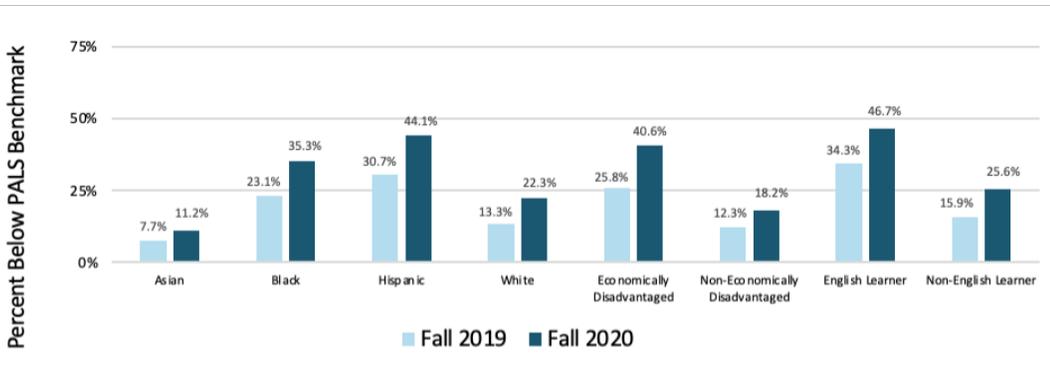
[2] Findings were similar regardless of administration method (i.e., in-person and remote administration methods); reported findings include students assessed by either mode of administration.

[3] Trends were evident but less pronounced in first grade.

Students at High-Risk for Reading Failure: Fall 2019 versus Fall 2020 By Student Group
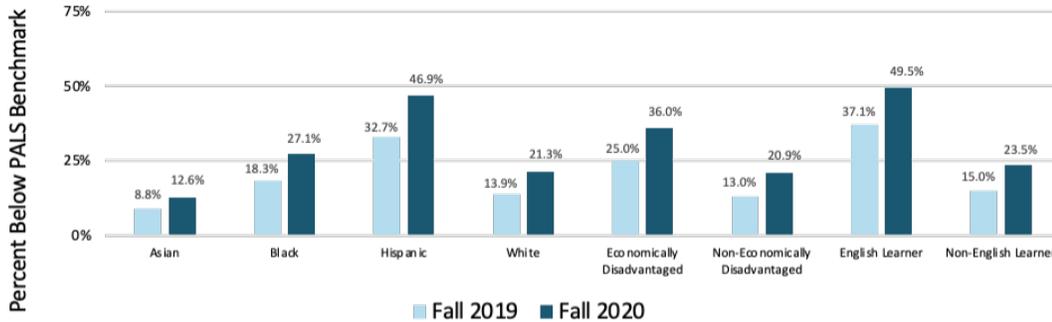
Key Takeaway #3: The rapid release of a remote administration option for PALS was an important tool for creating visibility into the early reading risks of all students enrolled in public school, particularly for Black, Hispanic, and EL students.[4]

- 55.7% of state data across kindergarten and first grade were collected through remote administration methods.
    - 69.4% of PALS data on Black kindergarten and first grade students were collected through remote administration methods.
    - 67.3% of PALS data on Hispanic kindergarten and first grade students were collected through remote administration methods.
    - 75.5% of PALS data on EL kindergarten and first grade students were collected through remote administration methods.
    - 41.5% of PALS data on White kindergarten and first grade students were collected through remote administration methods.

Key Takeaway #4: The increased number of kindergarten and first grade students beginning this school year at high-risk for reading failure is a threat to third grade reading outcomes in the coming years.

- For example, the increased number of kindergarten students falling below the PALS benchmark this fall, compared to last fall, would suggest a 25% increase in students failing to reach reading proficiency by end of G3 for this years' kindergarten cohort, as compared to last.
- This estimate is based on basic projections from historic patterns and emphasizes the relationship of early reading risk to later reading abilities, in the absence of effective instruction and powerful intervention models.

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[4] Many of these patterns are related, but not fully explained, by geographic differences in use of in-person and remote testing methods.