Trends in Virginia Students Identified as At-Risk for Reading Difficulties:
Fall Literacy Screening, 2019-2023

OVERVIEW

The early years of schooling coincide with a sensitive period for language and literacy development. The language and literacy competencies that students develop in the first years of schooling serve as a foundation, not only for later reading skills, but for academic learning and engagement across all academic subjects. Research shows that when students do not have adequate reading skills by the end of their third-grade year, they are likely to continue to struggle, often leading to higher rates of dropping out of high-school. Research suggests that for students with reading difficulties, early intervention is crucial, and the best way to help students improve their literacy development is to provide them with targeted, evidence-based literacy instruction. Literacy screening throughout early schooling is critical to be able to identify and intervene with students who are struggling to learn to read so that they can receive the targeted support in specific foundational skills that will help them become successful readers.

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) assessment serves as Virginia's state-supported literacy screener for kindergarten, first, and second grades. Used in the Commonwealth for over 20 years, educators in Virginia school divisions have administered PALS to evaluate their students' risk of reading difficulties. Last Fall, 131[1] Virginia school divisions administered PALS to their Kindergarten – Grade 2 students. This Fall, 17 Virginia school divisions opted to use the Virginia Language & Literacy Screening System (VALLSS), which will be adopted statewide in the Fall of 2024, to screen their Kindergarten – Grade 2 (or Grade 3) students. The remaining 114 Virginia Divisions continued to use PALS, as they have in previous years. PALS scores reflect students' skill levels on key indicators of reading development, and supply critical information for families, educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to support Virginia's young learners.

To indicate students who are at risk for reading difficulties, PALS uses benchmark scores. Students who score below the benchmark are at high risk for developing persistent reading difficulties; students who score slightly above benchmark are at elevated risk for reading difficulties; and students who score well above benchmark are considered at low risk for developing reading difficulties. PALS benchmark scores guide the state's allocation of Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) funds to support early literacy intervention for students who score below the benchmark. The resources afforded by EIRI can be essential to help students establish foundational skills, set a faster trajectory toward reading proficiency, and meet subsequent benchmarks.

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[1] Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) began participating in PALS in Fall 2021, in kindergarten classrooms only. To provide consistency in cross-year comparisons, FCPS data are not included in this report.

PALS benchmark reports help teachers, administrators, and families understand their students' current risk for developing reading difficulties. Benchmark reports for a single assessment window (Fall or Spring) are useful snapshots of student performance. However, benchmark reports that compare multiple years of PALS data are necessary to understand trends in below-benchmark rates over time—for Virginia K-2 overall, as well as for specific grade levels and student demographic groups. Multiyear comparisons also help reveal the evolving effects of COVID-19 on PALS below-benchmark rates.

To facilitate educational stakeholders' understanding of trends in below-benchmark rates over time, Virginia Literacy Partnerships (VLP) publishes a biannual statewide report comparing PALS benchmark data across the most recent Fall or Spring assessment windows. This is the Virginia Fall 2023 PALS Report, which presents PALS benchmark data from Fall 2019, Fall 2020, Fall 2021, Fall 2022, and Fall 2023, accompanied by a summary of key takeaways distilled from the data. Collectively, these five windows illuminate the initial impact of COVID-19-related learning disruptions on Fall PALS K-2 below-benchmark rates and the extent to which below-benchmark rates improve as we move beyond the most acute effects of the pandemic on the classroom learning environment. Additionally, it is important to remember that this report for Fall 2023 does not include data from the 17 divisions who implemented VALLSS this year, divisions that have been included in this report in previous years. These divisions are Albemarle, Augusta, Charlotte, Culpeper, Franklin County, Frederick, Galax City, Loudoun, Middlesex, Newport News, Orange, Powhatan, Rockingham, Russell, Southampton, Virginia Beach, and Wise.

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KEY TAKEAWAY #1

The overall rate of K-2 students scoring below the PALS benchmark decreased from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023 but remained higher than that of Fall 2019. There was also improvement in below-benchmark rates from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023 across each of the three grade levels. See Figures 1 and 2.

Fall 2023 PALS below-benchmark rates marked the second consecutive year of improvement (that is, the percentage of students falling below benchmark decreased) for the Fall assessment window. While the Fall 2022 below-benchmark rate showed slight improvement from the first COVID testing window in Fall 2020 (1.4 percentage points), this Fall 2023 testing window showed greater improvement from that same window (5.1 percentage points). Still, at 25.7%, the Fall 2023 below-benchmark rate remained 4.4 percentage points above the 2019 pre-pandemic rate of 21.3%.

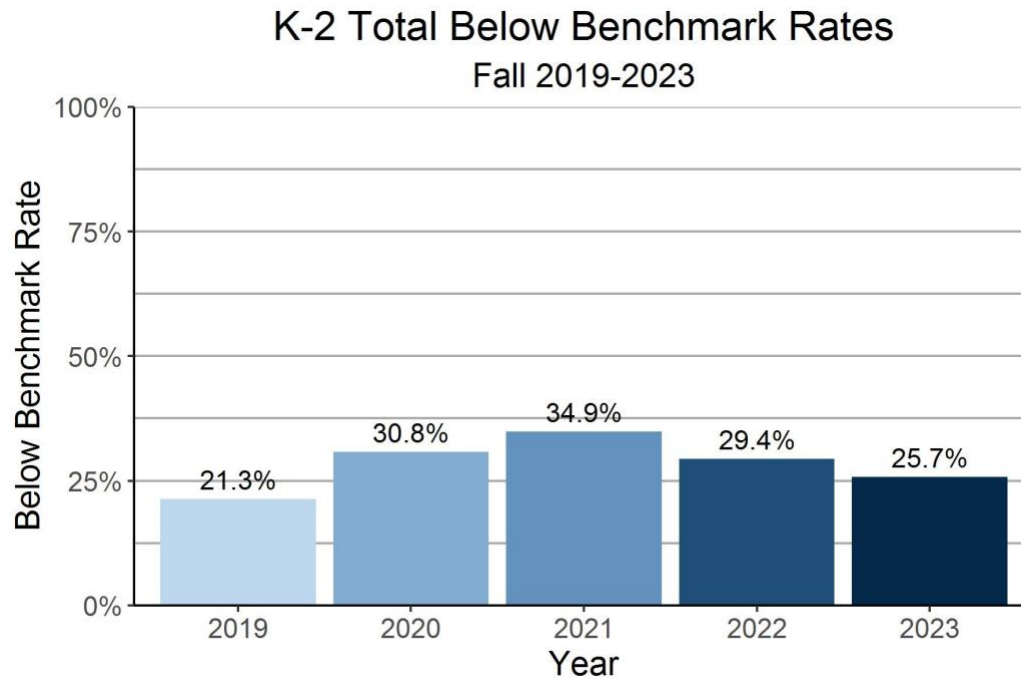## K-2 Total Below Benchmark Rates
Fall 2019-2023

Figure 1. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, grade levels combined. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.

Moreover, the PALS below-benchmark rate improved at each grade level from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, marking the second Fall window of declining below-benchmark rates for all three grade levels since peak Fall rates were observed in 2021. Fall 2023 kindergarten below-benchmark rates were down 2.6 percentage points from Fall 2022. Fall 2023 first grade below-benchmark rates were down 2.8 percentage points from Fall 2022. Fall 2023 second grade below-benchmark rates were down 6.1 percentage points from Fall 2022. However, like the overall 2023 below-benchmark rate, the Fall 2023 below-benchmark rate for each K-2 grade level remained higher than the corresponding 2019 pre-pandemic rate.
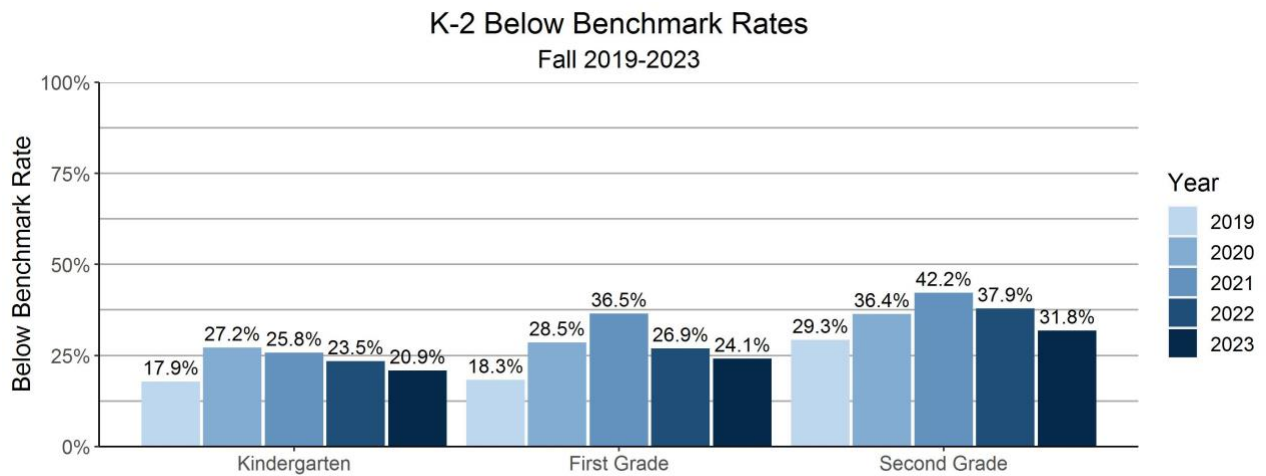

Figure 2. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, by grade level. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.

KEY TAKEAWAY #2

The percentage of students in the low-risk group grew from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023 while the percentage of students in the high-risk for developing reading difficulties group fell, marking improvement for the second consecutive Fall assessment window. Of the five Fall windows reported here, the Fall 2023 distribution of students at low, medium, and high risk for reading difficulties was the closest approximation to the Fall 2019 (pre-pandemic) distribution. See Figure 3.

The distribution of students at low, medium, and high risk for reading difficulties shifted greatly between the Fall 2019 pre-pandemic assessment window and the next two Fall assessment windows. The pattern of change from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 and to Fall 2021 shows that more and more students at medium risk were being identified as being at high risk. Since Fall 2022, the number of students in the low-risk group increased (4.2 percentage points), the number of students in the medium-risk group decreased slightly (0.6 percentage points), and the number of students in the high-risk group decreased (3.7 percentage points).
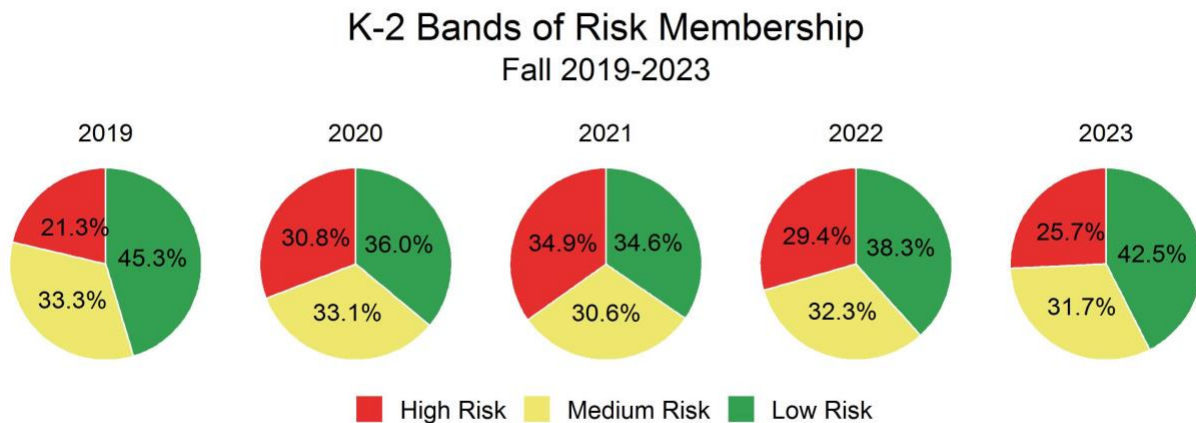

Figure 3. Proportion of students at low, medium, and high risk (i.e., below PALS benchmark score) for reading difficulties at Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 assessment windows, grade levels combined. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.

KEY TAKEAWAY #3

When examining Fall 2023 PALS below-benchmark rates by grade level, student race/ethnicity, and demographic subgroups, below-benchmark rates continue to appear disproportionately high in certain grades and subgroups. See Figures 4, 5, and 6.

Fall 2023 PALS below-benchmark rates were highest (greater than 30% of students below benchmark) in the first and second grade cohorts, specifically for students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, English learners, or who have a disability. These student subgroups had below-benchmark rates 6.6 to 21.5 percentage points *above* the overall grade-level below-benchmark rate.

The lowest below-benchmark rates (17% or less of students below benchmark) were observed in the kindergarten cohort, specifically for students who are Asian; White; Non-Hispanic, Other, or 2+ races; non-economically disadvantaged; or non-English learners. These groups had below-benchmark rates 5.9 to 12.1 percentage points *below* the overall grade-level below-benchmark rate.

KEY TAKEAWAY #4

When examining Fall 2023 PALS below-benchmark rates compared to Fall 2022 below-benchmark rates by grade level and student subgroup, lower rates were observed across most grades and subgroups, though the magnitude of improvements were variable. See Figures 4 and 5.

Typically, the greatest grade-level improvements in below-benchmark rates were seen among students who are Black (Fall 2023 rates 4.4 to 8.3 percentage points lower than Fall 2022), Hispanic (Fall 2023 rates 3.9 to 7 percentage points lower than Fall 2022), economically disadvantaged (Fall 2023 rates 5.3 to 8.1 percentage points lower than Fall 2022), English Learners (Fall 2023 rates 3.3 to 6.3 percentage points lower than Fall 2022), or who have a disability (Fall 2023 rates 3.3 to 8.8 percentage points lower than Fall 2022). The smallest improvements in below-benchmark rates were observed among students who are Asian (Fall 2023 rates 0.8 percentage points lower than Fall 2022 for Second Grade, Fall 2023 rates 2.9 and 0.7 percentage points higher than Fall 2022 for Kindergarten and First Grade).

K-2 Below Benchmark Rates by Race/Ethnicity
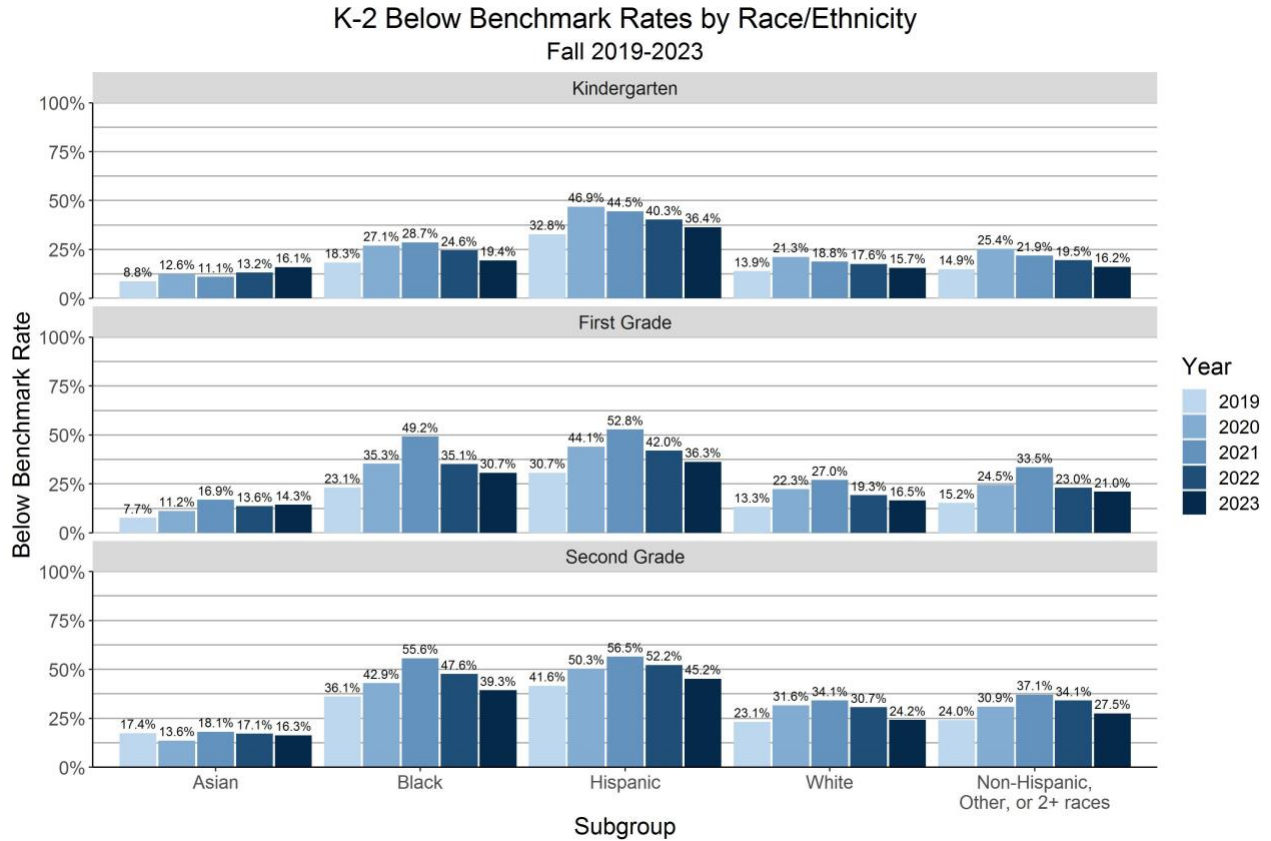### Fall 2019-2023

Figure 4. Below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 assessment windows, by student race/ethnicity and grade level. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.
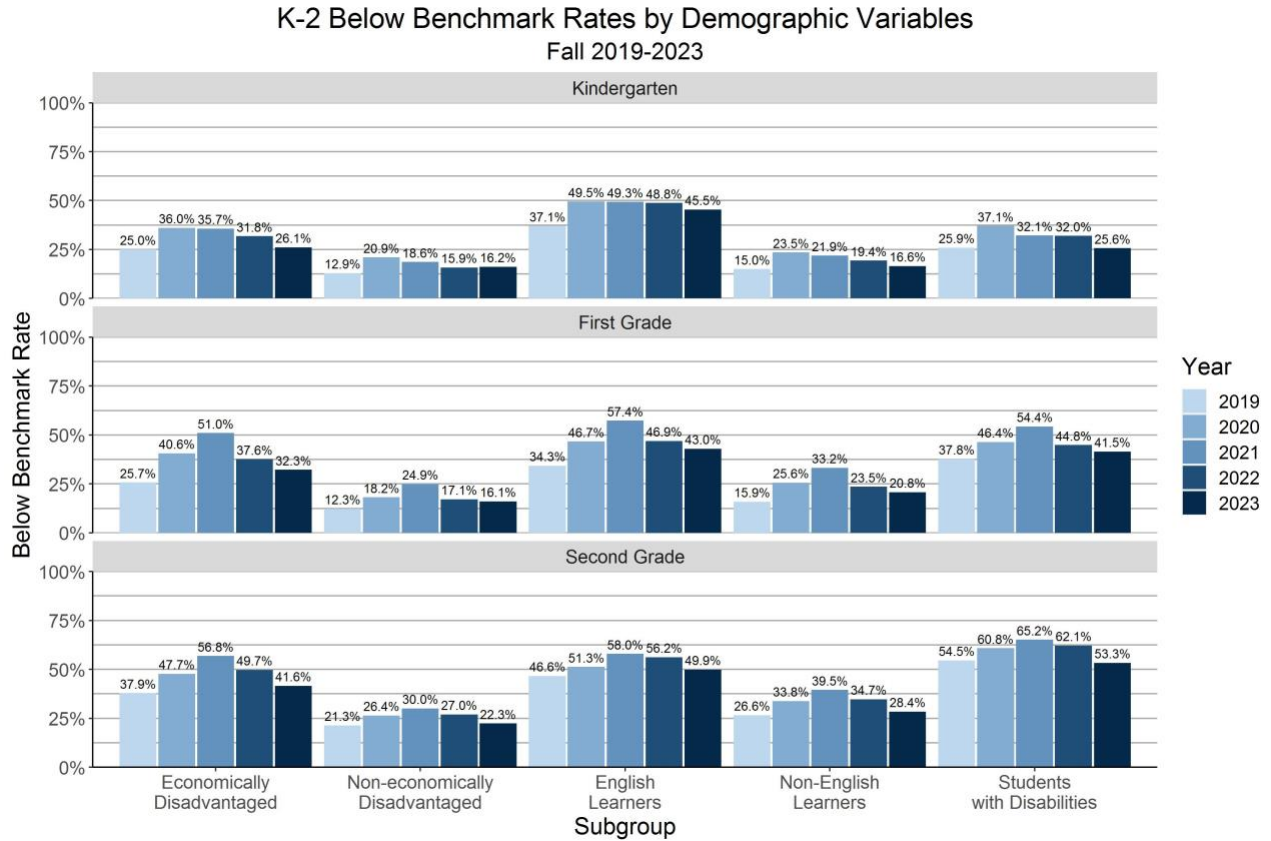
Figure 5. Below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 assessment windows, by student demographic subgroup and grade level. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.
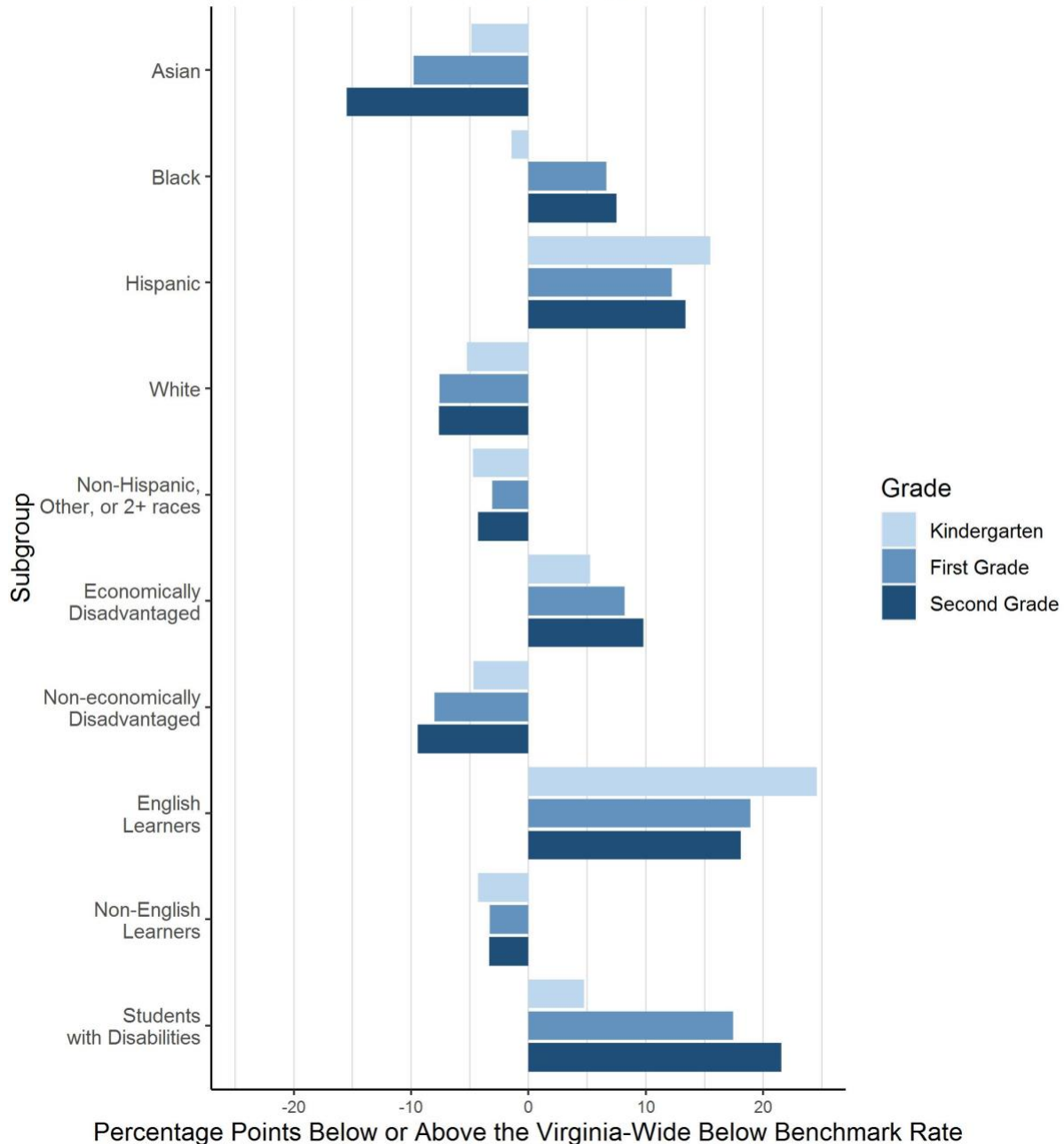
Fall 2023 Below Benchmark Rates for Student Subgroups Relative to the Virginia-Wide Rate

Figure 6. Disparities between the overall Virginia-wide grade-level Fall 2023 below-benchmark rate and each student grade-level subgroup. Zero represents the Virginia-wide below-benchmark rate: bars to the left of zero indicate a student subgroup with a below-benchmark rate lower (better-performing) than the Virginia-wide rate; bars to the right of zero indicate a student subgroup with a below-benchmark rate higher (poorer-performing) than the Virginia-wide rate. Note: Fall 2023 does not include the 17 divisions using VALLSS in lieu of PALS in the 2023-2024 school year.

KEY TAKEAWAY #5

When examining Fall 2023 PALS below-benchmark rates for the 113 current divisions using PALS (i.e., not including the 17 divisions using VALLSS), higher below-benchmark rates are found across each year and grade than rates for either all 130 divisions or only the 17 VALLSS divisions. This is true for the 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 Fall PALS assessment periods.

Finally, trends in below-benchmark rates for the State, inclusive and exclusive of the 17 divisions participating in VALLSS are different than the statewide numbers in Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. Below, Figures 7, 8, and 9 represent below-benchmark rates by grade level. Figure 7 includes all 130 divisions that have been included in previous PALS Statewide reports, Figure 8 shows rates from only the 17 divisions participating in VALLSS in Fall of 2023, and Figure 9 displays only the 113 divisions that are participating in PALS in the Fall of 2023. It is important to note that the below-benchmark rates for the current PALS divisions, depicted in Figure 9, are slightly higher than both the below-benchmark rates for the 17 VALLSS divisions (see Figure 8), and the below-benchmark rates for all divisions (see Figure 7) at each fall window, for each grade level, from 2019-2022.
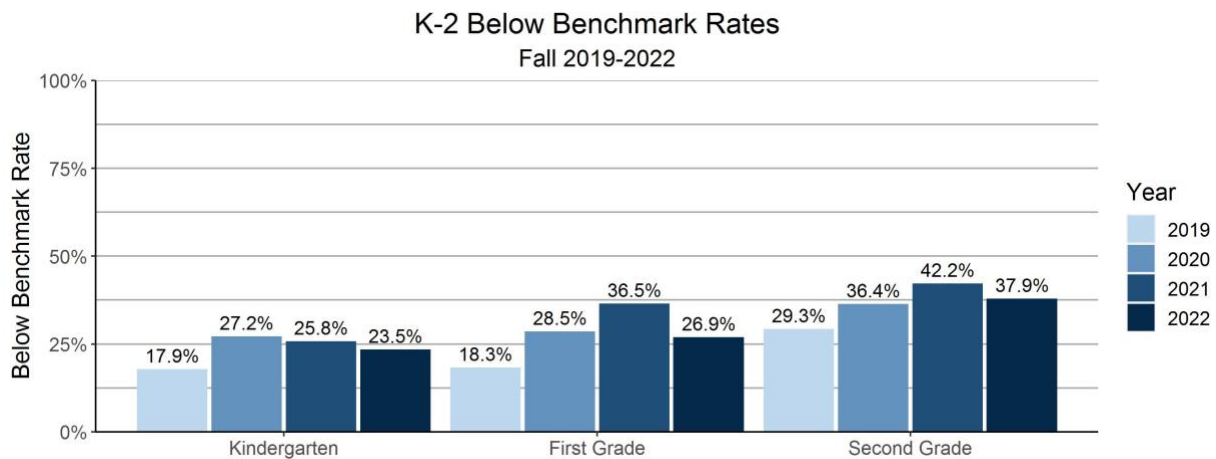

Figure 7. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, by grade level, inclusive of all 130 Virginia divisions.
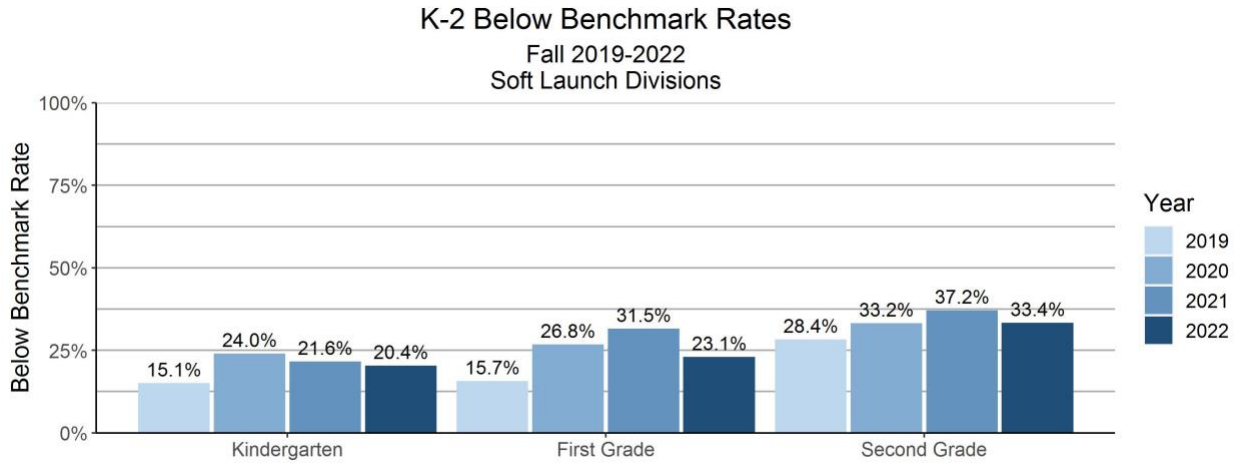
Figure 8. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, by grade level, inclusive of only the 17 Virginia Divisions who did not participate in PALS in Fall 2023. These divisions are Albemarle, Augusta, Charlotte, Culpeper, Franklin County, Frederick, Galax City, Loudoun, Middlesex, Newport News, Orange, Powhatan, Rockingham, Russell, Southampton, Virginia Beach, and Wise.
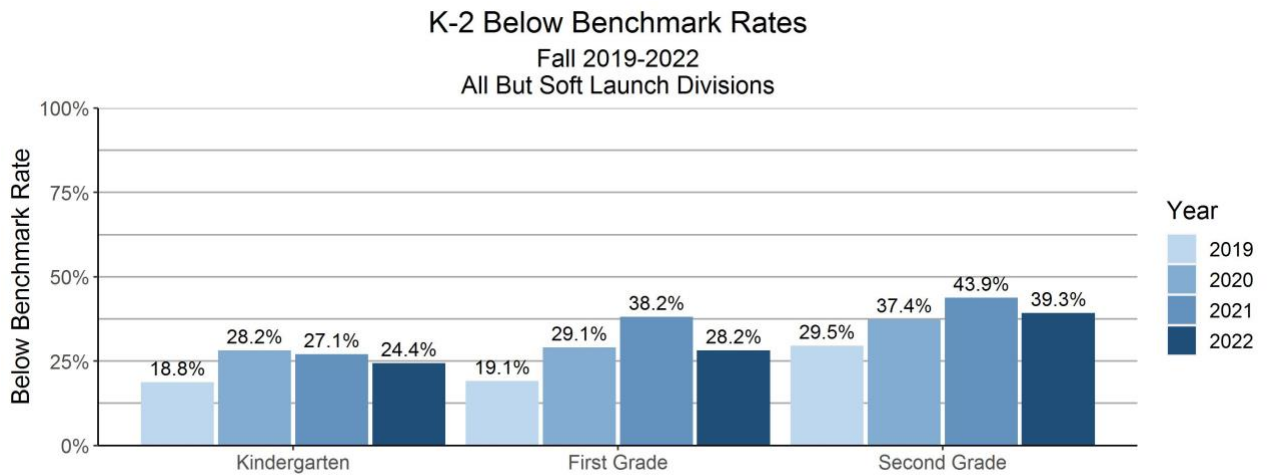

Figure 9. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, by grade level, inclusive of only the 113 Virginia Divisions who participated in PALS in Fall 2023.

CONCLUSION

This report summarizes the literacy performance of Virginia kindergarten, first, and second grade students across the previous five PALS Fall assessment windows spanning 2019 (pre-pandemic), 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, the most recent PALS assessment window.

Virginia-wide, the rate of K-2 students identified as being at high risk for developing reading difficulties fell 3.7 percentage points from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, and a decline in the below-benchmark rate was observed at all three grade levels. While Fall 2023 below-benchmark rates have not fully returned to the pre-pandemic levels seen in 2019, the improvements demonstrate progress as educators work to reverse the consequences of pandemic-era learning disruptions.

Below-benchmark rates for students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, English learners, or have a disability, were typically higher than the overall Virginia-wide below-benchmark rate, and also higher than the below-benchmark rates for students who are Asian, White, non-economically disadvantaged, or non-English learners, as has been the true for most previous Fall and Spring PALS assessment windows. While these rates continue to signify disproportionate risk for reading difficulties among these historically marginalized student subgroups, they tended to show greater improvement from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023 than their Asian, White, and non-economically disadvantaged peer groups.

This report focuses on the PALS below-benchmark rate because of the EIRI funding allocations and instructional implications associated with below-benchmark scores. As with any cut point, it is also important to consider students who score at or just above the benchmark, as these students are also considered to be at elevated risk for reading difficulties. While PALS reports do not provide a "medium risk" designation, on this report we include Key Takeaway #2 to highlight this group of students. Key Takeaway #2 shows the percent of students categorized as at low, medium, and high risk for reading difficulties at each previous Fall PALS window. The medium-risk group is also important for educators to take into consideration when planning instructional supports, interventions, and services.

Taken together, these data showcase recent improvement in Fall PALS below-benchmark rates for Virginia's young learners. Still, many students, particularly those in first and second grade from historically marginalized groups, continue to face challenges developing the literacy skills they need to help them be successful readers and learners across academic subjects.

A critical step in supporting the literacy and reading development of Virginia's K-2 students is supporting the teachers, specialists, coaches, and interventionists that work most closely with these learners. It is imperative that educators are confident in their knowledge and application of science-based reading instruction. Also imperative is that educators have access to high-quality resources to intensify reading instruction and intervention and know how to provide targeted instruction to students based on their specific areas of need. Virginia Literacy Partnerships (VLP) encourages administrators and educators to visit the VLP website for access to resources to aid in the use and interpretation of PALS data to guide decisions pertaining to students' literacy needs. VLP resources include training tools to support the implementation of high-quality literacy instruction for all students, and resources related to the delivery of individualized support to those students in need of more targeted and explicit instruction, including students below, at, and just above the PALS benchmark.