

# Trends in Virginia Students Identified as At-Risk for Reading Difficulties: Fall Literacy Screening, 2019-2022

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## OVERVIEW

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 all 131<sup>1</sup> Virginia school divisions administer PALS to evaluate their students' risk of reading difficulties. PALS scores reflect students' skill levels on key indicators of reading and literacy development, and supply critical information for families, educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to support Virginia's young learners.

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, efficacy, and engagement across 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 with ramifications that span beyond reading. As such, literacy screening throughout early schooling is essential to be able to identify and intervene with students who are struggling to learn to read so that they can receive the supports that will help them become successful readers.

To identify students who are at risk for reading difficulties, PALS uses benchmark scores. Students who score below the benchmark are at high risk for persistent reading difficulties, and students who score in the mid-range of the scale (slightly above benchmark) are at elevated risk for 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.

PALS benchmark reports help teachers, administrators, and families understand their students' established and emergent literacy competencies. Benchmark reports for a single assessment window (Fall, Mid-Year, or Spring) are useful in-the-moment snapshots of student performance. However, benchmark reports that compare multiple years of PALS data are critical to understanding 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 literacy screening trends in the Commonwealth, the Virginia Literacy Partnerships (VLP) Office publishes a biannual statewide report comparing PALS benchmark data across the most recent Fall or Spring assessment windows. This is

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

the Virginia Fall 2022 PALS Report, which presents PALS benchmark data from Fall 2019, Fall 2020,<sup>2</sup> Fall 2021, and Fall 2022 accompanied by a summary of key takeaways distilled from the data. Collectively, these four 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 are rebounding in the wake of the most acute effects of the pandemic on the learning environment.

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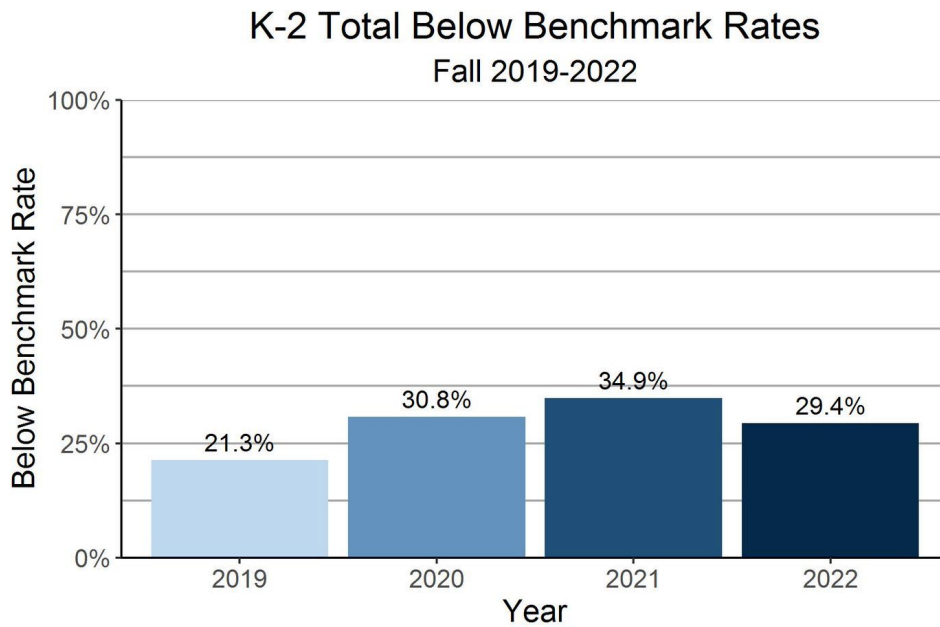
<sup>2</sup> To accommodate online learning, Fall 2020 PALS was administered to students via either the traditional in-person format (42%) or an online format (58%). Findings reported here reflect both modes of assessment, as prior analyses supported their equivalence. By Fall 2021, in-person assessment was above 98%.

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**KEY TAKEAWAY #1**

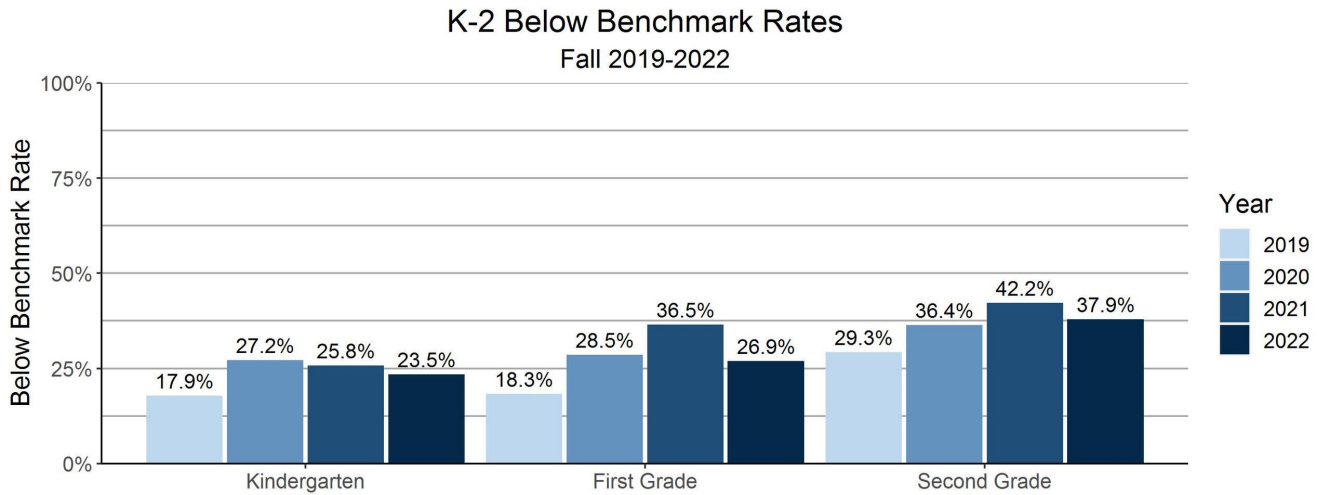
**The overall rate of K-2 students scoring below the PALS benchmark decreased from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022 but remained higher than that of Fall 2019 (pre-pandemic). Of the three grade levels, the greatest rebound in below-benchmark rates from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022 was observed in first grade. See Figures 1 and 2.**

After a steady 13.6 percentage point increase in the overall K-2 PALS below-benchmark rate from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021, the Fall 2022 below-benchmark rate fell from Fall 2021 by 5.5 percentage points. This places the Fall 2022 below-benchmark rate on par with Fall 2020 at the height of the pandemic, but still 8 percentage points higher than Fall 2019 before the onset of COVID-19.



*Figure 1. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, grade levels combined.*

Grade-level below-benchmark rates show that Fall 2022 below-benchmark rates improved across all three grade levels. The largest decline was observed for first grade (down by 9.6 percentage points), followed by second grade (down by 4.3 percentage points), then kindergarten (down by 2.3 percentage points).



*Figure 2. PALS below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, Virginia-wide, by grade level.*

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### KEY TAKEAWAY #2

**Across Fall assessment windows, PALS below-benchmark rates are consistently highest for second-grade cohorts compared to kindergarten and first-grade cohorts. See Figure 2.**

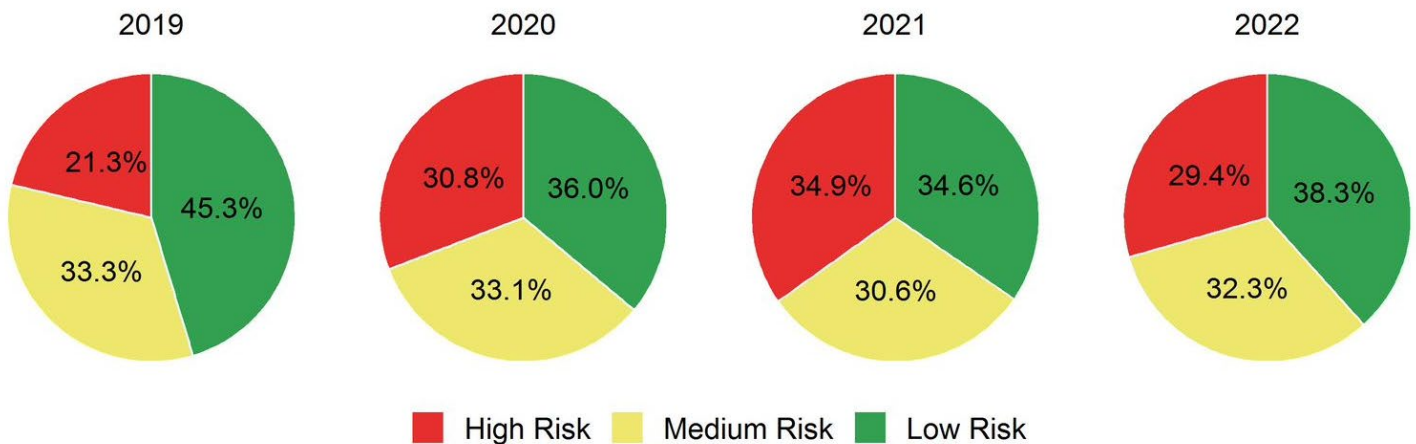
At each of the four Fall assessment windows reported, the second-grade cohorts had the highest below-benchmark rates, followed by first grade, then kindergarten. For example, in Fall 2022, the below-benchmark rate for the second-grade cohort was 11 percentage points higher than that of the first-grade cohort, and 14.4 percentage points higher than that of the kindergarten cohort. This pattern suggests that throughout the progression from kindergarten to second grade, a steadily increasing proportion of the grade-level cohort is scoring below benchmark.

**KEY TAKEAWAY #3**

**The percentage of students in low- and medium-risk groups grew from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022, while the percentage of students in the high-risk group fell. This is the first Fall assessment period since 2019 that membership in the high-risk group fell. Still, Fall 2022 PALS scores show that nearly 62% of all K-2 students were at high or medium risk for reading difficulties. See Figure 3.**

The percentage of students at high risk for reading difficulties fell by 5.5 percentage points from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022, while the percentage of students at low risk for reading difficulties increased by 3.7 percentage points and the percentage of students at medium risk increased by 1.7 percentage points. These data support the notion of a reversal of trends observed during the height of the pandemic, during which the percentage of students at high risk for reading difficulties rose steadily, and the percentage of students at low risk for reading difficulties diminished.

### K-2 Bands of Risk Membership Fall 2019-2022



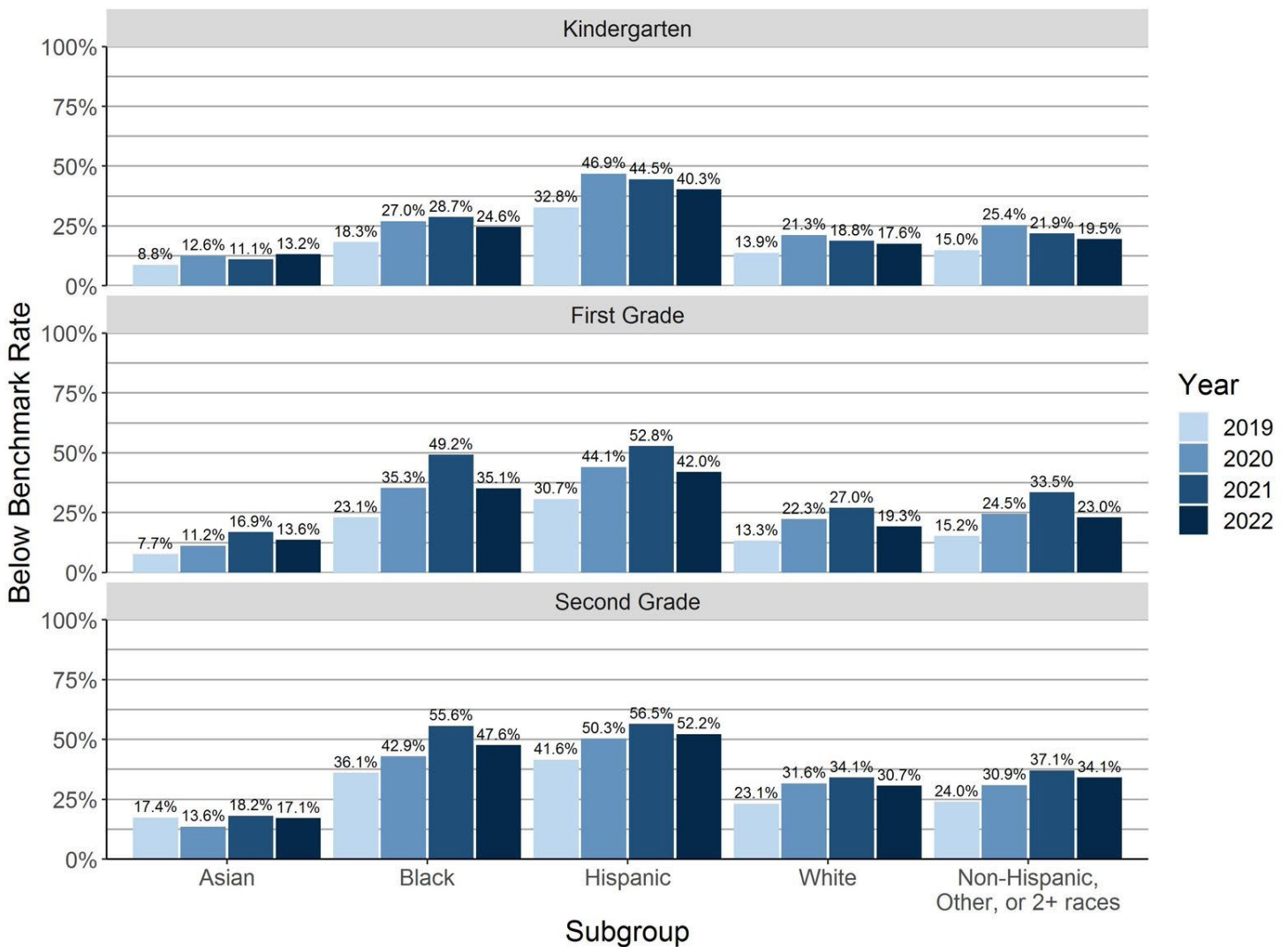
*Figure 3. Proportion of students at low, medium, and high risk (i.e., below PALS benchmark) for reading difficulties by year, grade levels combined.*

**KEY TAKEAWAY #4**

**PALS below-benchmark rates improved from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022, falling across student subgroups, though the magnitude of improvement was variable. See Figures 4 and 5.**

Compared to Fall 2021, the below-benchmark rate for each student subgroup improved in Fall 2022. Typically, the largest improvements were seen among students who are Black (Fall 2022 rate down by 4.1 to 14.1 percentage points), Hispanic (Fall 2022 rate down by 4.2 to 10.8 percentage points), or economically disadvantaged (Fall 2022 rate down by 3.9 to 13.4 percentage points). As a single exception, the below-benchmark rate for Asian kindergarteners rose by 2.1 percentage points.

### K-2 Below Benchmark Rates by Race/Ethnicity Fall 2019-2022



*Figure 4. Below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, by student race/ethnicity and grade level.*

### K-2 Below Benchmark Rates by Demographic Variables Fall 2019-2022

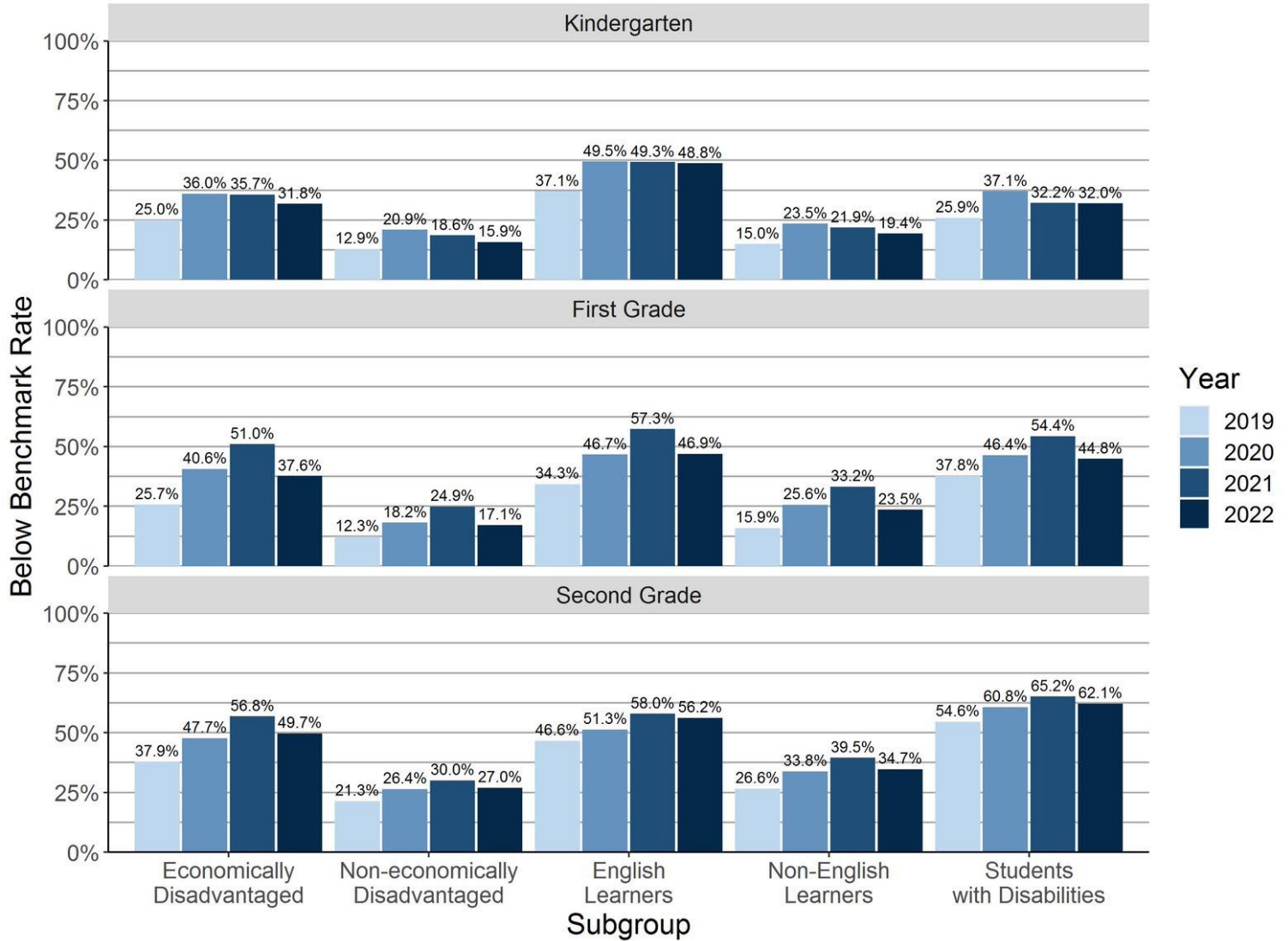


Figure 5. Below-benchmark rates for Fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 assessment windows, by student demographic group and grade level.

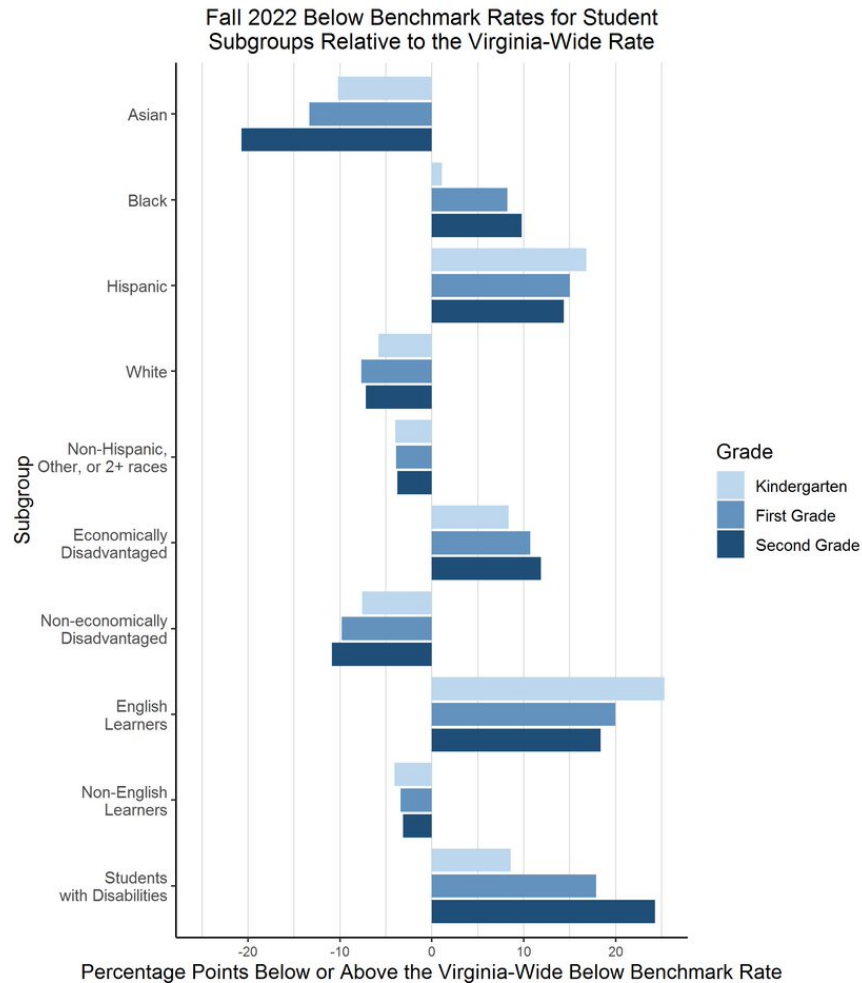
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**KEY TAKEAWAY #5**

**Students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, English learners, or have a disability had higher Fall 2022 PALS below-benchmark rates compared to the Virginia overall grade-level rates and compared to students who are Asian, White, Non-Hispanic/Other/2+ Races, non-economically disadvantaged, or non-English learners. See Figure 6.**

Discrepancies between the Virginia overall below-benchmark rate and the student subgroup below-benchmark rate were most pronounced for students who are Hispanic (14.3 to 16.8 percentage points above the Virginia overall rate), English learners (18.3 to 25.3 percentage points above the Virginia overall rate), or who have disabilities (8.5 to 24.2 percentage points above the Virginia overall rate).

Contrastingly, K-2 students who are Asian, White, Non-Hispanic/Other/2+ Races, non-economically disadvantaged, and non-English learners had Fall 2022 below-benchmark rates 3.2 to 20.8 percentage points lower than the Virginia overall grade-level rate.



*Figure 6. Disparities between the Virginia-wide Fall 2022 below-benchmark rate and each student group. Zero stands for the grade-level Virginia-wide below-benchmark rate: Bars to the left of zero indicate a student group with a below-benchmark rate lower than the Virginia-wide rate; bars to the right of zero indicate a student group with a below-benchmark rate higher than the Virginia-wide rate.*



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## CONCLUSION

This report summarizes the literacy performance of Virginia kindergarten, first, and second grade students across the previous four PALS Fall assessment windows spanning 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 2022, the current school year.

Virginia-wide, the rate of K-2 students identified as at-high-risk for reading difficulties decreased from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022. Moreover, a decline in the below-benchmark rate was seen in all three grade levels. Even though the Fall 2022 below-benchmark rates did not return to pre-pandemic levels, these improvements underscore educators' progress as they work to fully restore classroom stability and learning.

Below-benchmark rates for students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, English learners, or have a disability, were typically higher than the rates for students who are Asian, White, non-economically disadvantaged, or non-English learners, as well as the Virginia-wide rate. These rates signify disproportionate risk for reading difficulties among these student groups. Still, the largest improvements in below-benchmark rates from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022 were seen among students who are Black, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged. This pattern is consistent with a large body of empirical work showing that historically marginalized student groups, though often scoring lower than their peers on measures of academic performance, regularly demonstrate the steepest improvements in the context of intervention, remediation, or support.

As noted, the improvements from last Fall underscore recent progress and are a hopeful signal of more gains to come. Yet, it is notable that in each of the preceding four Fall PALS assessment windows, the second-grade cohort had the highest below-benchmark rate of the three grade levels. This is concerning because in third grade, students take their first Standards of Learning (SOL) test for English, which has high-stakes implications for remediation. Below-benchmark rates that steadily increase from kindergarten to second grade suggest that students are not always benefitting from K-2 instructional resources in time to be equipped with the skills needed to do well on the SOL.

This report focuses on the PALS below-benchmark rate because of the implications of the benchmark for EIRI funding allocations. However, as with any cut point, students who score at or just above the benchmark are also considered to be at elevated risk for reading difficulties. As such, we include Key Takeaway #3, which draws attention to the shifting proportion of students categorized as at low-, medium-, and high-risk for reading difficulties. Educators are encouraged to account for the medium-risk group when planning instruction and support services.

Taken together, these data showcase recent improvement in Fall PALS below-benchmark rates for Virginia's young learners. Still, lingering effects of the pandemic-related learning disruptions are apparent. Many students, particularly second graders, 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, and that they have access to high-quality resources to intensify reading instruction and intervention. The Virginia Literacy Partnerships (VLP) Office 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 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.