

BACKGROUND

In FY 2025, PEER received funding to contract with an education technology company to conduct a comparative review of 50 school districts. This report focuses on the area of instruction. For reports on non-instructional areas, see PEER Report #719.

This report contains the following instructional analyses: grade inflation, mastery decline, student proficiency and bubble, and resource implementation fidelity.

GRADE INFLATION

Grade inflation is evidenced when students receive high grades—e.g., As and Bs—but do not score proficient on state evaluation exams.

Grade inflation negatively impacts students because high grades give the impression to students and parents that students have mastered the required content, although subsequent state evaluation exams do not demonstrate that mastery.

KEY FINDINGS

- For districts reporting information for 3rd through 8th grades for the 2023-2024 school year in Math, grade inflation ranged from 22% in 7th grade to 28% in 3rd grade. For English Language Arts (ELA), grade inflation ranged from 20% in 3rd grade to 41% in 6th and 8th grades.
- Although some level of grade inflation is expected, districts with greater than 25% inflation in a grade level should conduct a systemic review of grading practices.

MASTERY DECLINE

School districts use benchmark assessments during a school year to monitor students' mastery of a subject. *Mastery decline* is evidenced when a student scores lower on a benchmark assessment at the end of the school year than at the beginning of the school year, even if the decline is one point.

Mastery decline negatively impacts a student's performance and confidence, creates challenges and additional expenses for school districts in addressing such, leads to higher dropout rates, and reduces a student's preparedness for college and career entry.

KEY FINDINGS

- For districts reporting information for the 2023-2024 school year for 3rd through 8th grades, students demonstrating mastery decline in Math ranged from 31% in 3rd grade to 53% in 8th grade. For ELA, mastery decline ranged from 26% in 4th grade to 50% in 7th grade.
- Factors contributing to mastery decline include absenteeism, summer break, ineffective instructional practices, misaligned resources, course scheduling, and ineffective processes to identify, track, and mitigate students with mastery decline.

To measure students' mastery of a subject, districts use two common types of formative/benchmark assessments:

- 1) **Adaptive Assessments:** Adaptive assessments are characterized by their ability to assess a student's starting point (on or off grade level) and ending point (on or off grade level). These assessments are useful to track how far a student has progressed from the start of the year to the end regardless of where the student started.
- 2) **On Grade Level Benchmarking:** On grade level benchmark assessments are characterized by their ability to assess a student's level of mastery based on current grade level content at the beginning of the year and again on current grade level content at the end of the year.

Since each method assesses students' mastery based on different criteria, comparisons and conclusions between the assessments should be avoided. This report differentiates between the two methods using different colors in the relevant mastery decline tables on pages 23 through 34.

STUDENT PROFICIENCY AND BUBBLE

Education assessments use a benchmark score threshold to identify whether a student is proficient in the required content, with students scoring above the threshold being proficient.

Students scoring within 3% above or below the proficiency threshold represent an important cohort because these students often vacillate above and below the proficiency threshold and if left unidentified, may struggle to grow academically. This group is referred to in this report as the “bubble” group.

KEY FINDINGS

For districts reporting information for 3rd through 8th grades for the 2023-2024 school year, students scoring within 3% above or below the proficiency threshold ranged from:

- 11% in 8th grade to 20% in grades 3rd and 6th for Math; and,
- 14% in grades 3rd and 4th to 19% in 6th grade for English Language Arts (ELA).

RESOURCE IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY

Resource implementation fidelity refers to the extent to which districts implement an education program or practice as planned or intended by developers.

Deviations from intended use and delivery methods may compromise the effectiveness of the educational program or resource and negatively impact students’ educational preparedness.

KEY FINDINGS

For the 2023-2024 school year, and for students in third through eighth grades in the districts reporting:

- 55% and 50% of students met the resource implementation fidelity thresholds in Math and ELA, respectively; and,
- 26% and 30% of students did not meet at least 50% of the resource implementation fidelity thresholds in Math and ELA, respectively.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

Grade Inflation recommendations:

- Implement an annual review process to identify, track, and manage grade inflation each year.
- Review the level of rigor and alignment of assignments and assessments in grade levels presenting high inflation.
- See page 18 for a full listing of recommendations pertaining to grade inflation.

Mastery Decline recommendations:

- Utilize software applications or other processes that automate the identification and tracking of decline in mastery.
- Create detailed reports that provide an overview of decline in mastery at various levels, including district, school, grade, and classroom. These reports should enable educators to pinpoint where decline in mastery is occurring to provide targeted support.
- See page 35 for a full listing of recommendations pertaining to mastery decline.

Student Proficiency and Bubble recommendations:

- Allocate a person or team to manage the proficiency and bubble student analysis process.
- Employ a software application or process that effectively generates proficiency and bubble student analysis, and create comprehensive reports at different levels (district, school, grade, and classroom) that will identify the bubble groups.
- See page 67 for a full listing of recommendations pertaining to student proficiency.

Resource Implementation Fidelity recommendations:

- Maintain a process or software application to closely monitor the resource implementation fidelity and effectiveness of all purchased resources.
- Conduct intra-year evaluations of implementation fidelity and effectiveness.
- See page 78 for a full listing of recommendations pertaining to resource implementation fidelity.