

What is the continued impact of Key Stage 1 school closures on later attainment and social skills?



We are grateful for the dedicated involvement of all our participating schools. These insights would not be possible without you!

Findings from the fourth year of a unique longitudinal study following the youngest school-aged children since the Covid-19 pandemic

The study aims to understand the long-term impact of Covid-19 and partial school closures on pupils' attainment and social skills.

In March 2024, 4,765 pupils in 59 schools took part in the fourth year of the study. We provided schools with NFER reading and maths assessments, and schools provided us with their pupils' data. Teachers completed a questionnaire on pupils' social skills for a sample of their Year 4 and Year 5 pupils. Contextual information about school practices and any catch-up activities undertaken with the pupils were also collected through a survey completed by 51 headteachers or senior leaders. We published the report from the fourth year of the study on 07 October 2024. This year's report, along with findings from previous years of the study, can be found on [our website](#).

As in previous years, the research continues to highlight the importance of focusing catch-up support on pupils who cannot access the curriculum and closing the disadvantage gap.

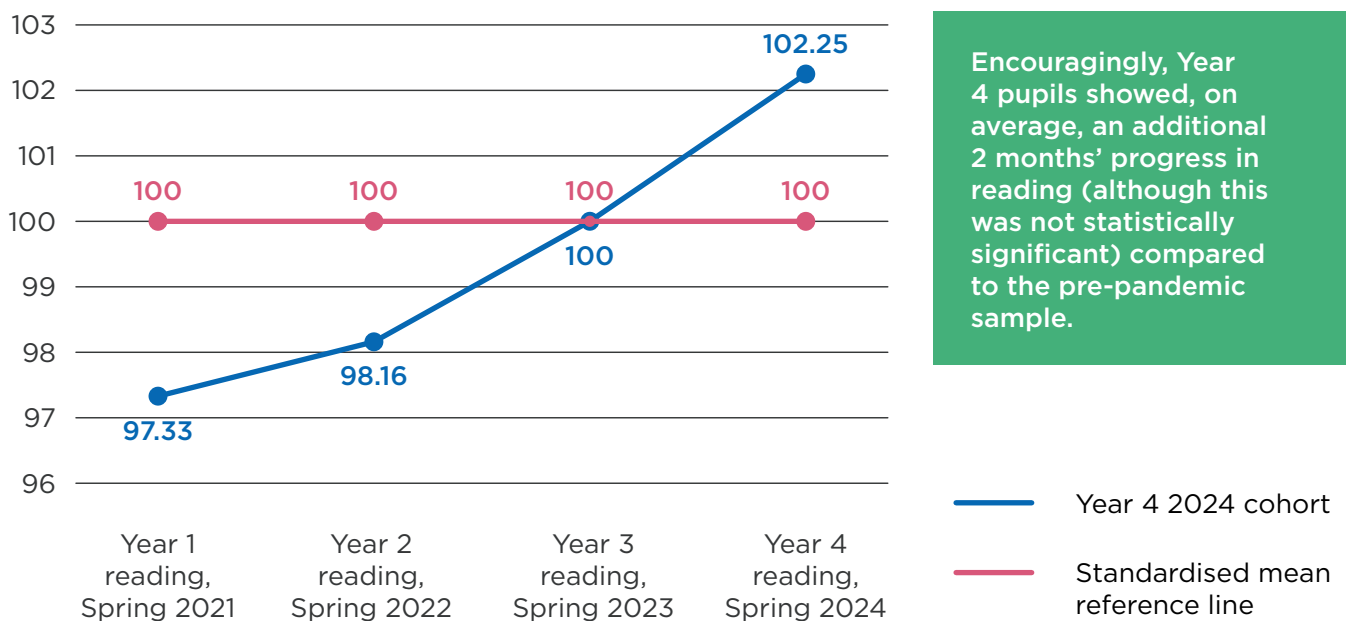
Although on average, most children in our study have caught up to pre-pandemic levels, low attaining and disadvantaged pupils continue to be affected by Covid-19 school closures.

Schools have continued to focus support on low attainers in their recovery work over the past year, as well as disadvantaged pupils although to a lesser extent. To continue learning support for all pupils, it is essential that policy makers ensure schools are provided with adequate funding to safeguard schools' required recovery work in the long-term.

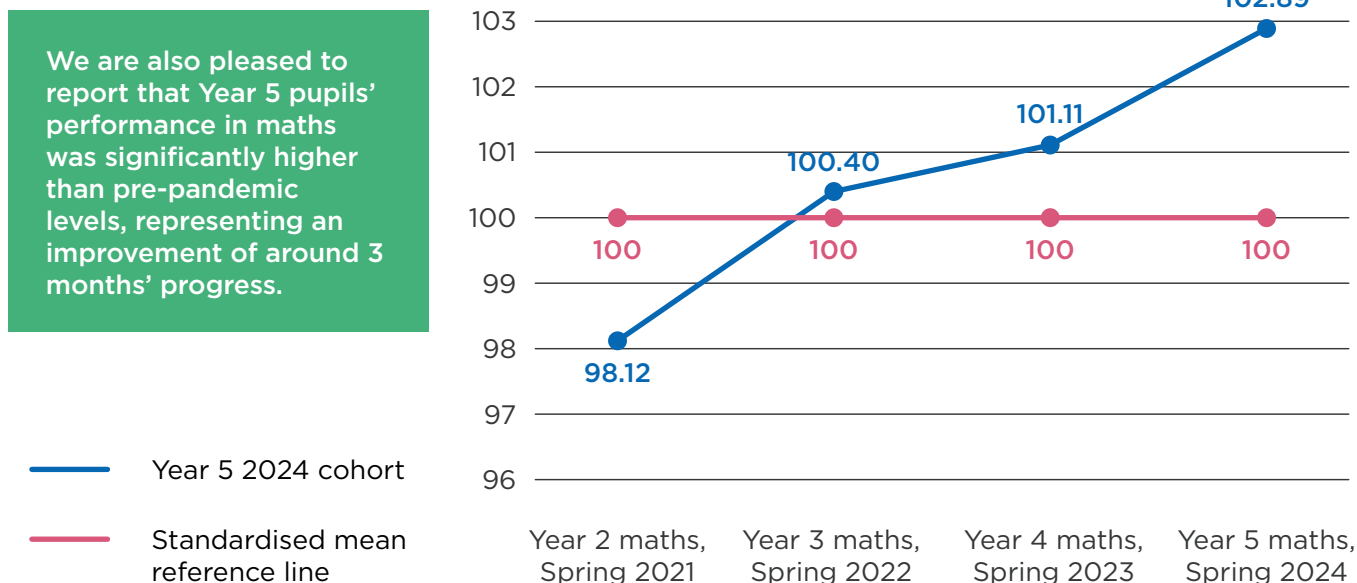
Although these pupils continue to struggle, most children in our study have caught up to pre-pandemic levels.

By spring 2024, on average, Year 4 and Year 5 pupils' attainment in both reading and maths appears to have recovered (and in some cases improved) compared to where we would have expected them to be before the pandemic. This has been a journey of continued improvement from spring 2021 until spring 2024. Some examples from the findings are provided below.

Average change in standardised reading scores for pupils in Year 4



Average change in standardised maths scores for pupils in Year 5



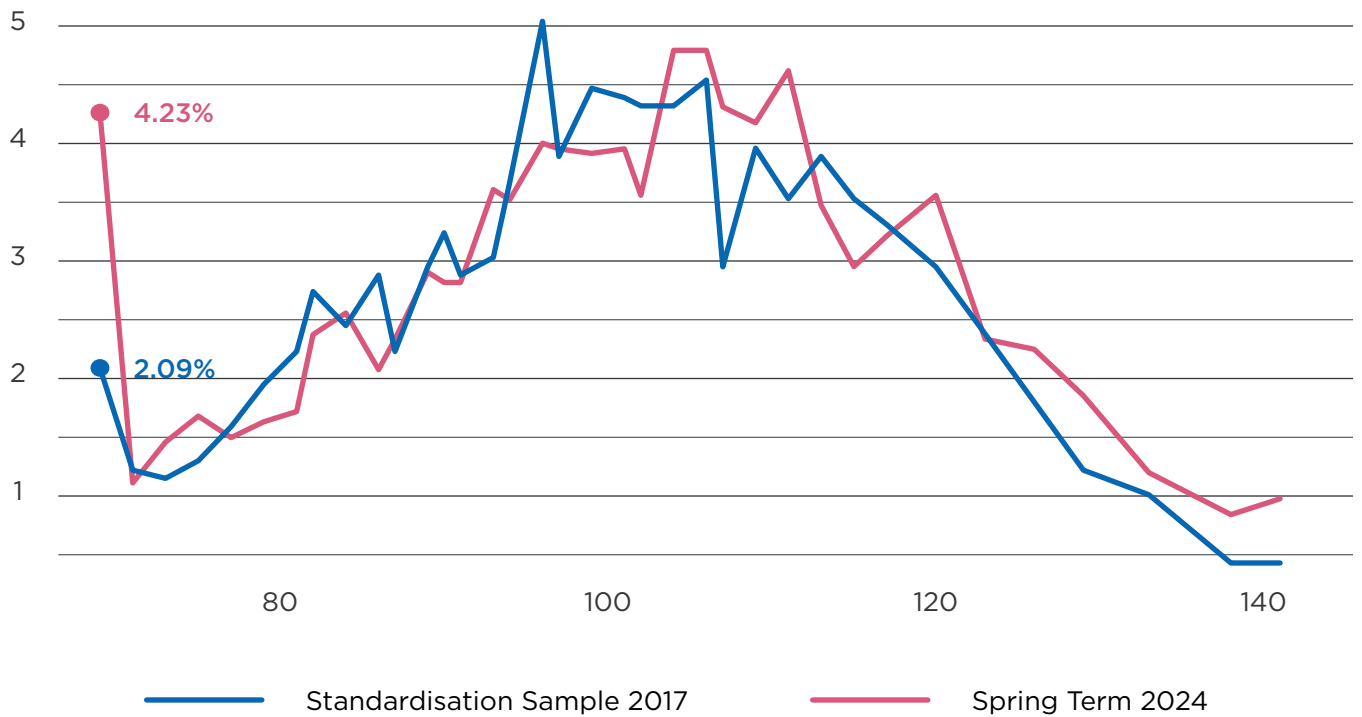
Whilst the number of very low attaining pupils appears to have reduced in most areas, this could be hiding a bigger picture.

In previous years, we have seen a large increase in the number of very low attainers compared with before the pandemic. We continue to see a large number of low attainers in Year 5 reading in spring 2024.



In spring 2024, for reading, the proportion of very low attaining Year 5 pupils doubled from 2.09% to 4.23%. Although there were also more high attaining pupils, this difference was not as large as the increase in low attaining pupils.

Year 5 pupils' standardised reading scores in spring 2024



Elsewhere in the study, the number of very low attainers appears to have decreased this year. However, we have seen an increase in the number of pupils considered 'unable to access the curriculum'. These pupils were withdrawn from taking the assessments in spring 2024.

Overall, 5.7% of Year 5 and 3.6% of Year 4 pupils were withdrawn, far higher than the national percentage in KS2 assessments (around 1%)¹. Many of these pupils had low scores in 2023, so it is possible that schools decided not to ask these low attaining pupils to take the tests in spring 2024.

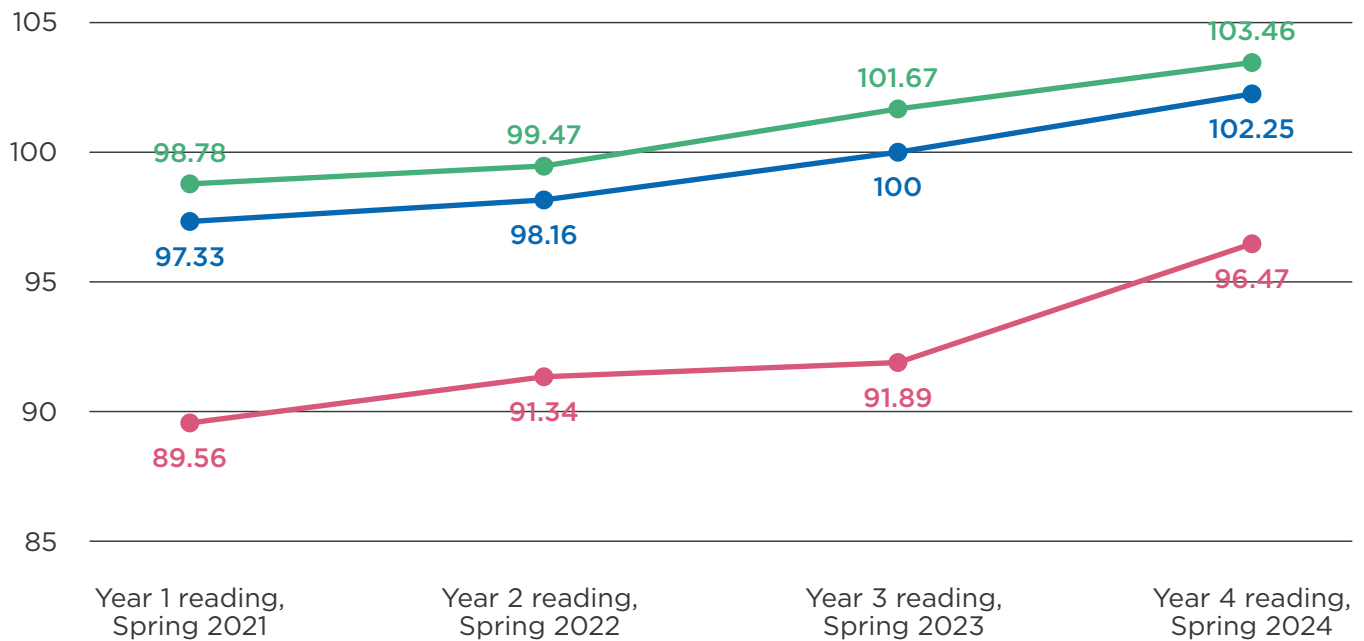
This may be hiding the story of low attaining pupils by not assessing them. Indeed, almost all schools reported focusing on low attainers in their recovery work this year.

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 1 Indicated on DfE Key Stage 2 (KS2) attainment reports for example: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment#explore-data-and-files>

The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers continues to be larger than pre-pandemic levels, but there are some signs of improvement for Year 4 pupils.

For Year 4 pupils across both subjects, the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those not eligible was equivalent to around seven months' progress. Although this is still wider than gaps reported pre-pandemic, the gaps in reading and maths have reduced since spring 2021, as shown in the graph below.

Average change in standardised reading scores for pupils in Year 4



- Non-FSM mean score
- Mean score
- FSM mean score

For Year 5 children, although disadvantaged pupils' attainment has improved in reading and maths, so has their peers', meaning the attainment gap has not reduced. This gap remains at six months' progress in reading and seven months' progress in maths, wider than those reported pre-pandemic.



Schools prioritise support for low attaining pupils but continue to face challenges from pupil absence and workload

Nearly all schools reported prioritising additional support for very low-attaining pupils, and nearly two-thirds were doing so for disadvantaged pupils. However, this has reduced slightly from the support recorded in 2023. Mathematics, reading and small group work were the most common areas for support in 2023/2024, with all three being more commonly used with low-attaining and disadvantaged pupils.

Whilst Covid-specific disruption such as Covid-illness absences continues to reduce, schools report other challenges to school life relating to the longer-term fallout of the pandemic. These include increased reports of difficulties obtaining external support for pupils and increased staff workload related to pupil behaviour and wellbeing. Wider challenges with pupil absence are also reported.





Wellbeing is an area of continued focus for schools although teachers believe pupils' social skills are on track

Since 2020/2021, wellbeing has been an area of continued focus when supporting pupils, with the majority of schools keeping their increased wellbeing provision in place during 2023/2024. The top strategies to support wellbeing this year were small group sessions, external support and staff redeployment.

In spring 2024, most pupils' social skills were considered to be average when compared to a child of the same age had the pandemic not happened (as was the case in 2023). However, teachers reported lower social skills for pupils eligible for free school meals compared to their non-eligible peers, as well as boys in comparison to girls. It is not possible to conclude whether these findings are as a result of Covid-19 school closures, or whether this has been a pattern since before the pandemic.

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