

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

**Findings from the third 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 2023, 6,157 pupils in 82 schools took part in year 3 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 3 and Year 4 pupils. Contextual information about school practices and any catch-up activities undertaken with the pupils were also collected through a survey completed by 65 headteachers or senior leaders. We published the [report](#) from year 3 of the study on 05 October 2023. The findings from year 2 of the study are available [here](#).

**The research continues to highlight the importance of focusing catch-up support on very low attaining pupils and closing the disadvantage gap.**

A key recommendation for policy makers is that it is essential that schools are both adequately funded and supported. This will ensure that the required long-term support can be delivered, particularly as this is a concern reported by schools.

**Although these pupils continue to struggle, overall most children have caught up to pre-pandemic levels.**

On average, Year 3 and Year 4 pupils appear to have closed the attainment gap in both reading and maths, compared to where we would have expected them to be before the pandemic.

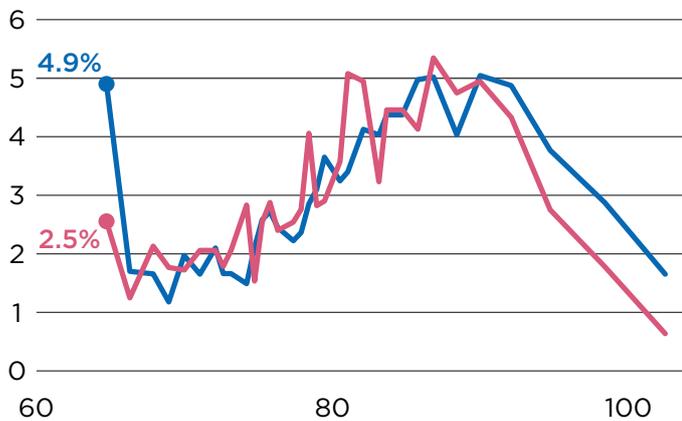
We are pleased to report that Year 3 pupils were, on average, 2 months ahead in maths, and Year 4 pupils were 3 months ahead in reading.



**Thank you for the dedicated and continued involvement of all our participating schools. These insights would not be possible without you!**

**The number of very low attaining younger readers in the typical classroom continues to be higher than pre-pandemic levels.**

**Year 3 pupils' standardised reading scores in spring 2023**



As in the previous year of this study, we found a large increase in very low attainers in Year 3 for reading, compared with before the pandemic. In Year 3, for reading, the proportion of very low attaining pupils almost doubled from **2.5%** to **4.9%**. Although there were also more high attaining pupils in spring 2023, this difference was not as large as the increase in low attaining pupils.

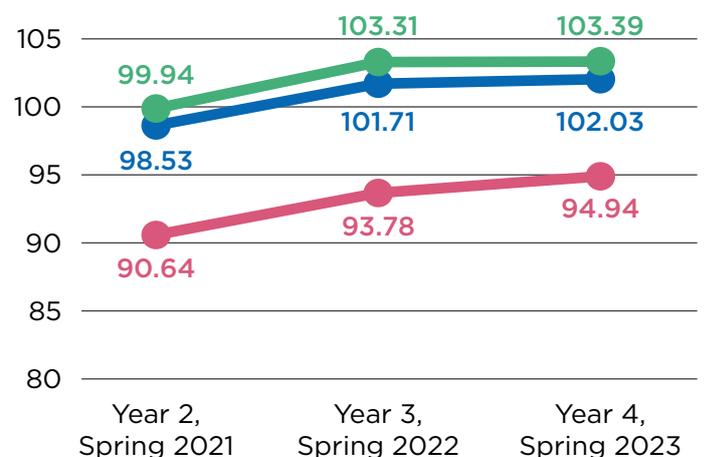
— % In Spring Term 2023  
 — % In Standardisation Sample 2017

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

For reading, in both Year 3 and Year 4, the attainment gaps between pupils eligible for free school meals and those not eligible were both equivalent to around seven months' progress. Although disadvantaged pupils' scores improved from spring 2021 to spring 2023, so did their peers' and so the gap between them has not reduced.

However, in maths, disadvantaged pupils in Year 3 and Year 4 have managed to reduce the gap originally measured in spring 2021. Although this is better, it is a relatively small improvement as the gap still stands at around 6 months' progress in spring 2023. The graph shows how the gap decreased between Year 4 disadvantaged pupils and their peers in maths between spring 2021 to 2023.

**Average change in standardised maths scores for pupils in Year 4**



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

Nevertheless, in both years for reading and maths, these gaps are still wider than those reported before the pandemic.



## Headteachers are still concerned about their pupils' wellbeing

Overall, the challenges originally reported by schools have decreased since 2022. Nevertheless, the wellbeing of pupils was an area of continued focus during 2022/2023, alongside provision of home learning. Small group sessions and extra PSHE sessions were the top strategies for social and wellbeing support.

Fortunately, compared to last year, fewer schools reported that learning was disrupted in 2022/2023. Whilst almost all schools reported some level of disruption in 2022, in 2023 this dropped to below half with the remaining 54% reporting a normal school year. Of the disruption reported in 2023, this was mainly due to pupils' behaviour and wellbeing, a challenge which has increased for schools since 2021/22. In addition, schools indicated that insufficient funding to support pupils who had missed learning also contributed to the disruption reported in 2023.

Since last year, some schools felt that parental engagement had decreased: whilst the majority of schools felt that parents were as capable of providing support in 2022/23 as in 2021/22, three-in-ten headteachers felt they were less willing to do so.

Findings suggest that schools have effectively targeted the most affected groups in 2022/2023. Nearly all schools reported prioritising additional support for very low attaining pupils, and three-quarters were doing so for disadvantaged pupils. Results suggest that the focus on maths support for disadvantaged pupils and low attainers has translated to improved outcomes for learners in these areas. However, there appears to be a need for continued support for very low attainers in reading, especially in our younger cohort (Year 3), and continued efforts to reduce the disadvantage gap.

# Spotlight on reading and maths achievement

Here are some of the findings on pupils' strengths and weaknesses in reading and maths in all schools which took part in the study in spring 2023 compared with before the pandemic. Schools which use the NFER Tests Analysis Tool are able to use the question level data to analyse pupils' performance in detail.



## Reading

Year 3 and Year 4 pupils were assessed on 6 content domains classified in line with the Key Stage 2 test framework.

higher attainment   
 the same attainment   
 lower attainment

### Year 3 reading

The Year 3 assessment focuses mainly on two domains: retrieve and record information/ identify key details from texts and make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text. There are a smaller proportion of questions requiring pupils to give/explain the meaning of words in context and very few testing the other domains.

#### Reading test coverage

	Compared with pupils before the pandemic, Year 3 pupils showed...	Compared with pupils in Year 3 in spring 2022, Year 3 pupils showed...
Give/explain the meaning of words in context		
Retrieve and record information / identify key details from texts		
Summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph		
Make inferences from the text/ explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text		
Identify/explain how content is related and contributes to meaning		
Identify/explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases		

#### Reading test coverage

Compared with pupils before the pandemic, Year 4 pupils showed...

Give/explain the meaning of words in context	
Retrieve and record information/identify key details from texts	
Summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph	
Make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text	
Identify/explain how content is related and contributes to meaning	
Identify/explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases	

### Year 4 reading

Like the Year 3 assessment, the Year 4 assessment focuses mainly on the two domains assessing retrieval and inference. There are also a small number of questions targeting vocabulary and other retrieval and inference related skills.

# Maths

The curriculum is divided into six domains which are the same for both Year 3 and Year 4.



## Year 3 maths

The Year 3 assessment focuses mainly on two domains: number and place value and calculations. There are more questions testing the other domains compared with the Year 2 assessment.

### Maths test coverage

Compared with pupils before the pandemic, Year 3 pupils showed...

Compared with pupils in Year 3 in spring 2022, Year 3 pupils showed...

Number and place value	↑	=
Calculations	↑	=
Fractions	=	=
Measurement	=	=
Geometry	↓	=
Statistics	↓	↓

### Maths test coverage

Compared with pupils before the pandemic, Year 4 pupils showed...

Number and place value	↑
Calculations	↑
Fractions	↑
Measurement	=
Geometry	↓
Statistics	↑

## Year 4 maths

In the Year 4 assessment, the domains of number and place value, and calculations form the majority of the assessment, as in Year 3. However, the number of questions assessing fractions, measurement and statistics is slightly higher than in Year 3.

**Pupils eligible for free school meals performed significantly lower than pupils not eligible in all reading and maths domains in both year groups.**

Our earlier findings (in 2021 and 2022) also found children from disadvantaged backgrounds had lower attainment in all curriculum areas in reading and maths.



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