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State Assessment Results: Covid-19 Impacts

Assessing student progress is among one of the most pressing difficulties presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, disengagement, low attendance, and virtual learning settings imposed hurdles to assessing whether students were learning as much as they would during a typical school year. Moreover, the severity of the challenges students faced—particularly students from low-income families—has left many educators and stakeholders wondering whether Covid-19 has made a lasting impact on student learning.

Initial results from interim assessments administered in the wake of the pandemic suggest many students began the 2020-2021 school year behind, and the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers continued to grow through the pandemic. Only about one in three New Mexico students is proficient in reading and science, and one in five in math. The Legislature should begin to consider systemic changes to student learning time and supporting the state’s educator ecosystem in order to improve outcomes for all students.

New Mexico’s Balanced System of Assessments

In recent years, the Public Education Department (PED) has been working to reduce the number of assessments New Mexico students are required to take, ultimately approaching what the department calls “a balanced system of assessments.” The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires students to be assessed in English and math once a year in third grade through eighth grade, and once in high school. [Section 22-2C-4 NMSA 1978](#) mirrors these federal requirements, but specifies that the high-school assessment should occur in 11th grade. PED also requires some assessments beyond what is mandated in statute, like the PSAT in 10th grade and Istation assessments in kindergarten through second grade.

- ***New Mexico Measures of Student Success and Achievement (NM-MSSA)*** . In third through eighth grades, students are required to take the NM-MSSA, a summative assessment aligned to common core content standards. NM-MSSA is designed to test student proficiency in mathematics and English language arts.
- ***New Mexico Assessment of Science Readiness (NM-ASR)***. The NM-ASR is an assessment aligned to New Mexico STEM Ready! Science Standards and is required in fifth, eighth, and 11th grades.

Key Takeaways

Results from the Spring 2022 summative assessment will be delayed until September due to a process PED calls “standards validation.” Analysis of interim test data is theoretically possible but must be done with caution

Pages 3-4

Data from the Istation formative assessment suggest students began the 2021-2022 school year behind and experienced about a year’s worth of growth. To return to pre-pandemic performance, more growth is needed.

Page 4

Preliminary data suggest the achievement gap between economically dis-advantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers has widened during the pandemic.

Page 5

The legislature can prioritize policies designed to reengage students and teachers, improve STEAM education, and improve the quantity and quality of hours spent at school

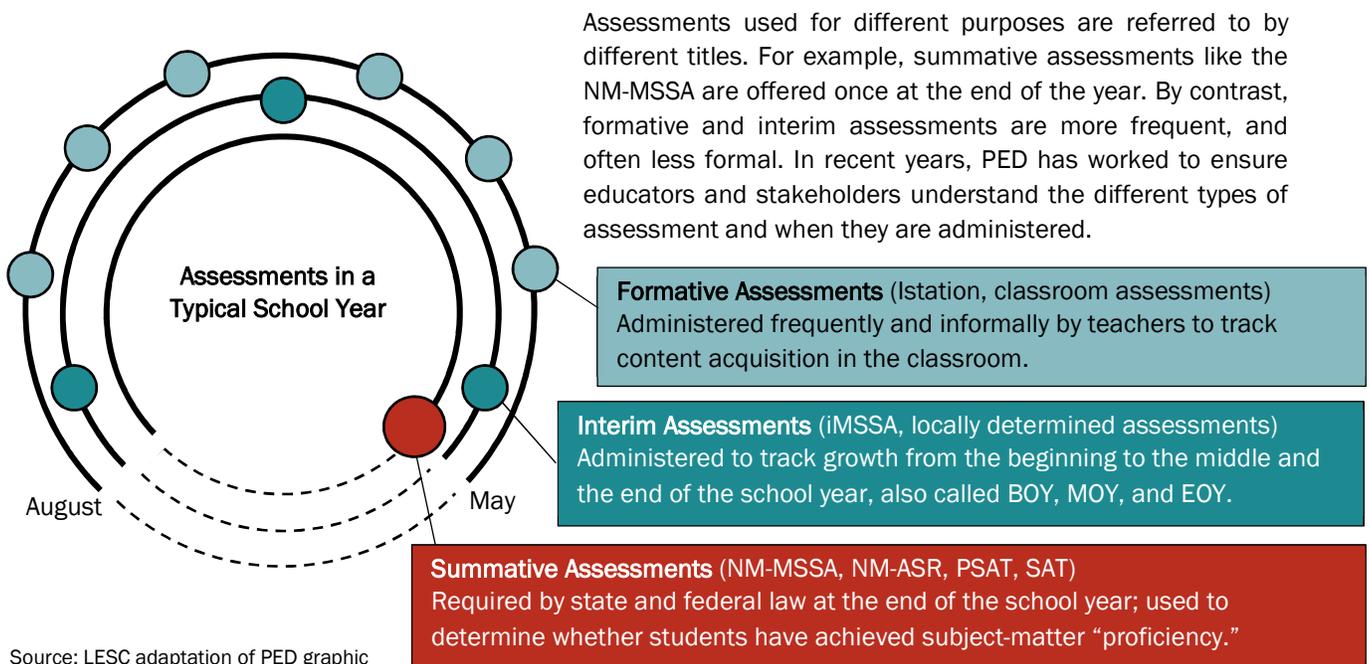
Pages 6-7

- **College Board's PSAT and SAT.** In 10th grade, PED requires New Mexico students to take the PSAT, and in 11th grade, the SAT, a college-readiness assessment commonly accepted by colleges nationally. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to use college-readiness assessments as summative assessments in high school for federal accountability purposes. The College Board has aligned the assessments with the Common Core content standards.

In addition to a slate of required summative assessments, schools track students' acquisition of content over time using formative and interim assessments. Even though statute does not require these assessments, PED requires schools to track literacy and reading skills in kindergarten through second grade using the Istation assessment, and math and reading skills using the Interim Measures of Student Success and Achievement (iMSSA), or some other locally determined interim assessment.

- **Istation Indicators of Progress.** Istation is a literacy test that assesses kindergarten through second grade students in listening, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary, and other essential reading skills. The test is computer-adaptive, meaning the difficulty of questions is adjusted based on how well the student is performing. Istation is administered monthly, with scores averaged every three months to determine whether students are “on-benchmark” at the beginning of the year, in the middle of the year, and at the end of the year.
- **Interim Measures of Student Success and Achievement (iMSSA).** PED offers access to an interim assessment aligned to the summative NM-MSSA for math and reading in third grade through eighth grade. In the 2021–2022 school year, PED required administration of either iMSSA or some other locally determined interim assessment to ensure students are making meaningful progress toward academic content standards in the wake of the pandemic.

Assessment Literacy: Understanding Different Types of Assessment



Source: LESC adaptation of PED graphic

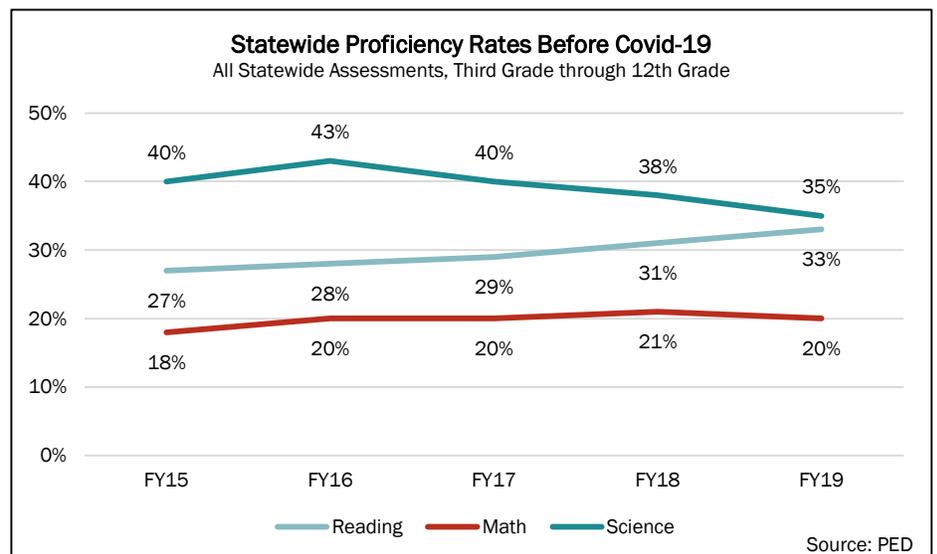
In addition to required assessments, PED has adopted a slate of specialized assessments designed for specific populations and purposes. These include the following:

- **ACCESS for English Learners 2.0.** The ACCESS for ELs 2.0 assessment is designed to identify students' progress toward English language proficiency in listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Each year in the early spring, students in kindergarten through 12th grade identified as English learners take the ACCESS assessment and receive a score of one through six based on their level of English proficiency.
- **Alternate ACCESS Assessment.** The Alternate ACCESS Assessment is a form of ACCESS for ELs 2.0 offered to students with cognitive disabilities that prevent them from meaningfully participating in the ACCESS for ELs 2.0 assessment.
- **Dynamic Learning Maps.** Dynamic Learning Maps, or DLM, is an assessment administered to students with cognitive disabilities in place of NM-MSSA, the statewide standards-based assessment. The modified test measures proficiency in meeting common core content standards for English language arts, mathematics, and science skills.
- **Early Childhood Observation Tool and Kindergarten Observation Tool.** These tools are used to assess prekindergarten and kindergarten students' readiness for a general education classroom. The tools are a series of rubrics designed to track students' physical development, literacy, mathematics, scientific reasoning, sense of self, family, and community, and approaches to learning. The two tools are meant to act as a bridge between prekindergarten programs and school entry in kindergarten.

Results from Recent Assessments

Prior to Covid-19, approximately one in three New Mexico students was considered proficient in grade-level reading, one in three in science, and one in five in math. While the state was making strong progress in improving reading proficiency, math proficiency had stagnated and science proficiency was on a four-year downward decline. The figure below shows statewide proficiency rates on the summative PARCC assessment in FY15 through FY18. In FY19, the state administered the Transition Assessment of Mathematics and English Language Arts (TAMELA), representing a transition away from the PARCC and toward the NM-MSSA. Throughout this time, PED worked with the assessment vendors to ensure results could be compared year-over-year.

In April 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic put a halt to New Mexico's assessment system. The United States Department of Education waived federal testing requirements in every state during the spring of 2020; nationwide school closures presented challenges to the normal administration of standardized tests, most of



which have strict rules designed to keep test results valid, reliable, and comparable year over year. Because PED could not assure the validity of standardized tests taken at home, students did not take standardized tests in the 2019–2020 school year. Likewise in the following spring of the 2020–2021 school year, a year where students were primarily receiving online instruction, only limited state testing occurred.

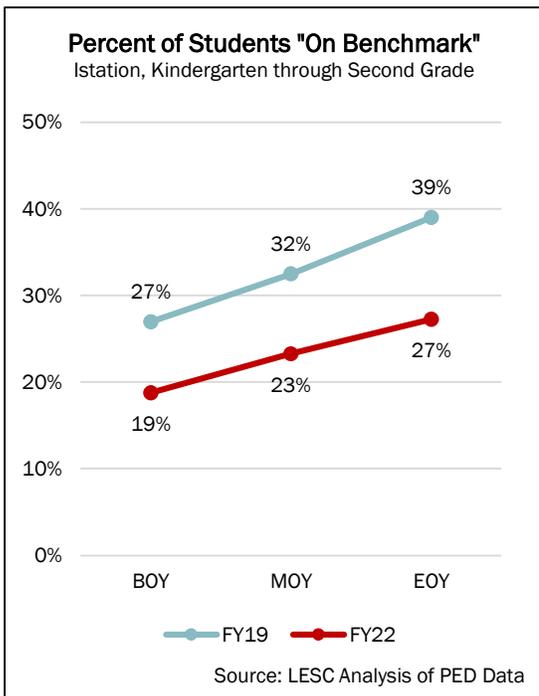
In the most recent 2021–2022 school year, students returned to primarily in-person instruction, and as a result were able to participate in the statewide administration of the NM-MSSA in grades three through eight, the PSAT in 10th grade, and the SAT in 11th grade. However, results from these assessments are not yet available due to a process PED calls “standards validation.” Standards-validation is a process that occurs in the first year of the administration of a new assessment, like the NM-MSSA. During the standards validation

process, the department works to align individual questions on each assessment with the state’s academic content standards, helping to set the bar for “proficiency” and ensure results are comparable year-over-year. In a Legislative Finance Committee hearing in May 2022, PED staff explained they anticipate having results from the new assessment by September 2022, but in future years, results should be available in June or July.

Results from the Spring 2022 statewide summative assessment will be delayed until September 2022 due to a process PED calls “standards validation.”

Analysis of Interim Assessment Data

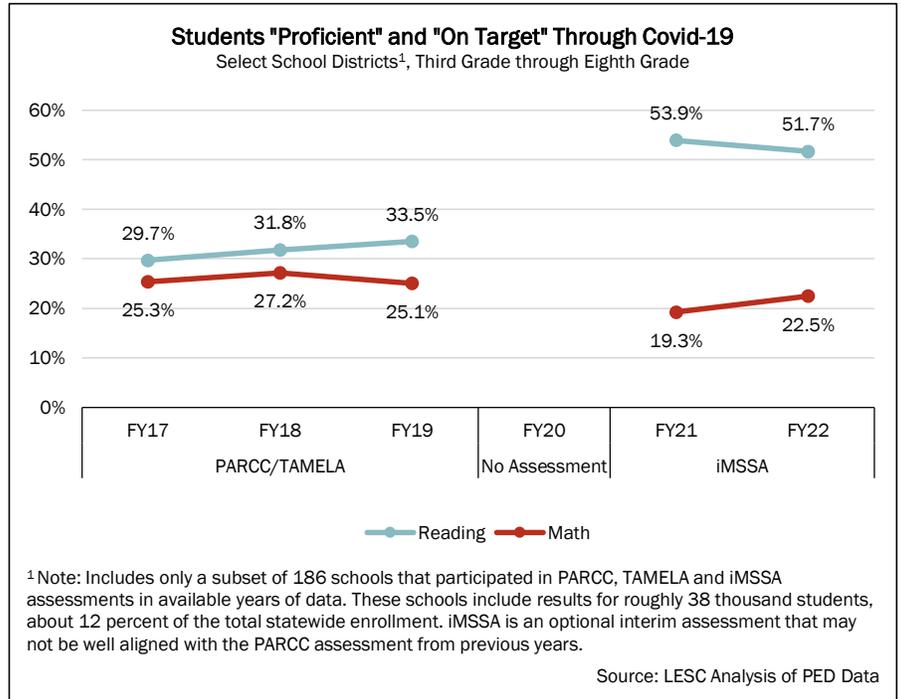
In addition to statewide standardized testing at the end of the 2021–2022 school year, PED required schools to participate in some form of interim testing. In an attempt to better prepare schools for NM-MSSA at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, PED made the interim iMSSA available to all schools, many schools made local decisions about which tests to participate in. According to PED data, 198 schools administered the iMSSA test in FY21, which increased to 288 in FY22.



“A Year’s Worth of Growth.” The Istation assessment is the only assessment that was administered statewide both before and after the pandemic. Students take Istation frequently throughout the school year in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, creating scores that can be averaged into beginning-, middle-, and end-of-year performance. Using these scores, educators and policymakers are able to understand whether students are growing and mastering content during the course of a normal school year.

Istation results tell a striking story when examined before and after the pandemic. In FY19, before the pandemic, 27 percent of students were “on benchmark” in reading at the beginning of the school year, a percentage that grew to 39 percent by the end of the school year. In FY22, the first year of in-person instruction after the pandemic, students began the year significantly behind, with only 19 percent of students on benchmark in reading. While the slope of their growth through the pandemic mirrored the pre-pandemic trend, one year of growth for these students is not enough – students need more than a year’s worth of growth to catch up to their peers from previous years.

In lieu of summative test results, LESC staff attempted to analyze proficiency results from the FY17, FY18 administrations of PARCC, the FY19 administration of TAMELA, and the FY21 and FY22 end-of-year administration of iMSSA. The chart to the right shows the results from the PARCC, TAMELA, and iMSSA in 186 schools. To attempt to produce the highest comparability possible, LESC staff were careful to analyze only those schools that took every assessment in every year of data available, creating a sample of schools representing approximately 38 thousand students per year, about 12 percent of the total statewide enrollment.



Results from this analysis suggest percent of students “proficient” on the statewide assessment is not well-aligned with the percent of students “on target” on the interim assessment, as evidenced especially by reading scores. PED staff have urged extreme caution in comparing proficiency data from before the pandemic to data from iMSSA after the pandemic, explaining the assessments are very different. While 33 percent of students in the sample were proficient in reading in FY19, iMSSA results suggest over 50 percent of students are on target. It is unlikely this jump is the result of an improvement in actual student performance; rather, the jump is likely evidence of a misalignment between the two tests.

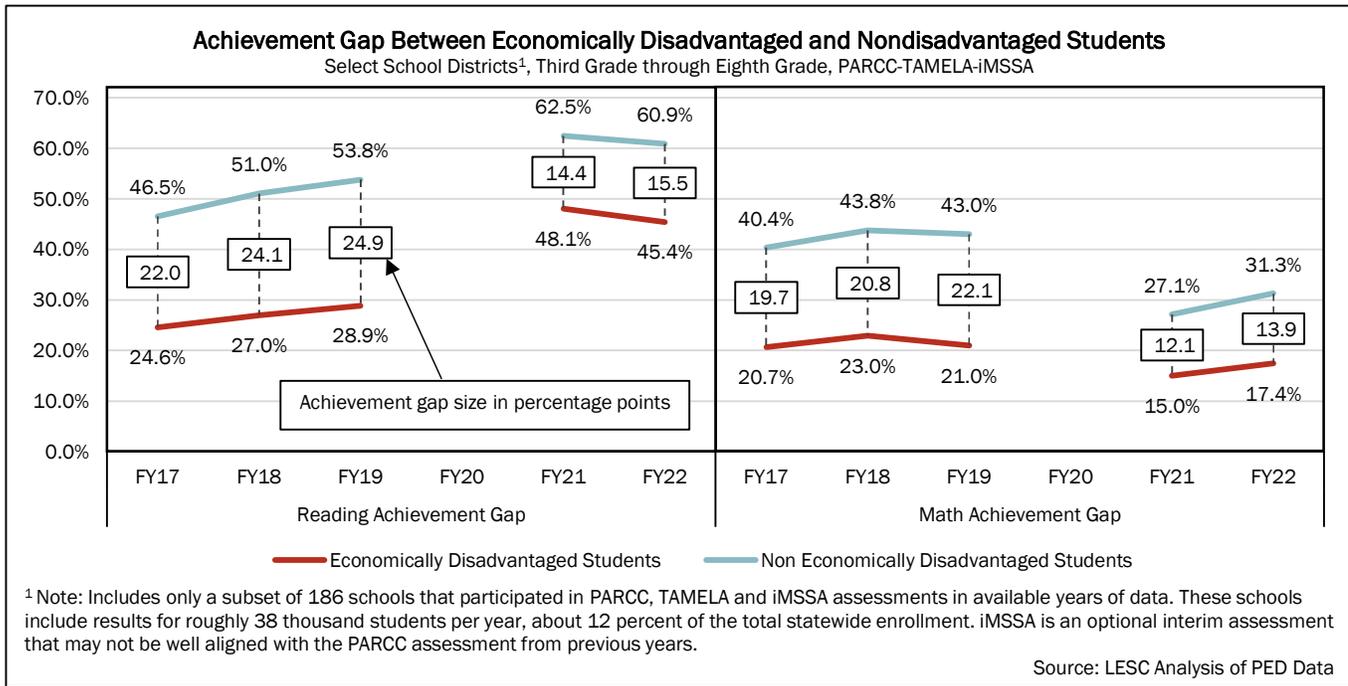
Comparisons of “proficiency” data from the statewide assessment and “on target” data from interim assessments are not perfect – but until FY22 summative assessment data are released, it’s the only data available.

The Achievement Gap. The interim assessment can also be used to analyze in the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers over time. The misalignment of the summative and interim tests presents additional challenges in interpreting these data, but some inferences can be made despite these challenges.

Even before the pandemic, PARCC and TAMELA data from FY17 to FY19 suggest the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers was widening. Among the sample of 186 schools that participated in PARCC, TAMELA, and iMSSA in every year of those three tests available, the size of the reading achievement gap grew from 22 percentage points in FY17 to nearly 25 percentage points in FY19. In math, the trend was similar, growing from 20 percentage points in FY17 to 22 percentage points in FY19. Although the scores from iMSSA are poorly aligned to historic performance, evidence from iMSSA suggests the achievement gap continued to

Data suggest the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers may have widened throughout the pandemic.

widen from FY21 to FY22, with a gap that grew from 14 percentage points to 15 percentage points in reading and 12 percentage points to 14 percentage points in math. Evidence of a widening achievement gap corresponds with anecdotal reports heard from educators and students across the state; students without the means to a virtual education were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.



Policy Implications

While these data are best understood as preliminary, the Legislature and education stakeholders across the state should prepare for evidence that proficiency rates across the state have declined and the achievement gap has widened. The Legislature has been making investments in programs across the state designed to target the achievement gap, but without dedicated studies and reliable data, the effectiveness of these programs remains difficult to parse. There is likely no “one-size-fits-all” solution to New Mexico’s proficiency rates, but the Legislature can target its efforts and investments to holistically improve how students learn.

Reengage Students. According to data from PED, the percent of students “chronically absent,” defined as missing 10 percent of the school year or more for any reason, skyrocketed from 15 percent to about 30 percent during the pandemic. For learning to be effective, students should be engaged and find value in the time they spend at school. Investments aimed at making education relevant to students, culturally and linguistically, as well as making sure all students feel supported in their pathway to college or a career.

Relevant Budget Considerations:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culturally and Linguistically responsive instruction Career-technical education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve New Mexico’s graduation requirements to reflect the skills students want from education and the pathways students choose after graduation. Create a broader definition of “school directed program” that incentivizes schools to pursue innovative and engaging teaching styles like project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and career technical education.

Reengage Educators. Following landmark investments in educator compensation during the 2022 legislative session, New Mexico is poised to fill a number of vacancies across the state. As these vacancies are filled, the Legislature should begin to consider ways to ensure they are filled with the best educators possible. To this end, the state could consider greater use of paid prep time, supportive school leadership practices, and ongoing professional development to ensure every teacher feels supported. Moreover, the state could consider creating a pathway to mastery of the teaching profession, a career pathway that could keep high-quality teachers in the classroom for a longer period of time.

Relevant Budget Considerations:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher Professional Development Principal and School Leadership Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide funding within the state equalization guarantee for educator professional work, like prep time, collaboration, and other administration, embedded in the course of a normal school day. Create a pathway with incentives for high quality teachers to become “master teachers” and remain in the classroom.

Focus on mathematics and STEAM education. PED has concluded its “Year of Literacy,” a year-long push to improve student reading scores using awareness and targeted professional development focused on the science of reading. With only about 20 percent of students in New Mexico proficient in grade-level mathematics, the state should begin a similar statewide initiative for science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) education. In addition to targeted professional development, the state should consider how STEAM education can be improved systemically within the state’s other initiatives, including building pathways to STEAM-related career technical education and creating graduation requirements with diverse and relevant math courses.

Relevant Budget Considerations:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional materials within the state equalization guarantee STEAM initiative funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise New Mexico’s graduation requirements to afford students relevant and engaging pathways into STEAM fields, like statistics, computer science, financial literacy, career-related mathematics, and other relevant courses.

Increase the quantity and quality of time spent at school. The Legislature has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into programs designed to increase the amount of time students spend at school, including the Extended Learning Time Program, the K-5 Plus Program, and the K-12 Plus Pilot. These programs have seen varying degrees of success in implementation, with a greater number of school districts and charter schools choosing to implement the Extended Learning Time Program due to its flexibility and the fact that it requires fewer instructional hours than K-5 Plus. The Legislature could consider providing funding to increase the minimum hours students spend in school, giving schools more discretion over how those additional hours are distributed. The Legislature could also work to ensure time spent at school is high-quality.

Relevant Budget Considerations	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extended Learning Time Program K-5 Plus program Additional base funding for school hours in the state equalization guarantee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the statutory number of “minimum hours” students are required to attend school and provide sufficient funding for these hours. Provide funding within the state equalization guarantee for educator professional work, like prep time, collaboration, and other administration, embedded in the course of a normal school day. Reduce school district reporting requirements to allow schools to focus on the quality of education for students.