When grades rise but test scores fall, what should schools trust?

A Canadian report says pandemic learning loss persisted, while report cards may have made the setback look smaller.



A balance scale on a classroom desk compares a blank report card with a blank test sheet.

A new national report on Canadian schools says student performance fell during and after the COVID-19 **pandemic** in every province and territory it examined, even as teacher-assigned grades often moved in the opposite direction. According to Phys.org's coverage of the report, the researchers found declines in at least some standardized **assessment** results across Canada, while report-card grades rose enough to obscure how large the setbacks may have been.

That matters because schools do not recover from a **learning** problem they cannot see clearly. If grades suggest students are doing better, families and governments may assume the system has already bounced back. If standardized tests suggest students are still behind, officials may argue for more **tutoring**, more monitoring, or other **recovery** efforts. The tension is not simply "grades bad, tests good." It is that two familiar ways of measuring school performance can tell different stories, and each story can lead to different decisions about time, money, and help.

The report, titled "Pandemic Learning Loss in Canada: Student Performance Before, During, and After COVID-19," combined results from 15 studies. It used data collected by ministries of education from the 2014–2015 school year through the 2024–2025 school year. The report covered all Canadian provinces and territories except Manitoba and Nunavut. Researchers described it as the most detailed and comprehensive analysis of pandemic learning loss in Canada so far.

A standardized assessment is a test given and scored in a consistent way so results can be compared across schools, regions, or years. The report found that those assessments showed declines in at least some outcomes in every jurisdiction examined. But the pattern was not the same everywhere. The size and staying power of the losses differed by subject, grade, gender, and region. Some rural students were affected more than others. In many provinces, math gender gaps widened in favor of boys.

Those differences are important because a single national slogan cannot solve a problem that looks different from place to place. A ninth grader who lost ground in math may need a different response from a younger student struggling in reading. A rural school facing a sharper setback may need different support from a school where test scores have recovered more. The report's lead researcher, Tra-

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cy Vaillancourt of the University of Ottawa, said recovery efforts need to reflect those differences.

The more surprising finding is the gap between standardized test results and teacher-assigned grades. Teacher-assigned grades are the marks students receive from their classroom teachers. The report says those grades improved while test performance fell. The researchers describe this as grade **inflation**, which means grades rise without matching **evidence** that academic performance has risen by the same amount.

That creates a difficult choice for schools. Grades are close to the classroom. They come from teachers who know the course, the assignments, and the students' work over time. For many families, grades are also the most visible sign of whether a student is on track. But grades can vary from class to class and school to school, and the report warns that relying on them alone may make learning loss look smaller than it is.

Standardized assessments have the opposite strength and weakness. They can reveal broad patterns because they are designed for comparison. That makes them useful for governments trying to see whether one group of students, one subject, or one region needs more attention. But a test score is not the whole picture of a student. It does not explain by itself why a student struggled, what support would work, or what else was happening in that student's life and school.

The report's policy message is that governments should use evidence-based strategies, meaning approaches chosen and checked through data rather than assumptions, especially for the most **vulnerable** students. It also calls for reliable **tracking** of student achievement over time and plans to keep schools operating safely during emergencies. Those recommendations sound practical, but they raise hard questions. More testing and tracking can help identify needs, but they can also increase pressure on schools. Targeting help to specific groups can make recovery fairer, but it can also label students or communities in ways that feel unfair if the data are incomplete.

The report connects academic achievement with later outcomes such as education, employment, income, health, and well-being. That does not mean one test determines a life. It means that learning gaps left unaddressed can grow into larger inequalities over time. The challenge for schools is to take the warning seriously without pretending that any one measure, whether a report card or a standardized test, can carry the whole truth.

Written from reporting by Phys.org.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. If grades and standardized test scores point in different directions, which should carry more weight when schools decide where to send extra help?

2. How can schools target recovery support to groups that need it most without unfairly labeling those students or communities?

3. What information would you want before judging whether pandemic learning loss has truly been recovered?

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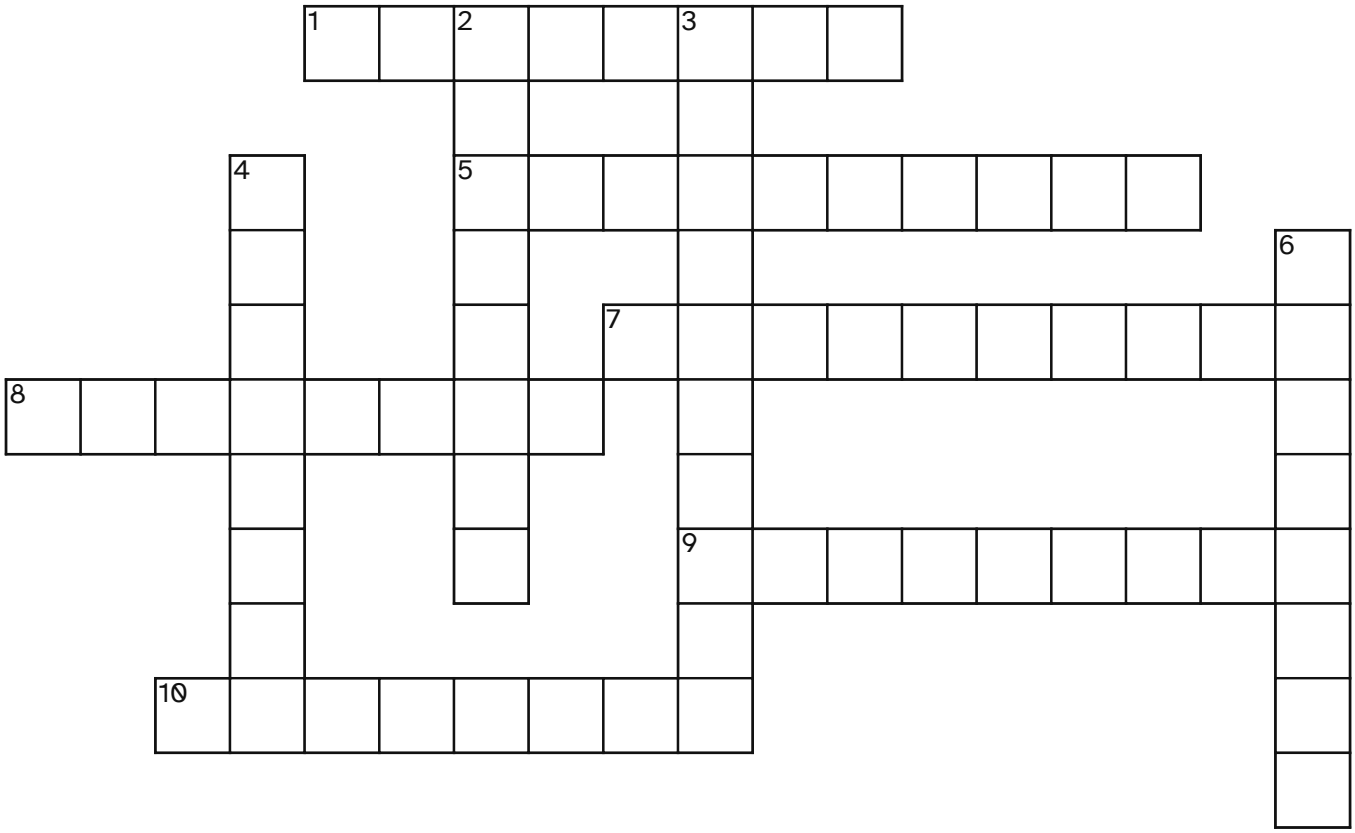
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ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE INEQUALITY INFLATION LEARNING
PANDEMIC RECOVERY TRACKING TUTORING VULNERABLE

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ACROSS

1 Extra individual or small-group academic help

5 Test used to measure what students know or can do

7 More likely to be harmed or need extra support

8 Disease outbreak spreading across much of the world

9 Rise in marks without matching improvement in achievement

10 Process of returning to an earlier level after a setback

DOWN

2 Repeated collection of information to follow progress over time

3 Unfair difference in opportunities or results between groups

4 Facts or results supporting a conclusion or decision

6 Gaining knowledge or skills through study and practice

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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Phys.org

"Report finds consistent pandemic learning loss and gaps between grades and test scores across Canada"

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https://phys.org/news/2026-11-pandemic-loss-gaps-grades-scores.html

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The article and its discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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