



The Research Bureau

# STUDENT OUTCOMES IN WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Patterns Across Standardized Assessments

REPORT 26-04

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student performance data provide a useful snapshot of academic progress, but they do not define students, schools, or the quality of education being delivered. Standardized test scores capture learning at a single point in time and cannot fully reflect student growth, engagement, or potential.

A substantial body of research shows that standardized test outcomes are heavily shaped by out-of-school factors, while the assessments themselves measure a narrow set of skills. When used as high-stakes accountability tools, standardized testing can incentivize teaching to the test, narrow curriculum, and reinforce stigma—particularly in urban districts serving high shares of low-income students, English Learners, and students of color. Despite these limitations, test results are often treated as definitive measures of school quality and student ability.

This report examines where Worcester Public Schools stands today and uses comparisons with peer districts in Massachusetts and across the country. These comparisons demonstrate that differences in student performance closely track income, English Learner status, race, and ethnicity. Because these characteristics frequently overlap within the same student populations and districts, their combined effects help explain why high-need districts are less likely to post strong average outcomes—pointing to systemwide patterns rather than isolated school or district failures.

The findings underscore a dual responsibility: schools must be adequately and equitably funded to support student learning, while policymakers must recognize the limits of what schools alone can accomplish. Expecting a small set of high-need districts to independently close gaps in test performance places a disproportionate burden on those communities rather than on the education system as a whole.

Ultimately, the goal of improvement is not to raise scores for their own sake, but to invest in students and the next generation of residents. Public education should prepare young people to think critically, engage civically, and navigate complexity. While standardized test results may reflect these outcomes over time, they should be understood as byproducts of meaningful learning—not the sole measure of success.

### GRADES 3-8 MCAS RESULTS

This section examines MCAS performance in grades 3–8 and situates Worcester’s outcomes within statewide and national peer comparisons, highlighting persistent gaps and recovery patterns following the pandemic.

- **Only about one in five Worcester students met or exceeded expectations** across English Language Arts, math, and science.
- **Every student group scored below statewide benchmarks**, with the largest gaps affecting Black, Hispanic/Latine, low-income students, and English Learners.
- Among Massachusetts’ peer districts with similar enrollment and student need—**Boston, Springfield, Lynn, Brockton, and Lowell**—no district had even one-third of students meeting or exceeding expectations in any subject.
- **Worcester recovered approximately 70 percent of its pre-pandemic ELA performance and 77 percent in math**, comparable to Springfield and Lowell but behind Boston.

Using the Education Recovery Scorecard, the Bureau compared Worcester to 21 demographically and economically similar districts nationwide.

- Between 2019 and 2024, nearly all peer districts experienced declines in reading and math and remained below national grade-level benchmarks.
- **Worcester students lost 0.88 grade levels in reading and 0.52 in math**, ranking 16th of 22 in reading recovery and 5th of 21 in math.
- The closest demographic matches—**Union Public Schools (Oklahoma) and Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD (Texas)**—followed nearly identical recovery trajectories despite operating under different funding and accountability systems.
- By 2024, students in all three districts remained roughly one to one-and-a-half grade levels behind pre-pandemic performance, with math recovering faster than reading.

### GRADE 10 MCAS, ADVANCED PLACEMENT EXAMS, AND SAT SCORES

This section examines high school outcomes across multiple indicators to assess college readiness, opportunity, and post-pandemic recovery.

- **Grade 10 MCAS results mirror earlier grades, with most students remaining below proficiency** and Worcester experiencing one of the steepest ELA declines among large cities in 2025.



- Worcester ranks mid-to-low among Massachusetts peer districts (4th in ELA, 5th in math), reflecting persistent post-pandemic challenges rather than outlier performance.

The removal of MCAS as a graduation requirement shifted accountability to districts; Worcester responded by adopting a [mastery-based grading](#) system focused on demonstrated learning rather than single test outcomes.

Advanced Placement participation exceeds the state average, indicating strong student aspiration and interest in rigorous coursework.

- **About one third of WPS 10-12 graders took an AP exam**, and there is a great variety of subjects students pursue.
- Most AP students take only one exam, limiting cumulative academic and financial benefits.
- **Only 43 percent of AP exams earn college-credit-eligible scores**, well below the statewide average.
- SAT scores remain below pre-pandemic levels, with Worcester ranking third lowest among Gateway Cities and trailing suburban districts by roughly **140 points per section**.

### STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

This section outlines the district’s ongoing efforts to improve instructional quality, expand opportunity, and address barriers to learning.

- Implemented a five-year Strategic Plan, [Our Promise to the Future](#) (2023–2028) with explicit goals to raise achievement and close gaps by race, language, income, and disability.
- Centered district priorities on high-quality instruction, equitable resource allocation, modern facilities, family engagement, and workforce stability.
- Adopted a science-of-reading curriculum (CKLA) to strengthen early literacy and foundational skills.
- Partnered with the American Institutes for Research to evaluate and improve services for English Learners and students with disabilities.
- Reorganized central office supports into school-embedded Quadrant Teams to provide direct instructional, multilingual, special education, and climate expertise.
- Expanded wraparound services and family engagement infrastructure to address non-academic barriers to learning.

- Scaled Early College pathways in partnership with local higher education institutions and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program for 7-12 graders

- Deployed [School Growth Plan Snapshots](#) to translate district goals into school-level action plans.

- Increased transparency by emphasizing conditions for learning and continuous improvement rather than test scores alone.

- Expanded summer learning and enrichment programs with targeted outreach to students with the greatest needs.

### CONCLUSION

The report concludes by emphasizing that Worcester’s outcomes reflect broader structural inequities rather than local failure. Persistent gaps in test performance by income level and English proficiency appear across states, funding systems, and accountability models, underscoring that these patterns are not unique to Worcester or the result of district-specific shortcomings.

Meaningful progress depends on sustained and equitable investment, transparent monitoring of improvement efforts, and resisting the tendency to reduce educational quality to test scores alone. Ultimately, educational success must be understood through the conditions for learning, student engagement, and access to opportunity—recognizing that standardized test results are, at best, partial reflections of those deeper foundations.

Readers interested in moving beyond outcomes to understand how Worcester is working toward improvement are encouraged to explore the Worcester Regional Research Bureau’s recent brief on the [WPS Strategic Plan Evaluation](#), along with the accompanying [interactive Tableau dashboard](#). These resources offer a transparent, school- and goal-level view of progress to date and highlight where focused attention and investment remain most needed.



## INTRODUCTION

What is student performance, and how do we measure it? In Massachusetts, as in much of the country, standardized tests such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) have long served as the dominant benchmark for evaluating student achievement and school quality. Yet while MCAS data reveal wide disparities in outcomes between schools and districts of privilege and those facing disadvantages, these tests capture only a narrow dimension of what students know and can do.

In recent years, the state’s accountability landscape has begun to evolve. Following the 2024 ballot question that ended the MCAS graduation requirement as a statewide competency determination, districts were required to develop their own locally defined systems for demonstrating student mastery, subject to approval by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Worcester approved a [mastery-based](#) grading process to create greater consistency across 9-12 schools, which will be expanded to middle schools later. That plan was approved by the School Committee on November 20.

Within this shifting policy context, the district is nearing the midpoint of implementing its five-year strategic plan, [Our Promise to the Future](#). Spanning 2023 through 2028, the plan sets out a broad set of district priorities alongside specific student performance benchmarks. These include increasing the share of students meeting or exceeding benchmarks in reading and math and for narrowing achievement gaps for Hispanic/Latine students, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and English Learners by 2027. It is important to note that the district has chosen not to use MCAS results to measure progress on these benchmarks. Instead, the strategic plan relies on the Student Tracking, Assessment, and Reporting System (STARS), an interim assessment platform used across grade levels to monitor student progress several times throughout the year. STARS is designed to provide teachers with timely data to identify learning gaps and to help families better understand their child’s academic progress.

### THE WRRB’S EVALUATION OF THE WPS STRATEGIC PLAN

The Worcester Regional Research Bureau has published an interactive Tableau dashboard— the [WPS Strategic Plan Evaluation](#)— that allows parents, guardians, local policymakers, and the interested public to explore progress toward the plan’s benchmarks to date. The Bureau has also released a companion [brief](#) that explains the strategic plan and summarizes the key findings from the dashboard.

Some research has found a correlation between stronger performance on STARS assessments and higher achievement on MCAS, suggesting that the tool may reinforce core academic skills and offer useful instructional insight. At the same time, reliance on interim assessments like STARS raises concerns about over-assessment and a growing culture of testing, which may reduce instructional time and limit opportunities for teachers to emphasize creativity, critical thinking, and more holistic learning experiences.

To understand standardized test performance gaps—and Worcester’s progress or lack thereof—it is first necessary to confront the structural forces that produce them. Calls for increased resources or improved staffing alone often assume that disparities in test outcomes are entirely within a district’s control. In reality, standardized test results reflect broader social, economic, and policy conditions that shape students’ opportunities to learn long before they enter a classroom.

This context is especially relevant in Worcester, a large urban school district where **71.9% of students are designated as low-income, 58.4% speak a first language other than English, and 32.2% are classified as English Learners**. Students facing concentrated poverty encounter a wide range of out-of-school barriers—housing instability, food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and fewer enrichment opportunities—that their higher-income peers within the same district, and students in more affluent neighboring districts, are far less likely to experience. Layered on top of these challenges is the reality that a substantial share of students are expected to demonstrate academic proficiency on standardized tests administered in a language they are still learning, which predictably contributes to large and persistent outcome gaps.

Being a first-language non-English speaker or an English Learner is not, in itself, a deficit. Many of these students possess forms of social and cultural capital—multilingualism, cross-cultural fluency, and adaptability—that will serve them well in an increasingly global and multicultural society. Yet within a K–12 accountability system heavily reliant on standardized testing, English Learners are systematically disadvantaged in ways unrelated to content knowledge or intellectual ability, but directly tied to language proficiency and test design.

As this report demonstrates, policymakers and families need a clearer understanding of what drives test score performance and how the state’s accountability framework defines and measures “success.” While Worcester Public



Schools must continue investing in teachers, curriculum, technology, and instructional innovation, statewide conversations about educational quality must extend beyond test scores alone. Standardized assessments often function as demographic proxies—capturing the effects of poverty, segregation, and inequality as much as, or more than, they measure school effectiveness.

If the goal is to build a stronger, more equitable public school system, we must challenge the paradigm that equates test scores with quality. This requires a continued reexamination of the state’s commitment to funding education equitably and ensuring that districts like Worcester receive support proportional to their needs—so that an adequate education remains not only a legal standard, but a lived reality for every student.

### **TEST-BASED STUDENT MEASUREMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Building on these questions of equity and educational quality, it is important to revisit the debate surrounding standardized testing and the state’s reliance on test-based accountability systems. Understanding both the benefits and the limitations of this approach helps explain why assessments like the MCAS remain central to measuring student progress—and why they continue to face criticism for failing to capture the full range of student abilities or the deeper structural inequities that shape educational outcomes.

Proponents of standardized testing argue that test-based measurement provides an objective, data-driven approach to assessing student achievement, identifying gaps, and holding schools accountable for performance. They view standardized tests as essential for ensuring that all students meet certain academic benchmarks, thereby improving workforce readiness and maintaining U.S. economic competitiveness in a globalized marketplace ([Peterson et al., 2011](#); [Angrist et al., 2021](#)). Others have found that standardized test performance is associated with college attendance, college readiness, and future earnings ([McElroy, 2023](#); [Papay et al., 2020](#); [Kane et al., 2022](#); [Papay et al., 2024](#)). Others have argued that accountability mechanisms—such as linking funding or interventions to test results—ensure that schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged students, improve outcomes and close achievement gaps ([Dee & Thomas, 2010](#)). Additionally, by measuring performance at the state and national levels, many proponents believe standardized tests help drive competition between states and school districts, fostering innovation and educational improvement.

Critics, however, contend that standardized testing is problematic for a variety of reasons. Researchers have

shown that these tests contain underlying biases, reinforcing cultural assumptions about knowledge and intelligence ([Aronson, 1995](#); [Popham, 2001](#)). Others have argued that these tests have been designed to only assess a narrow set of academic skills, particularly those deemed most important for college or the workforce ([Holler, 2024](#); [Thomas, 2013](#)). As a result, standardized tests do not measure the full range of students’ abilities.

The high-stakes nature of standardized tests for teachers and administrators has led to criticisms that their widespread use encourages “teaching to the test,” prompting schools to prioritize test performance over a more holistic, in-depth education ([Hamilton et al., 2002](#); [Jennings & Bearack, 2014](#)). This, it is argued, leads to score inflation, in which test scores increase over time, but does not necessarily mean that educational material is being taught better, and students are learning more, as some labor market economists or business leaders believe. These critics also highlight how standardized testing can narrow the focus of education in content and form, whereas critical thinking, creativity, social-emotional learning, and deeper subject mastery may be sacrificed in order to produce better test takers to manufacture better results ([Koretz, 2019](#)).

Equity concerns have also been raised, as standardized test scores frequently correlate with the intersection of race and socioeconomic status rather than school quality measures or instructional effectiveness ([Geiser, 2015](#); [Gaudet, 1999](#)). From this perspective, critics argue that standardized testing may not merely reveal disparities but could actively contribute to inequality ([Au, 2022](#)).

Another critique is that the reliance on test-based accountability as the sole measure of student performance has led to misconceptions about school quality. Companies that publish annual school rankings based on test scores reinforce the flawed notion that these metrics are definitive measures of educational excellence. However, these rankings often overlook critical factors such as instructional quality, school culture, and actual student learning, thus magnifying stigmas about urban, low-income, and disproportionality non-White school districts as providing lower-quality education. This can lead families away from these districts, contributing to further disadvantage ([Schneider & Gottlieb, 2021](#); [Knoester & Au, 2015](#); [Orfield and Lee, 2005](#)).

At its core, the debate over standardized testing in education reflects fundamental divergences in the goals and priorities ascribed to schooling. The extent to which standardized assessments should influence educational policy depends on underlying assumptions about the purpose of education, the legitimacy and utility of student



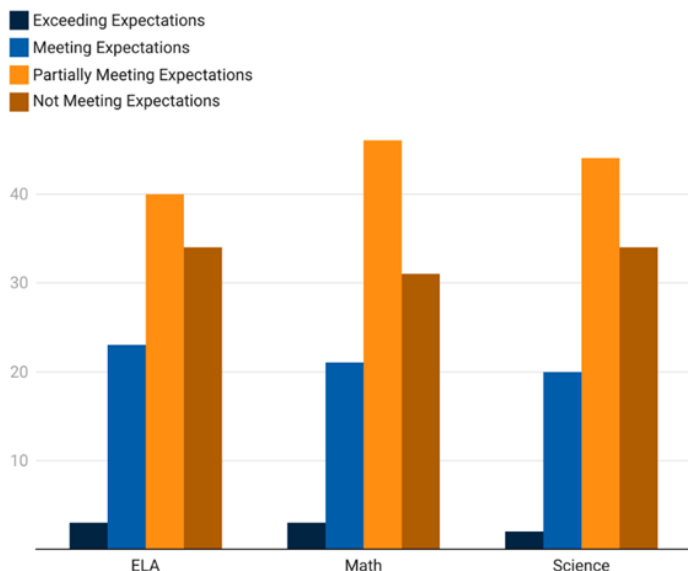
performance metrics, and the most effective strategies for pursuing equitable and meaningful learning. This report offers a framework for stakeholders across the ideological spectrum to critically examine student performance in

Worcester Public Schools, fostering a more nuanced and informed discourse on the role of standardized testing in educational accountability and reform.

## GRADES 3-8 MCAS RESULTS

This section analyzes 2024-2025 MCAS performance data for Worcester Public Schools (WPS), highlighting trends and disparities across student demographic groups. It then assesses the post-pandemic trends in MCAS scores, comparing WPS' progress to that of other large urban districts in the Commonwealth. Using data from the Education Recovery Scorecard, a joint project by Stanford and Harvard Universities, the Bureau identified national peer districts to WPS and compared their performance in reading and math using a national scale.

### Share of WPS Students in 2025 by Performance Category in Grades 3-8 MCAS



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 - Created with Datavrapper

District-wide MCAS results for Grades 3–8 in WPS reveal a consistent pattern: a large majority of students are partially meeting or not meeting expectations across all subject areas, while only about one-fifth are meeting or exceeding expectations.

These outcomes mirror trends in other large urban school districts, which serve a disproportionate share of low-income and English Learner students—populations that also overlap significantly with race and ethnicity. Among the six largest districts in Massachusetts, each with enrollment and demographic profiles like WPS, none had even one-third of students meeting or exceeding expectations on any subject test in 2025.

While the share of students meeting expectations provides a broad view of proficiency, it can mask crucial differences in how close—or far—students are from the state’s performance benchmark. To better understand these gaps, the following analysis looks beyond proficiency rates to examine average scaled scores for each student group in Worcester Public Schools. By comparing the average score of each group to the statewide benchmark of 500 points—the threshold for “Meeting Expectations”—we can see how far the typical student in each group remains from grade-level mastery. This perspective offers a more precise measure of progress toward recovery and highlights where academic supports may be most needed.

Across Worcester Public Schools, every student group falls below the statewide benchmark of 500 points in both ELA and math (bottom of page 7), though the size of these gaps varies by race, income, and language status. Asian

Achievement Level	Scaled Score Range	Definition
Exceeding Expectations	530–560	Mastery of the subject matter.
Meeting Expectations	500–529	Met grade-level expectations and is academically on track to succeed in the current grade in this subject.
Partially Meeting Expectations	470–499	Partially met grade-level expectations. The school, in consultation with the student’s parent/guardian, should consider whether the student needs additional academic assistance to succeed in this subject.
Not Meeting Expectations	440–469	Did not meet grade-level expectations. The school, in consultation with the student’s parent/guardian, should determine what coordinated academic assistance and/or additional instruction the student needs to succeed in this subject.



students come closest to meeting expectations, scoring 9 points below the benchmark in ELA and 3 points below in math—suggesting near-proficiency performance on average. Black and Hispanic/Latine students, respectively, show the largest racial and ethnic gaps, scoring 16 and 20 points below 500 across ELA and math—a difference of 7 to 10 points compared with White students.

The gap between low-income and non-low-income students is also pronounced: low-income students score about 15 points lower in ELA and 14 points lower in math, reinforcing how economic disadvantage aligns with lower achievement. English Learners face the steepest barriers, averaging 32 points below the benchmark in ELA and 26 points below in math, reflecting the dual challenges of language acquisition and content mastery. Comparable data for non-English Learners are not available, preventing a direct in- versus out-group comparison, but the existing figures make clear that language status compounds existing inequities across Worcester’s student population.

Research suggests that racial and ethnic achievement gaps stem from a combination of interrelated, out-of-school factors that accumulate over time, rather than any single cause. Studies point to differences in early access to high-quality early childhood education, exposure to housing and economic instability, health and environmental stressors, and access to academically enriching experiences outside of school as shaping learning well before students reach tested grades. These influences often intersect with school-age factors such as higher rates of low income, English Learner status, and chronic absenteeism among Black and Hispanic/Latine students,

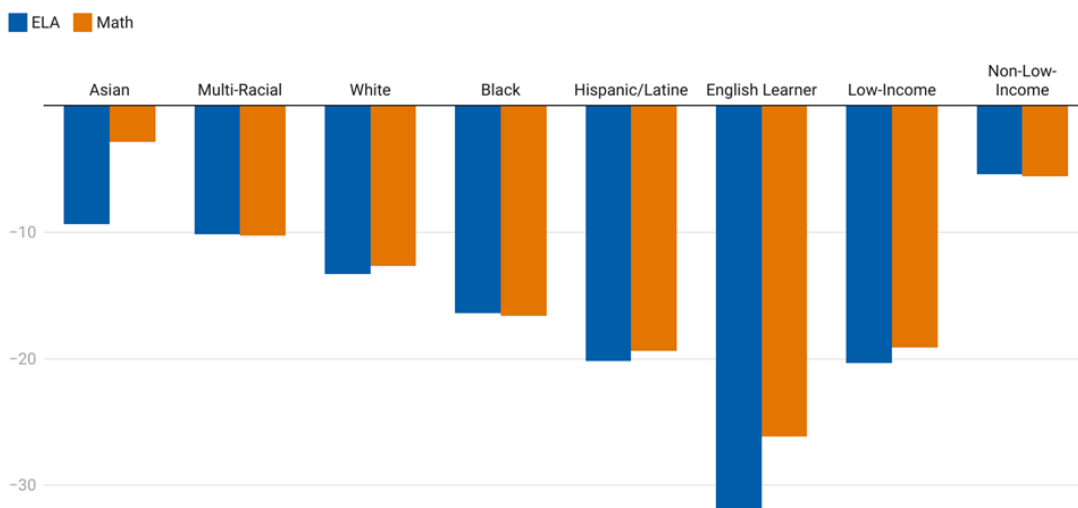
each of which is associated with lower average test performance and can compound over time. The test gaps reflect uneven access to opportunity across the life course, with race and ethnicity serving as markers of these broader structural conditions rather than as causal explanations themselves.

**WORCESTER’S STATEWIDE PEERS**

To provide a meaningful basis for comparison, this analysis focuses on six of Massachusetts’ largest school districts with broadly similar student populations and levels of socioeconomic need. The relatively low share of students meeting or exceeding expectations on standardized tests is neither unique to Worcester nor a recent development. Districts of comparable size and socioeconomic composition—particularly those serving disproportionately large shares of low-income students and English Learners—have long faced similar challenges and produced similar outcomes. This pattern of chronic “underperformance” predates the pandemic.

Districts across Massachusetts vary dramatically in size, fiscal capacity, and student need. Wealthier suburban districts often benefit from substantially higher per-pupil spending, driven by excess local capacity beyond the Chapter 70 minimum contribution to the foundation budget. These districts also tend to serve far smaller shares of low-income students and English Learners, resulting in fundamentally different instructional contexts and resource environments. Together, these factors make direct performance comparisons between high-need urban districts and their more affluent neighbors inherently limited.

**How far below the “Meeting Expectations” benchmark (500 points) does each student group score on average?**



Note: 0.0 represents scoring a 500  
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • Created with Datawrapper



Comparisons to wealthier districts can be useful in certain contexts—particularly when the goal is to highlight how disparities in income, wealth, and local resources shape educational outcomes. However, when the purpose is to understand how districts serving similarly disadvantaged student populations have fared through the pandemic and its aftermath, peer comparisons are far more instructive.

This report compares Worcester Public Schools with five other large Massachusetts districts including **Boston, Springfield, Lynn, Brockton, and Lowell that serve similarly high shares of low income students, English Learners, and students experiencing chronic absenteeism.** These districts represent the state’s largest urban school systems and face overlapping challenges tied to concentrated poverty, linguistic diversity, and uneven access to resources. Using this peer group allows for a more meaningful comparison than statewide averages, which are heavily influenced by suburban districts serving more advantaged student populations, and helps distinguish systemwide patterns from district specific differences.

The charts below present performance trends from 2019 through 2024 for all of these districts, highlighting how closely aligned outcomes remain among districts with similar demographic and economic profiles and offering insight into the uneven pace of academic recovery.

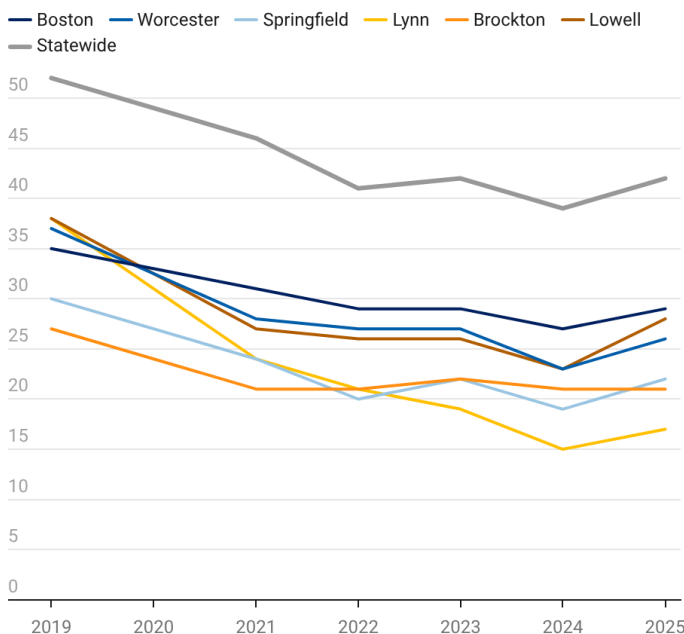
### Student Enrollment and Selected Student Populations in Worcester and Large Peer Districts

Districts	Students	Low-Income	English Learners	Chronically Absent
Boston	46,094	70.1%	34.7%	33.0%
Worcester	24,778	71.9%	32.2%	25.3%
Springfield	23,670	83.9%	19.0%	32.8%
Lynn	16,364	73.9%	45.8%	30.8%
Brockton	15,280	74.0%	34.8%	26.9%
Lowell	14,457	71.3%	29.6%	21.4%
Statewide	915,932	42.1%	13.9%	18.8%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

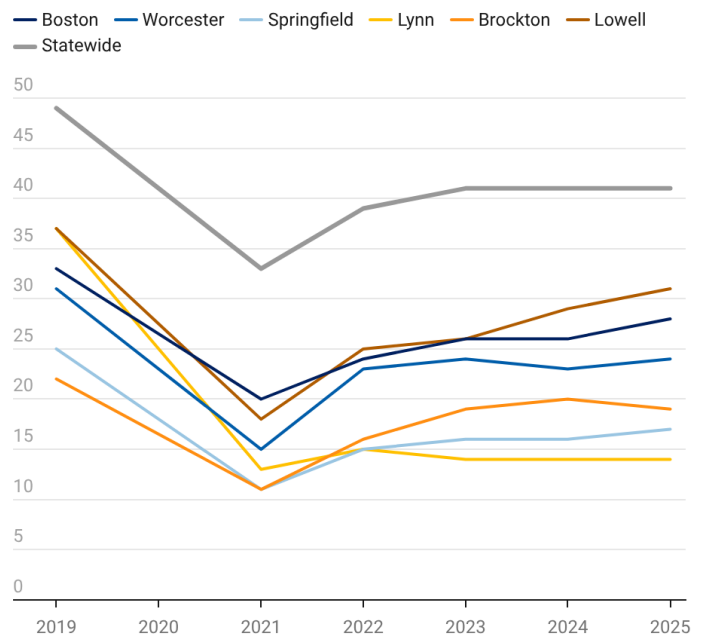
All of these city districts perform below the **statewide averages of 42% in English Language Arts (ELA) and 41% in math.** Since 2019, ELA performance has declined across every large urban district, with only modest rebounds emerging in 2025 for most—except Brockton, where scores have remained unchanged. In 2025, 26% of Worcester students met or exceeded expectations in ELA, placing the district third among the six largest city districts, behind Boston (29%) and Lowell (28%), and just ahead of Springfield (22%), Brockton (21%), and Lynn (17%). **Compared to 2019, when 37% of Worcester students met or exceeded expectations, the district has**

### Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3-8 ELA MCAS in Largest City Districts



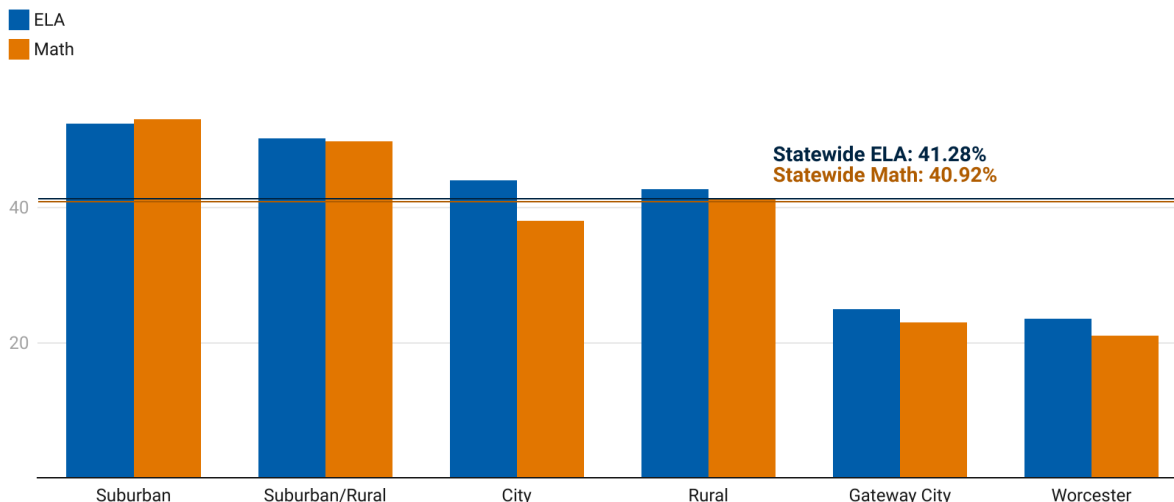
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

### Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3-8 Math MCAS in Largest City Districts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

## Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3–8 MCAS by District Type



Note: Suburban/Rural districts are regional districts including a suburban and rural community.  
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

**recovered about 70% of its pre-pandemic performance.** This level of recovery is on par with Springfield (73%) and Lowell (74%), but below Boston (83%) and Brockton (78%), and well above Lynn (45%).

In math, sharp declines in 2021 were followed by a rebound in 2022, and the share of students meeting or exceeding expectations has since risen gradually across districts. In 2025, 24% of Worcester students met or exceeded expectations in math, also ranking third among the six city districts, behind Boston (28%) and Lowell (31%), and ahead of Brockton (19%), Springfield (17%), and Lynn (14%). **Worcester’s 2025 performance represents about 77% of its pre-pandemic level, again placing it in the middle of the group**—below Boston (85%), Brockton (86%), and Lowell (84%), but ahead of Springfield (68%) and Lynn (38%).

As shown at the top of page 9, suburban and suburban-rural regional schools have the highest shares of students meeting or exceeding expectations—around half of students in both ELA and math, while performance drops sharply in city and rural districts. There is a striking gap between Gateway Cities, where the typical school’s proficiency rates are **20 percentage points lower than those in other city districts and less than half those of suburban schools.** Worcester’s typical school performance (23.5% in ELA and 21% in math) is slightly below Gateway City schools.

### WORCESTER’S NATIONAL PEERS

While comparisons among Massachusetts’ largest urban districts help illustrate disparities within the state, it is also useful to understand how Worcester and its peers perform

in a broader national context. Looking beyond state boundaries provides insight into whether the challenges faced by Gateway Cities mirror those of similarly positioned districts across the country. To do so, researchers have developed tools that align state test results with national benchmarks, allowing for a clearer picture of how local recovery and performance trends compare nationwide.

Nationwide, the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) provides a broader view of academic recovery since the pandemic by analyzing data from more than 11,000 school districts across 43 states. Developed by researchers at Stanford University and Harvard University, the study translates state test results onto the scale used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—a long-running federal exam often referred to as the nation’s report card. NAEP is administered annually to a representative sample of students in grades 4 and 8 and serves as the primary benchmark for tracking academic achievement across states over time.

To enable valid comparisons, the researchers converted each state’s proficiency thresholds for grades 3–8 into equivalent NAEP scale points. This approach allows for cross-state and demographic comparisons, illustrating how students from different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds performed relative to national grade-level expectations. The result is a consistent measure of pandemic learning loss and recovery that situates local performance—like that of Worcester—within the broader national context.

The most recent data from the project, released in a



[January 2024 report](#), reflect student performance through 2024 and show that pandemic recovery in Massachusetts has been particularly uneven compared to much of the country. **Massachusetts was one of six states where the gap between high- and low-poverty districts in reading scores grew by more than half a grade level, and one of eight states where the gap in math scores similarly expanded by more than half a grade level from 2019 to 2023.** Wealthier districts such as Lexington, Brookline, Newton, and Wachusett saw improvements in both math and reading achievement, while higher-poverty districts like Lynn, Fall River, and Revere experienced further declines, particularly in math performance.

The Worcester Regional Research Bureau used data from the Education Recovery Scorecard and the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) to identify peer school districts across the country with similar grades 3–8 enrollment sizes, student demographic compositions, and levels of economic disadvantage. These districts were then compared to Worcester to assess differences in pandemic recovery and standardized test performance, providing a national benchmark for understanding how similarly positioned communities have fared. This analysis focused on districts with comparable shares of Hispanic, White, Black, and Asian student populations.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Bureau identified 21 peer districts, the vast majority of which had adequate recovery data. Detailed demographic characteristics of each district can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

[Page 11](#) shows scatter plots of each district by grade 3-8 enrollment on the x-axis, and the change in average reading and math scores from 2019 to 2024 relative to the national average.

Most peer districts experienced declines in achievement between 2019 and 2024, remaining below the national average in both reading and math. No district in this group improved to the national grade-level average in math, and only two districts showed reading gains above the national benchmark. Over this period, **Worcester's students fell 0.88 grade levels in reading and 0.52 grade levels in math relative to the national average**, indicating that while performance declined, the losses were less severe in math.

**Worcester ranks 16th lowest in reading** out of 22 peer districts, showing a larger-than-average decline in literacy achievement. In contrast, **Worcester ranks 5th highest in math** among 21 districts, reflecting a comparatively stronger rebound in quantitative skills. Worcester's changes are most like **Wichita Falls ISD (TX) (-0.85 reading, -0.50 math)** and **Huntsville ISD (TX) (-0.55**

**math)**.

From this list, the Bureau applied a narrower set of demographic criteria to find peers that are even closer to WPS' demographic composition. Districts were selected within a  $\pm 10\%$  range for Hispanic/Latine students, who make up 46% of the WPS student body, and proportional variation thresholds for other groups— $\pm 5.67\%$  for White,  $\pm 3.75\%$  for Black, and  $\pm 1.39\%$  for Asian students—to align closely with Worcester's demographic profile.

The two closest matches to WPS were the **Union Public School District in Oklahoma** and the **Eagle Mountain–Saginaw Independent School District (EMSISD) in Texas**. Union serves a large urban-suburban area spanning southeast Tulsa and northwest Broken Arrow and is Oklahoma's eighth-largest district. EMSISD, located in northwest Tarrant County, Texas, covers 73 square miles that include Saginaw, Eagle Mountain, and parts of Fort Worth.

**As shown at the top of page 12**, between 2019 and 2024, Worcester, Union, and EMSISD all experienced declines in reading and math performance, following similar recovery patterns despite operating under different state systems. For all students, reading scores fell steadily—Worcester declined from  $-0.43$  to  $-1.31$ , Union from  $-1.04$  to  $-1.86$ , and EMSISD from  $0.02$  to  $-1.12$ —while math scores showed comparable losses, with Worcester dropping from  $-0.80$  to  $-1.32$ , Union from  $-0.86$  to  $-1.55$ , and EMSISD from  $0.10$  to  $-0.97$ .

**Across all three districts, students are now roughly one to one and a half grade levels behind pre-pandemic performance**, although math recovery has been slightly stronger than reading. All three districts remain below the national average, with Worcester's overall recovery falling between Union and EMSISD—EMSISD showing the strongest outcomes and Union the weakest.

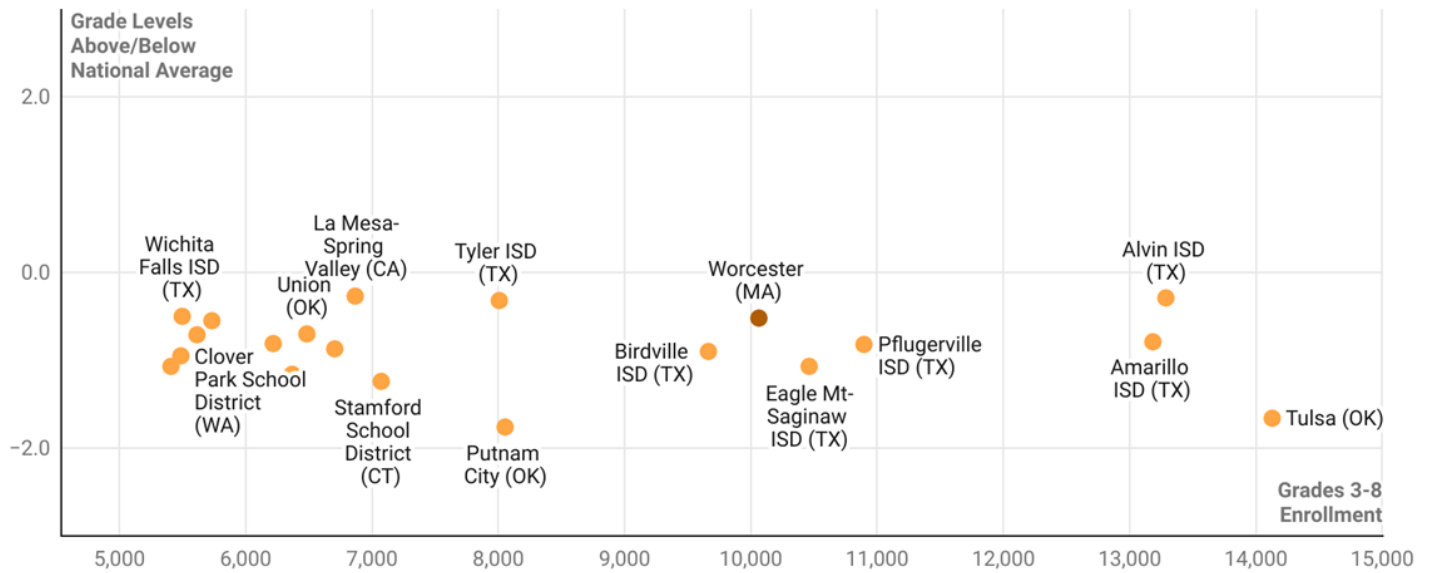
Across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, these districts displayed almost identical disparities (top of page 13). **Asian and White students perform near or above grade level**, while **Black and Hispanic students lag one to three grade levels behind**. By 2024, Worcester's White ( $-0.09$ ) and Asian ( $-0.07$ ) students were close to grade level, while Black ( $-0.99$ ) and Hispanic ( $-2.26$ ) students remained well below. Union's pattern mirrors this: White ( $-0.02$ ) and Asian ( $+0.13$ ) students approached the national average, compared to Black ( $-2.67$ ) and Hispanic ( $-3.15$ ) students who remained far behind. EMSISD follows the same structure—White ( $-0.32$ ) and Asian ( $-0.12$ ) students were closest to grade level, while Black ( $-2.02$ ) and Hispanic ( $-1.51$ ) students continued to trail significantly. Math shows the same consistency across all three: White



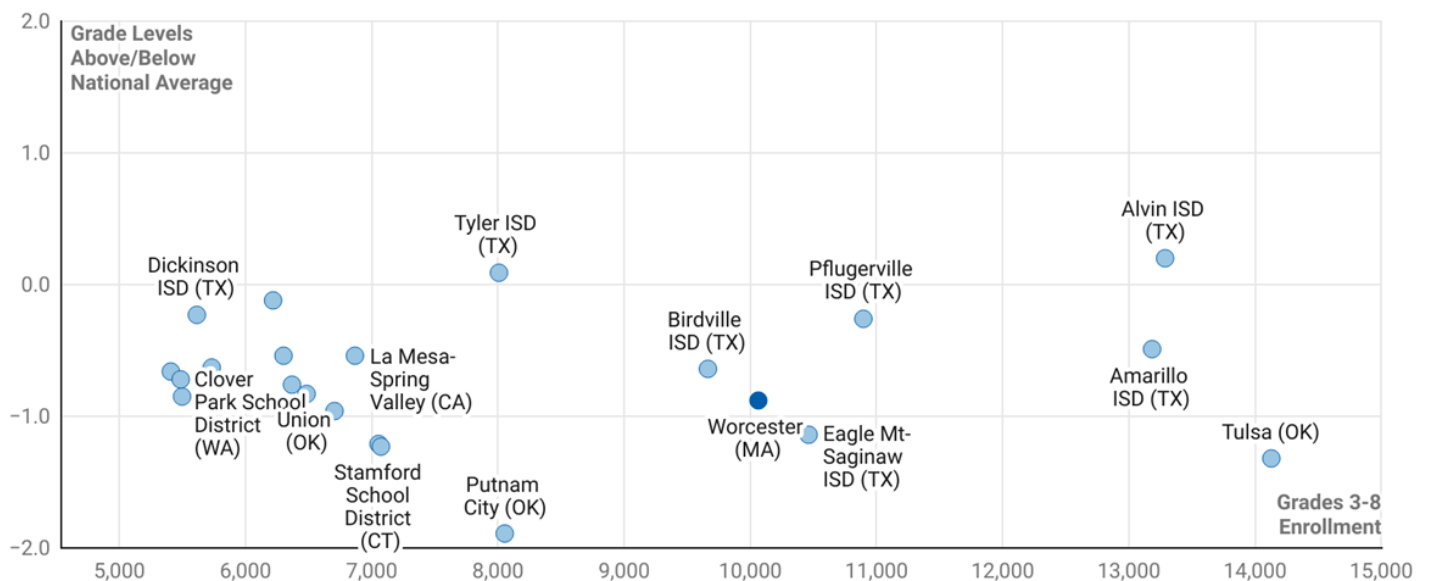
### DEFINING PEER DISTRICTS NATIONALLY

Peer districts were identified based on two criteria using data from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA). First, districts with grades 3-8 enrollment within 5,000 students of WPS were selected. Second, demographic criteria were applied, focusing on districts whose student composition closely aligned with WPS. Specifically, districts were considered peers if their shares of White, Hispanic/Latine, and Black students were within 10% of WPS' percentages, while the threshold for Asian students was set at 5% due to their smaller representation in WPS (6.3% in 2023-2024).

## Change in Average Math Scores for All Students (2019-2024): Worcester and National Peers



## Change in Average Reading Scores for All Students (2019-2024): Worcester and National Peers

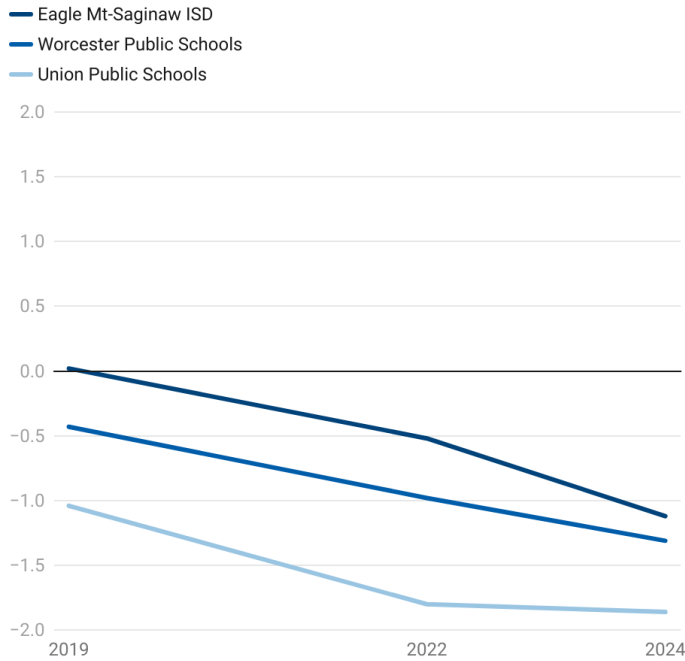


Note: 0.0 represents the national average

Source: Education Recovery Scorecard • Created with Datawrapper

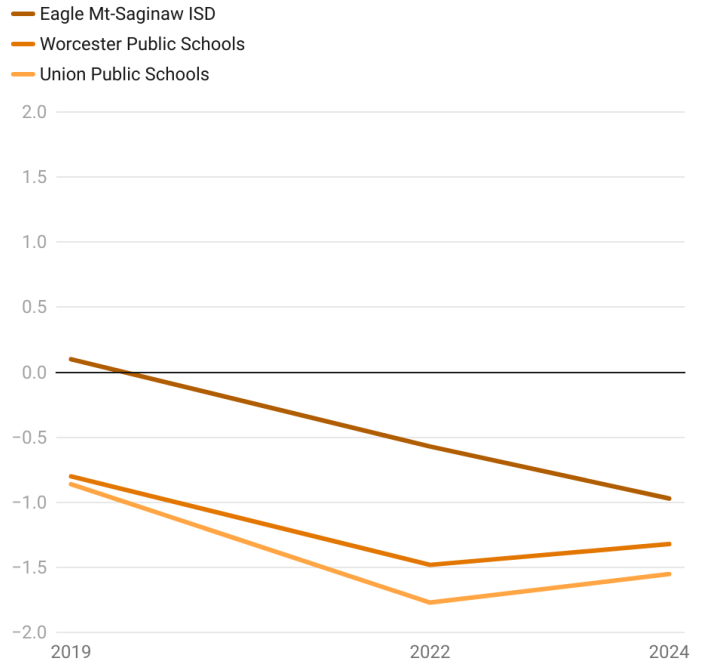


### Change in Average Reading Scores for All Students (2019-2024)



Note: 0.0 represents the national average  
Source: Education Recovery Scorecard • Created with Datawrapper

### Change in Average Math Scores by Race, Ethnicity, and Income Status (2019-2024)



Note: 0.0 represents the national average  
Source: Education Recovery Scorecard • Created with Datawrapper

and Asian students have returned to or near grade-level performance, while Black and Hispanic students remain **1.5 to 2.5 grade levels below**, reinforcing that these racial achievement gaps persist across quite different state contexts. Income-based disparities show the same tight alignment. In reading, by 2024, Worcester’s low-income students scored  $-2.02$  compared to  $+1.04$  for non-low-income peers; Union’s low-income students scored  $-2.50$  versus  $+0.74$ ; and EMSISD’s  $-1.86$  versus  $-0.13$ . Math results show the same divide—Worcester’s low-income students scored  $-1.97$  compared to  $+0.83$ , Union’s  $-2.07$  versus  $+0.71$ , and EMSISD’s  $-1.65$  versus  $-0.06$ . Across all three, **low-income students remain two grade levels behind their more affluent peers**, and the size of these gaps is identical across contexts. Despite different testing systems and state funding formulas, **Worcester, Union, and EMSISD exhibit the same structural inequities driving disparities in student learning**, suggesting that shared socioeconomic challenges that intersect across race and ethnicity shape educational outcomes, despite differences in local and statewide policies.

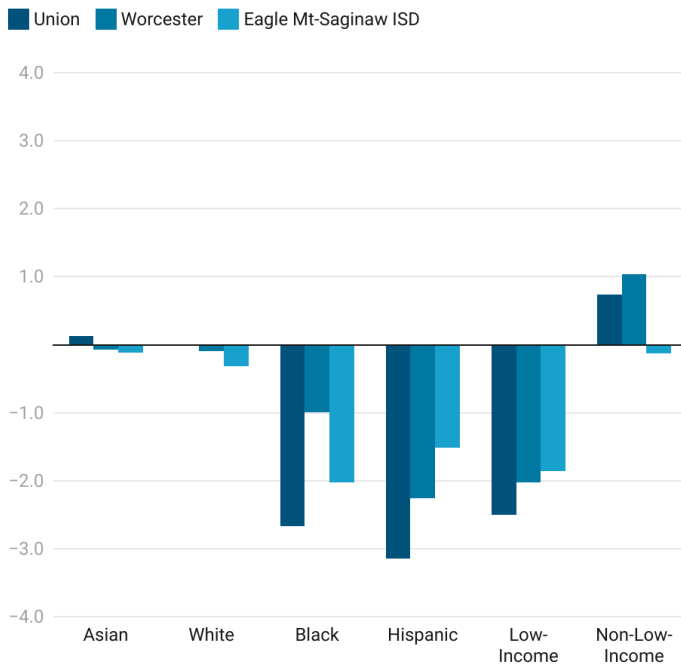
Between 2019 and 2024, Massachusetts and other states adjusted their criteria for classifying students as Low-Income, affecting test score trends. Raising the income threshold included higher-income students, potentially

increasing average scores for both low- and high-income groups without significantly altering the achievement gap. Massachusetts implemented this change in 2021-22. The researchers found the gap widened by 0.2 grade levels in math and 0.31 in reading from 2019-22 and continued growing in 2022-23—when the definition remained unchanged—by 0.23 in math and 0.31 in reading. **Massachusetts saw one of the largest increases in the achievement gap, with district-level comparisons confirming a substantial widening.**

The Education Recovery Scorecard highlights the uneven COVID-19 recovery for urban districts and disadvantaged students while reinforcing longstanding research on persistent achievement gaps before the pandemic. A strong body of social science literature shows that urban districts consistently perform lower on standardized tests compared to suburban, wealthier districts.

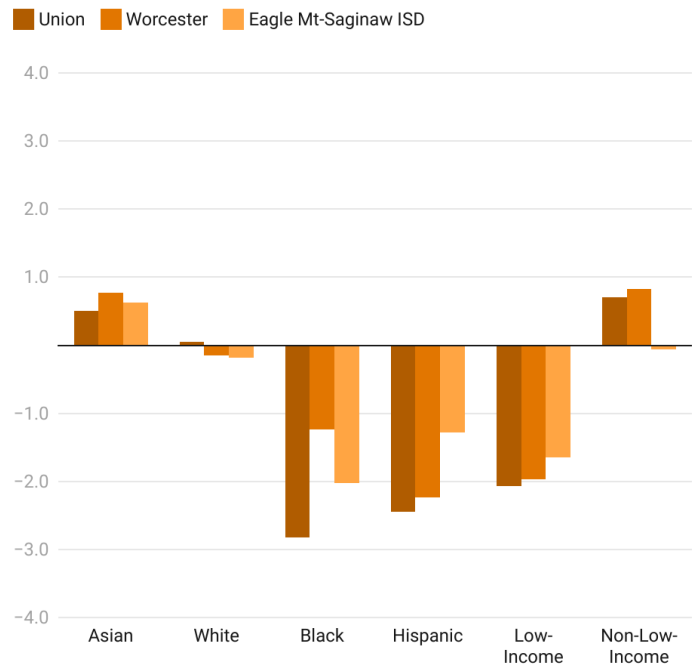


### Change in Average Reading Scores by Race, Ethnicity, and Income Status (2019-2024)



Note: 0.0 represents the national average  
Source: Education Recovery Scorecard • Created with Datawrapper

### Change in Average Math Scores by Race, Ethnicity, and Income Status (2019-2024)



Note: 0.0 represents the national average  
Source: Education Recovery Scorecard • Created with Datawrapper

## GRADE 10 MCAS, ADVANCED PLACEMENT EXAMS, AND SAT SCORES

Worcester’s MCAS results show similar performance patterns from grades 3-8 to grade 10. In grades 3-8, 26% of students met or exceeded expectations in ELA, 24% in math, and 22% in science. In grade 10, these figures shifted only slightly—to 33% in ELA, 24% in math, and 26% in science. Most students in both groups fall below proficiency, with 70% scoring in the “partially meeting” or “not meeting expectations” categories across all subjects. Overall, these results suggest that standardized test performance gaps observed in the early grades persist into high school.

In 2025, 10th grade MCAS results declined statewide and across all major urban districts, reversing the brief improvements seen the prior year. The share of students meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA fell from 57% to 51% statewide, while math declined from 48% to 45%.

Among the large cities (top of page 14), Worcester experienced one of the steepest ELA drops—from 40% to 33%—while Lowell fell from 40% to 30%, Brockton from 38% to 29%, Lynn from 34% to 28%, and Springfield from 31% to 28%. Boston saw a smaller two-point dip, from 42% to 40%. Worcester now ranks fourth among the six, ahead of Springfield and Lynn but below Boston, Lowell,

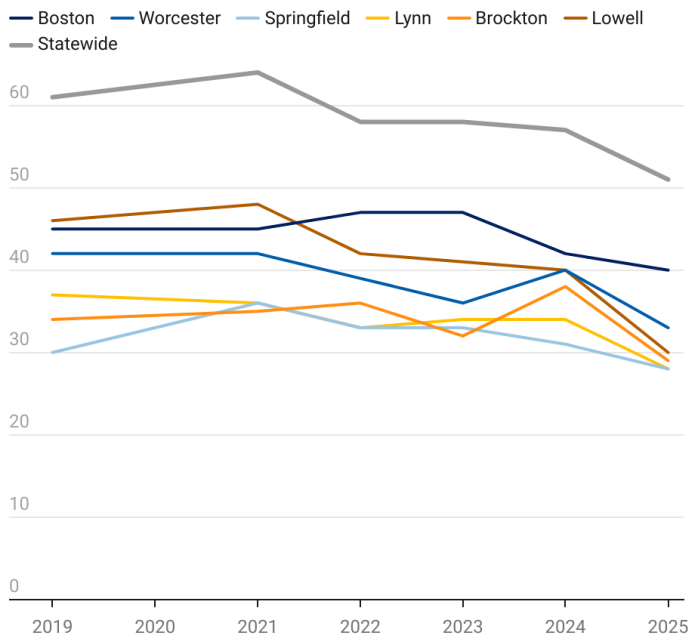
and Brockton.

In math, declines were more modest but widespread. Worcester fell slightly from 27% to 24%, like the statewide drop. Boston held steady at 38%, while Lowell saw a sharper decline (-9 points, from 32% to 23%). Springfield (18%), Lynn (16%), and Brockton (18%) all remained flat at low levels. Worcester ranks fifth, ahead of only Lynn.

These declines come amid a major statewide shift following the passage of Ballot Question 2 and new DESE guidance issued in late 2024, which move Massachusetts high school graduation requirements away from relying solely on the MCAS exam to earn a Competency Determination (CD). Beginning with the Class of 2025, students who have not already met the CD standard through MCAS or appeal must instead demonstrate mastery of state academic standards through district-certified coursework in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and at least one Science discipline. Under this new framework, districts are responsible for verifying that a student’s completed courses reflect mastery of the same skills and knowledge once measured by the state exams. Districts were required to submit their proposals by December 31, 2025.

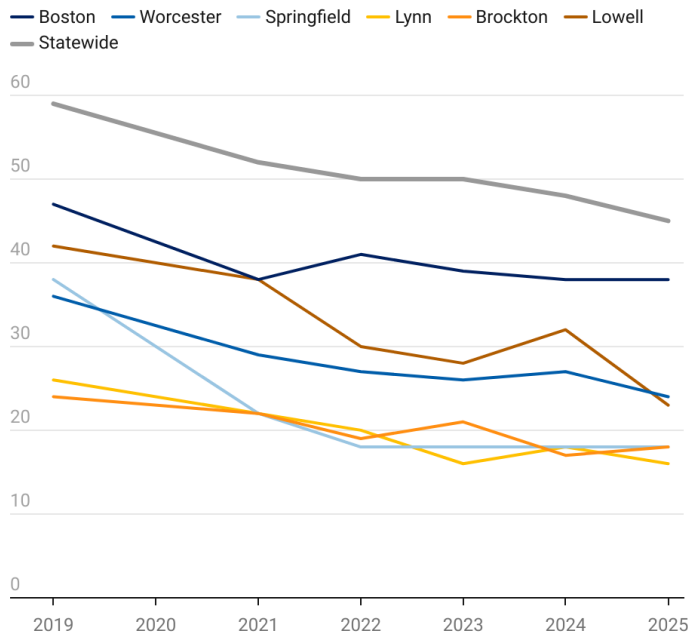


### Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 10 ELA MCAS in Largest City Districts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

### Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 10 Math MCAS in Largest City Districts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

In Worcester, these statewide changes prompted the development of a [mastery-based grading policy](#) designed to create a consistent system for evaluating high school coursework and to serve as the foundation for the district's new Competency Determination process. Under the policy, grades are structured so that major assignments—such as exams, essays, and projects—account for 60% of a student's grade, minor assignments like classwork and homework make up 30%, and practice, participation, and engagement comprise the remaining 10%. Teachers retain discretion over which assignments are classified as major or minor, and students are allowed to submit incomplete work after deadlines, earning up to a 40 rather than a zero once the work is completed. District leaders have framed the approach as a way to better reflect student learning over time and to ensure that a single missed or low score does not block a student from meeting graduation requirements.

The path to adoption, however, was marked by delays and uncertainty. The policy was first introduced in August—just days before the start of the school year—prompting concerns from educators about timing, workload, and a lack of clear guidance. Teachers and union representatives raised questions about additional grading and feedback expectations not reflected in existing agreements, as well as how a standardized grading structure would apply to specialized contexts such as Advanced Placement courses,

special education, and vocational programs. Some also expressed concern about the rigidity of the grade-weighting system if inconsistent or inaccurate data were added to WooEdu, the district's online student and family portal that allows students and caregivers to view grades, attendance, schedules, assignments, and school communications in one place.

In response, the School Committee voted on Sept. 4 to send the policy back to the Teaching, Learning, and Student Success Subcommittee for further review and additional teacher input. Subsequent discussions focused on clarifying expectations, adjusting timelines, and securing additional professional development and implementation supports.

Following revisions reaching an agreement with the teachers union that includes added training and guidance, the policy advanced. It was approved by the Standing Committee on Finance, Operations and Governance on November 10 and formally adopted by the full School Committee on November 20. WPS plans to roll out the system first in high schools, with expansion to middle schools next year, creating a uniform district-wide grading framework.

### ADVANCED PLACEMENT PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES

In 2023–24, **29.8% of WPS students in grades 10**



through 12 took at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam, a participation rate slightly above the statewide average of 29.1%. However, achievement outcomes reflect persistent statewide gaps. **Among WPS tests, 43% of AP exams earned a score of 3 or higher, the threshold for college credit at many institutions, compared to 70% statewide.** Moreover, 60% of Worcester’s AP test-takers take only one exam, versus 45% statewide—suggesting that while access to AP opportunities has expanded, many students remain at the entry level of participation rather than enrolling in multiple advanced courses.

While overall test outcomes are not as strong as statewide averages, performance by subject tells a more nuanced story. In courses such as Physics 2, Spanish and other foreign language offerings, Calculus BC, and the AP Capstone, more than 70% of students scored between 3 and 5, demonstrating mastery of advanced material. In Biology, Spanish Literature, and U.S. History, about half of students reached the 3–5 benchmark. Meanwhile, in courses such as Chemistry, Environmental Science, Computer Science A, Physics 1, and Statistics, fewer than 40% of students achieved a 3–5 score.

These mixed results highlight both the breadth of AP opportunities available in Worcester and the diverse academic interests of its students taking advantage of them. They also reflect the broader challenge of sustaining equitable access to rigorous coursework while ensuring that all students have the academic supports needed to thrive once enrolled.

Scoring a 3 to 5 on an AP exam can carry significant benefits. At many colleges and universities, such scores fulfill prerequisite or introductory course requirements, allowing students to earn college credit before graduating high school. For those who pursue higher education, passing these exams can mean saving thousands of dollars on tuition and fees, since each AP exam—costing about \$100—can offset the price of a comparable three-credit college course. According to the [Worcester Public Schools Handbook](#), the district pays the advanced placement test fee for all students who choose to take them.

Enrolling in AP courses in and of itself is meaningful, demonstrating academic agency and ambition. It reflects a willingness to take intellectual risks, challenge oneself in a college-level environment, and engage with rigorous course material. These choices reveal a student body that values aspiration, resilience, and enrichment—one that supports students not only in pursuing college credit, but in cultivating the habits of mind and confidence needed for lifelong learning.

## SAT SCORES

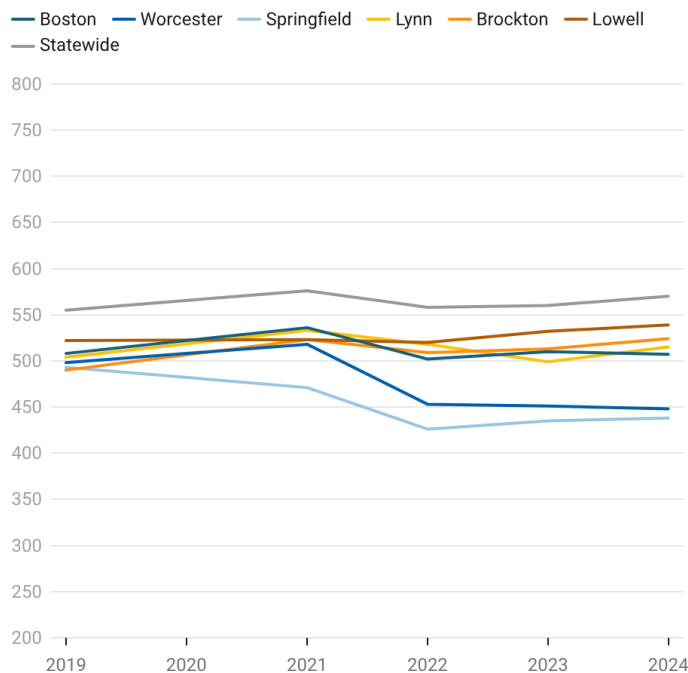
The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) are two more metrics for evaluating student performance. The exams have long served as benchmarks of college readiness, offering a standardized measure that allows colleges and universities to compare students from different high schools. Yet their use in college admissions has become increasingly controversial. Critics argue that these tests reflect disparities in access to preparation resources and perpetuate racial and socioeconomic inequities, while supporters contend that they provide a common yardstick for evaluating applicants and can help identify talented students from under-resourced schools. During the pandemic, hundreds of colleges adopted test optional or test blind admissions policies, citing both logistical disruptions and equity concerns. In recent years, however, some highly selective institutions including Harvard, Dartmouth, and MIT have reinstated test requirements, arguing that test scores can offer useful context alongside grades and coursework. Still, the majority of U.S. colleges remain test optional, reflecting an ongoing debate over how best to balance objectivity, fairness, and access in admissions.

Like any standardized test, the SAT does not and should not be used to measure the whole student. It captures only certain kinds of academic skills and preparedness, not the broader capacities that define student potential or character. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides SAT benchmark data that can be useful for understanding many of the same achievement gaps districts observe in MCAS results, offering one additional lens through which to assess equity and opportunity across schools. So, how have pre-pandemic and post-pandemic SAT scores fared among Worcester Public Schools students?

Relative to its peer city districts in Massachusetts, Worcester’s SAT performance in both Reading and Math has weakened over time. **In 2019, Worcester ranked near the middle of the peer group in both subjects**, scoring above Springfield and Brockton and close to Boston and Lynn. After a pandemic era increase in 2021, scores in both Reading and Math declined sharply and continued to fall through 2024. By 2024, Worcester ranked **second lowest among the peer city districts in both subjects**, outperforming only Springfield while trailing Boston, Lynn, Brockton, and Lowell. Over this period, Worcester’s gap with the statewide average widened substantially, growing from roughly 57 to 61 points per subject in 2019 to more than 118 to 122 points in 2024, as statewide scores remained relatively stable while Worcester’s fell below pre pandemic levels. This is shown at the top of page 16.

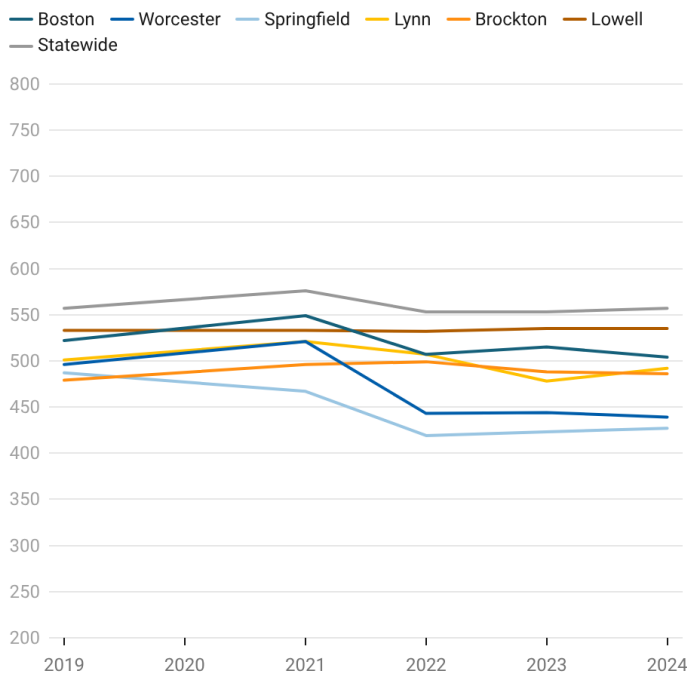


### Average SAT Score in Reading in Largest City Districts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

### Average SAT Score in Math in Largest City Districts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

While this decline signals challenges in test performance, the SAT represents only one indicator of postsecondary readiness, one that many colleges made optional in recent years, though some institutions are now reinstating SAT and ACT requirements as part of their admissions process.

## WPS STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

In the wake of shifting state accountability policies and continued disparities in standardized test outcomes, Worcester Public Schools (WPS) has undertaken a series of strategic efforts to raise student achievement, strengthen instructional quality, and ensure equitable access to learning opportunities across all schools. In addition to the new [mastery-based grading policy](#) for 9-12 graders (and middle schoolers later), these efforts span curriculum reform and expanded student supports focused on building stronger foundations for learning.

### STRATEGIC PLAN: “OUR PROMISE TO THE FUTURE” (2023–2028)

Adopted in 2023, the district’s five-year strategic plan serves as the blueprint for improving student learning and achievement. The plan outlines measurable goals for increasing the share of students meeting or exceeding benchmarks in reading and math and for closing achievement gaps for Hispanic/Latine students, English Learners, and students with disabilities by 2027. It

emphasizes five priority areas: high-quality instruction, equitable resource distribution, safe and modern facilities, family and community engagement, and a strong, well-supported educator workforce. This growth will be measured not through MCAS, but through STAR Math and Reading growth, which are standardized, computer adaptive assessments created by the Renaissance Learning, Inc and offers programs in early literacy, reading, math, and Spanish.

### DISTRICTWIDE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

In 2023, Worcester Public Schools introduced [several major initiatives](#) aimed at boosting student learning and closing achievement gaps. The district adopted the **Core Knowledge Language Amplify (CKLA)** reading curriculum to strengthen early literacy instruction with an evidence-based, science-of-reading approach, replacing the previous Fountas and Pinnell program. To better support multilingual learners and students with disabilities,



WPS partnered with the **American Institutes for Research (AIR)** to conduct an audit and develop targeted recommendations for improving instruction and services.

WPS also restructured district staff into **Quadrant Teams (“Q-Teams”)**, ensuring educators spend over 80% of their time in schools providing direct support in academics, special education, multilingual learning, technology, and school culture. The new **Family and Community Engagement Office** was established to expand culturally and linguistically responsive outreach, while every school now has a **Wraparound Coordinator** to help connect students with wellness and support services. In addition, the district launched the **Spark Plan**, emphasizing hands-on, future-ready learning experiences, and expanded its **Early College Program**, partnering with Quinsigamond Community College and Worcester State University to allow high school students to earn college credit and experience higher education environments. The **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** program complements these efforts for students in grades 7 through 12. The program helps students develop the academic skills, study habits, and organizational strategies needed to succeed in rigorous coursework, including honors and Advanced Placement classes, while also providing structured academic and social support.

### **SCHOOL GROWTH PLAN SNAPSHOTS**

[School Growth Plan Snapshots](#) are annual, school-level improvement plans that bring Worcester Public Schools’ broader strategic goals down to the classroom level. While districtwide goals set a common direction, they can only tell part of the story. Each school—and the students it serves—faces unique circumstances shaped by factors such as community engagement, access to resources, income levels, and language diversity. These plans help cut through the limits of district-level reporting by identifying each school’s specific successes, challenges, and strategies for improvement.

Each plan defines the school’s mission or “North Star” and outlines measurable goals organized around four focus areas: Leadership Practices, Positive Climate and Culture, Student-Specific Supports (MTSS), and Intentional Instruction. These categories clarify how each school’s leadership team will translate district priorities into concrete action—whether by strengthening school culture, improving instructional quality, or providing targeted support to meet students’ individual academic and social-emotional needs.

This approach allows parents, guardians, community members, and advocates to better understand how each school is working to advance learning for all students, beyond what standardized test data can show. Worcester

Public Schools should continue and expand this practice—not only for transparency’s sake, but to keep public attention focused on how schools are addressing the root causes of learning disparities and building environments where all students can thrive. By revisiting and refining these school-level goals each year, the district can ensure continuous progress that reflects the diverse realities of Worcester’s schools and communities.

### **SUMMER LEARNING AND ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Worcester Public Schools continues to expand high-quality summer programs designed to accelerate learning and support student engagement across all grade levels. The Elementary Acceleration Summer Academy (July 7–31, 2025) serves students entering grades 3–5, focusing on strengthening English language arts and math skills through lessons that integrate multilingual learning and language acquisition.

Also running from July 7–31, the Summer Spark Academy serves North Quadrant elementary students through project-based activities centered on creativity, collaboration, and positive youth development. This program integrates social-emotional learning and the district’s “Vision of a Learner” framework to build confidence and connection, with schools inviting students who would benefit most.

Other summer initiatives include Middle School Jump Start, which helps rising middle schoolers transition successfully to new academic expectations; Civics Camp, engaging students in hands-on civic learning and community projects; High School Credit Recovery, providing opportunities for students to make up missed coursework; the Early College Summer Academy, allowing high school students to earn college credit; and Worcester Unites, a districtwide enrichment initiative promoting leadership, community service, and student belonging. Together, these programs ensure learning continues year-round and that every student is supported academically, socially, and emotionally.



## CONCLUSION

The findings from this report highlight both the persistence of Worcester’s academic challenges and the depth of the district’s ongoing efforts to address them. Across grades 3–8 and grade 10, Worcester Public Schools continues to perform below the statewide average in MCAS achievement percentiles, with most students still partially meeting or not meeting expectations. These gaps mirror patterns found in other large urban districts that serve higher shares of low-income students and English Learners, populations that have been slowest to recover nationally from pandemic-era learning loss. Comparisons using national data from the Education Recovery Scorecard confirm that Worcester’s experience is not unique: districts across the country with similar demographics—regardless of state policy or funding models—show strikingly similar patterns of lower achievement and slower rebound among economically disadvantaged and racially diverse student populations.

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At the high school level, Worcester’s SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) results reveal the same structural inequities. SAT scores remain well below state and suburban averages, underscoring persistent gaps in college readiness. Yet Worcester’s above-average AP participation rate demonstrates a strong culture of aspiration and academic ambition, even as fewer students reach the college-credit threshold. This combination of broad access and uneven outcomes reflects both opportunity and challenge—a reminder that progress cannot be measured by test scores alone.

The district’s educators, principals, and staff continue to implement a wide range of evidence-based strategies—

from early literacy reforms and summer acceleration programs to the new mastery-based grading policy and expanded Early College pathways—to strengthen instruction, engage families, and promote student well-being. Many of these efforts aim to build skills and supports that may not immediately translate into standardized test gains but are essential to long-term student growth, engagement, and confidence.

Ultimately, understanding Worcester’s progress requires looking beyond MCAS results. As the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) has long emphasized, true measures of school quality include not only academic performance, but also student engagement, school climate, and the conditions for learning. Evaluating Worcester’s success through this broader, more balanced lens offers a fuller picture of how the district—and its educators—are working to ensure that every student, regardless of background, can thrive.

Evaluating Worcester’s success through this broader, more balanced lens reinforces the central role of the district’s Strategic Plan as the framework through which improvement is intended to occur. The challenge ahead is not simply identifying promising strategies, but sustaining attention to how effectively they are implemented, monitored, and refined over time. This includes closely tracking progress on Strategic Plan indicators and systematically evaluating the implementation and impacts of the district’s mastery-based grading policy to better understand how it supports student learning, equity, and academic progression. Continued improvement will depend on transparent reporting, meaningful engagement with families and community stakeholders, and a shared commitment to long term work that extends beyond year to year changes in test scores. Maintaining this focus is essential to ensuring that Worcester’s investments and reforms translate into measurable, lasting gains for students.



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## FOOTNOTE

1. The Education Recovery Scorecard methodology has several limitations that could impact the accuracy of its findings. First, it relies on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale for comparability between state assessments, assuming that both measures the same level of student achievement and that performance follows a normal distribution. However, NAEP tests a random sample of students rather than all students, which means discrepancies between state tests and NAEP could lead to inaccurate comparisons across states. Another limitation is the interpolation of missing data. For years without NAEP data, such as 2016 and 2018, the study estimates scores based on state averages. As NAEP was not administered in 2023, and 2024 data is not yet available, the study uses 2022 data and assumes proficiency thresholds remained stable between 2022 and 2023. While this approach allows for estimating district performance, it assumes no significant changes occurred in testing methods or proficiency standards. Additionally, states with low participation rates in state assessments, such as New York and Colorado, are excluded from the study. Since low participation can skew results, this exclusion aims to improve the representativeness of the data but leaves out important states. Moreover, some states did not provide sufficient data broken down by proficiency level, leading to their exclusion from the analysis. As a result, recovery trends in these states may not be fully captured, leaving gaps in the understanding of recovery patterns. Finally, the study assumes the stability of test methods and proficiency thresholds from 2022 to 2023, but any changes in testing standards or procedures during that period could lead to over- or underestimations of academic recovery. This assumption, combined with the lack of direct NAEP data for 2023, presents a potential challenge in accurately assessing the state of educational recovery.
2. Using the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), the Bureau created a selection criteria for identifying peer districts across the country. Districts of similar size are defined as those whose grades 3-8 enrollment are within 5,000 students to WPS'. The Bureau then used two sets of criteria to define peer districts for comparison. The loose criteria focused on districts whose demographics were within 10% of WPS' share of White, Hispanic/Latine, and Black students, and within 5% for Asian students (who only make up 6.3% of WPS students in 2023-2024). This broad approach resulted in the identification of 22 peer districts. For a stricter comparison, the Bureau weighted the

demographic criteria based on the demographic composition of WPS, where Hispanic/Latine students make up 46% of the student body. In this approach, districts with a +/- 10% variation in Hispanic/Latine student share were considered acceptable, while other groups were given more specific thresholds based on their representation in WPS. White students were allowed a +/- 5.67%, Black students a +/- 3.75%, and Asian students a +/- 1.39%. This more refined method resulted in two peer districts.



## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Enrollment and Demographic Data of Nationwide Peers to Worcester Public Schools

Name	State	Total Enrollment	Grades 3-8 Enrollment	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible
Abilene ISD	TX	14,652	6,301	33.0%	47.0%	13.7%	1.5%	66.8%
Alexandria City Public School District	VA	16,406	7,054	26.8%	37.6%	24.4%	6.9%	54.7%
Alvin ISD	TX	29,740	13,287	20.1%	40.3%	26.4%	9.6%	57.0%
Amarillo ISD	TX	29,729	13,184	33.7%	47.4%	10.5%	4.8%	67.9%
Birdville ISD	TX	22,219	9,664	34.4%	46.7%	9.6%	4.9%	58.6%
Clover Park School District	WA	12,162	5,486	26.8%	36.1%	13.3%	9.9%	66.4%
Dickinson ISD	TX	12,592	5,614	26.9%	52.6%	15.2%	2.0%	68.2%
Eagle Mt-Saginaw ISD	TX	23,462	10,462	30.4%	39.3%	19.1%	6.1%	49.0%
Hamilton Township Public School District	NJ	12,239	5,408	33.9%	42.1%	16.8%	3.2%	39.1%
Harrison School District No. 2 in The County Of El Paso	CO	12,024	5,783	23.5%	53.1%	11.9%	2.9%	69.4%
Huntsville ISD	TX	11,318	5,732	31.8%	40.4%	21.4%	2.5%	58.2%
La Mesa-Spring Valley	CA	10,651	6,867	25.6%	52.2%	7.7%	5.6%	58.8%
Pflugerville ISD	TX	25,297	10,896	21.6%	48.9%	15.2%	9.3%	54.1%
Putnam City	OK	18,733	8,054	20.8%	38.6%	23.5%	4.4%	76.1%
Schertz-Cibolo-U City ISD	TX	15,146	6,705	30.9%	47.4%	11.8%	2.2%	35.6%
Stamford School District	CT	15,704	7,073	25.9%	51.9%	12.5%	6.1%	53.4%
Tempe School District (4258)	AZ	10,293	6,368	19.2%	51.7%	13.0%	4.1%	69.3%
Tulsa	OK	33,562	14,129	20.9%	38.0%	22.4%	3.5%	83.3%
Tyler ISD	TX	18,304	8,008	21.6%	48.2%	25.0%	1.5%	73.6%
Union	OK	14,974	6,484	23.0%	40.9%	15.1%	7.4%	62.9%
Valley View CUSD 365U	IL	14,847	6,218	18.4%	48.0%	22.4%	6.3%	62.2%
Wichita Falls ISD	TX	12,868	5,497	35.9%	39.8%	14.3%	2.2%	63.9%
<b>Worcester</b>	<b>MA</b>	<b>24,341</b>	<b>10,064</b>	<b>26.1%</b>	<b>46.0%</b>	<b>17.3%</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>71.8%</b>

Note: Harrison School District No. 2 lacks data for both reading and math from 2019 to 2024, while Alexandria lacks data in math from 2019-2024.