



## 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.