

ACSI Schools Weather Pandemic Storm with Steady Student Achievement, In-Person Instruction, and Enrollment Growth

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Key Findings

- ACSI schools maintained high levels of academic achievement during the pandemic, consistently exceeding pre-pandemic national norms.
- ACSI schools responded quickly to students' learning needs. Over 80 percent of ACSI schools returned to primarily in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year, and nearly all schools returned to in-person instruction during the 2021-22 school year.
- ACSI schools experienced steady enrollment growth throughout the pandemic, on average growing by over a third since the 2019-20 school year. Schools that returned to in-person instruction "much sooner than district public schools" experienced more growth than schools that returned "around the same time" or "much later."

Introduction

In October 2022, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Commonly referred to as "The Nation's Report Card," the NAEP provides helpful insights into student learning across the United States by

allowing for direct comparisons across states and districts, as well as over years.

The results in both reading and mathematics at both the 4th and 8th grade levels showed the lowest levels of achievement since 2003, leading many commentators to point to the disruptive effects of the COVID pandemic to explain the disappointing results.¹

¹ Matt Barnum, "Nation's report card: Massive drop in math scores, slide in reading linked to COVID disruption," *Chalkbeat* (October 23, 2022). <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/24/23417139/n>

[aep-test-scores-pandemic-school-reopening](#); Sequoia Carrillo, "Student math scores are down from pre-COVID levels, the National Report Card finds," *NPR* (October 24, 2022).

Still, there were some bright spots in the NAEP results. Early in the pandemic, parents reported that perceived learning was favorable in schools that reopened for in-person instruction.² NAEP results seem to support this perception. Results for private and Catholic schools, which returned much earlier to in-person instruction, find these schools maintained relatively high levels of achievement when compared with district public schools.³ While NAEP results are not reported separately for Protestant schools, we expect similar results for ACSI schools, which exceeded the national average for in-person instruction early in the pandemic.⁴

Indeed, upon close examination of the evidence, ACSI schools flourished during the pandemic. We come to this conclusion based on three key measures: academic achievement, mode of instruction, and enrollment.

Finding #1: ACSI schools maintained high levels of academic achievement.

First, we find that ACSI schools consistently maintained high levels of academic achievement during the pandemic. The average tested ACSI student exceeded pre-pandemic national norms by roughly 20

scale points in reading and over 10 scale points in math each year of the pandemic.

To measure student achievement, we use TerraNova 3 (TN3) testing data from ACSI's assessment division. The TN3 is a testing service provided by ACSI predominantly to member schools, but the sample includes non-member Christian educational contexts as well.

The TN3 is a nationally norm-referenced exam. It is important to note that the TN3 Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE), national norms for the TN3 Reading and Mathematics exams, was calculated in 2017, before the pandemic. Thus, ACSI student achievement is being compared to pre-pandemic national norms.

In Figure 1 below, we compare the average difference between tested ACSI students' performance on TN3 Reading and Math against the 2017 NCE. It is noteworthy that during each year of the pandemic, ACSI schools maintained consistent levels above national pre-pandemic norms, indicated by the red line.

<https://www.npr.org/2022/10/24/1130629135/naep-test-covid>.

² Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, & Martin R. West, "Pandemic parent survey finds perverse pattern," *Education Next* 21, no. 2 (2020).

<https://www.educationnext.org/pandemic-parent-survey-finds-perverse-pattern-students-more-likely-to-be-attending-school-in-person-where-covid-is-spreading-more-rapidly/>; Matthew H. Lee, "Christian schools and COVID: Leading the way," *ACSI* (2021). <https://blog.acsi.org/christian-schools-and-covid>.

³ Kathleen Porter-Magee, "Amid the pandemic, progress in Catholic schools," *Wall Street Journal* (2022). [https://www.wsj.com/articles/amid-the-](https://www.wsj.com/articles/amid-the-pandemic-progress-in-catholic-schools-partnership-naep-report-card-math-reading-public-charter-black-hispanic-11666902117)

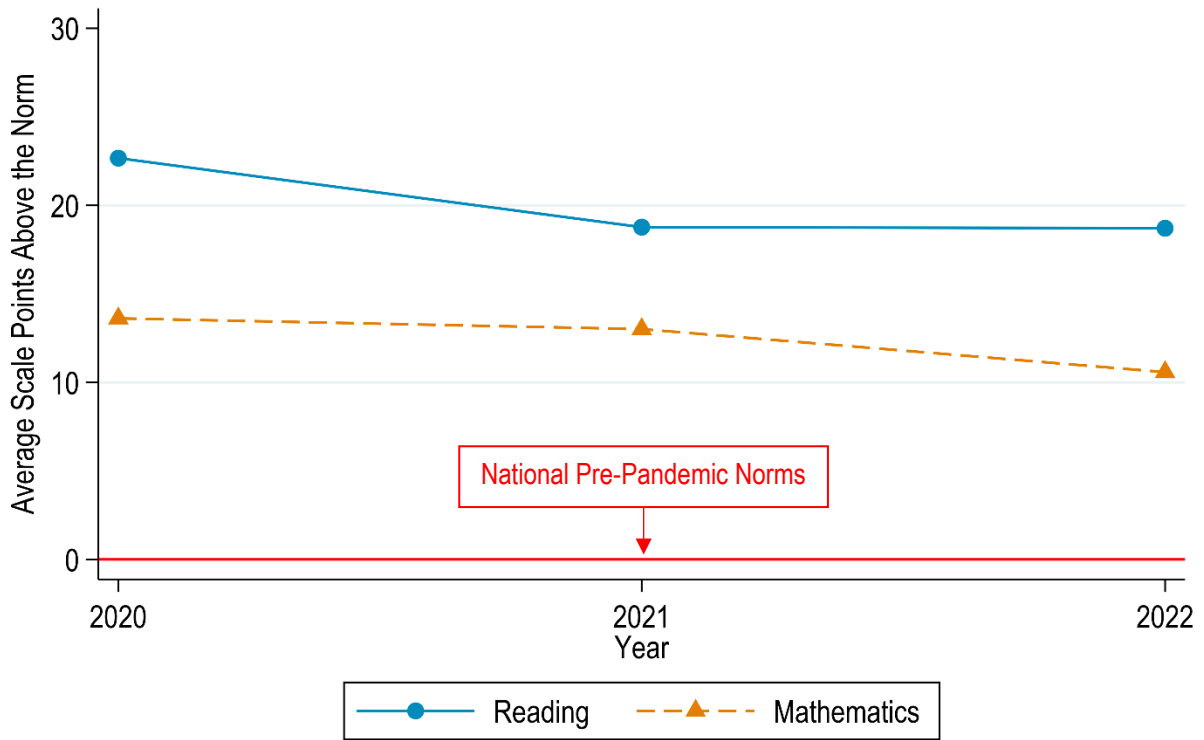
[pandemic-progress-in-catholic-schools-partnership-naep-report-card-math-reading-public-charter-black-hispanic-11666902117](https://www.npr.org/2022/10/24/1130629135/naep-test-covid); Ira Stoll, "Catholic schools are a rare bright spot in Nation's Report Card 2022 data," *Education Next* (2022).

<https://www.educationnext.org/catholic-schools-are-a-rare-bright-spot-in-nations-report-card-2022-data/>.

⁴ Lynn E. Swaner & Matthew H. Lee, *Christian schools and COVID-19: 2020-2021 school year profile* (Colorado Springs, CO: Association of Christian Schools International, 2020).

<https://www.acsi.org/docs/default-source/website-publishing/research/swaner-lee-2020---christian-schools-and-covid-19.pdf>.

Fig. 1. ACSI TerraNova Performance vs. National Norms (2017)
2019-2022



Finding #2: ACSI schools responded to student learning needs by returning quickly to in-person instruction.

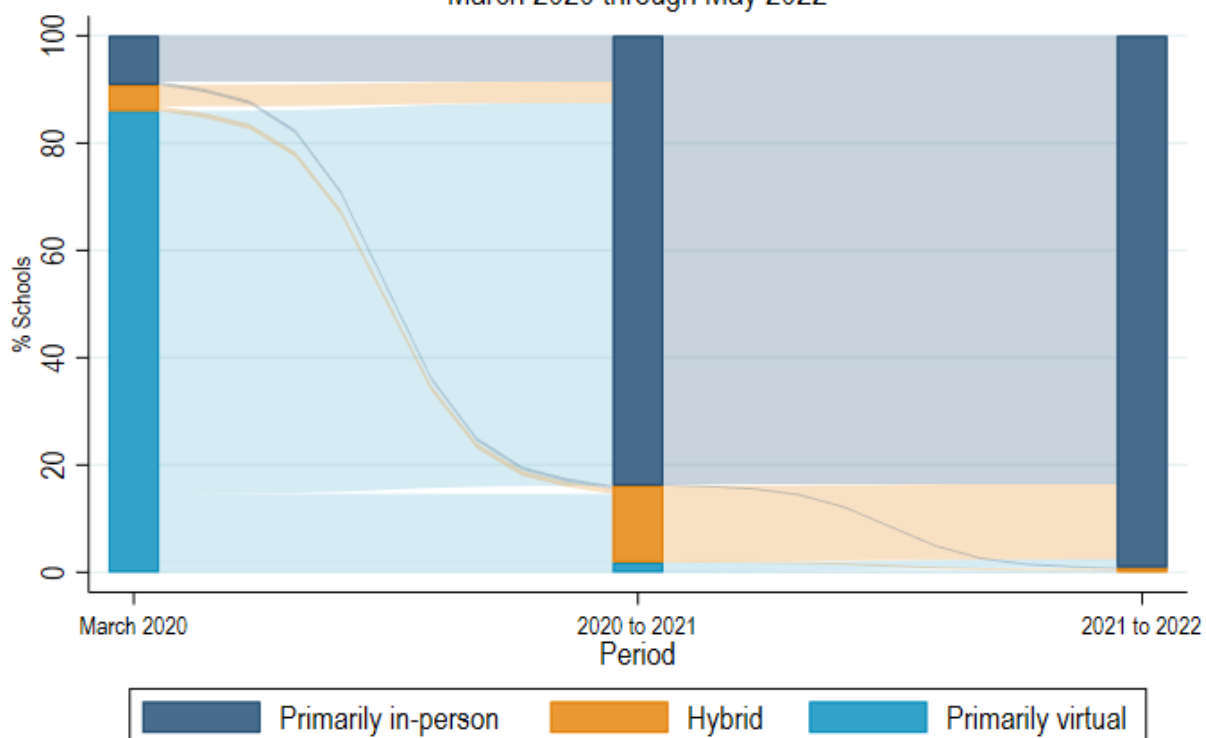
How were ACSI schools able to maintain high levels of student achievement? The recent NAEP results suggest that in-person instruction helped preserve student learning. ACSI schools worked quickly to return to in-person instruction.

To examine mode of instruction, we turn to data from a survey ACSI fielded in October 2022. Three hundred thirty-eight school leaders responded to our survey, representing over 15% of ACSI U.S. member schools. The sample is geographically representative of ACSI’s three U.S. divisions—Western, Central, and Eastern.

We asked school leaders, “Compared to district public schools in the area, how quickly did your school return to in-person learning?” About four out of five school leaders (84.0%) reported returning to in-person instruction “much sooner” than surrounding district public schools, while 15.4% reported a return to in-person instruction that was roughly similar to the timing of surrounding public schools.

From March 2020 to the end of the school year, 85.5% of ACSI schools operated in a primarily virtual mode, 9.4% continued with in-person instruction, and 5.1% took a hybrid approach. The next school year, 83.8% of ACSI schools returned to primarily in-person instruction, 14.4% used a hybrid mode of delivery, and 1.8% remained virtual. While a

Fig. 2. Primary Mode of Instruction
March 2020 through May 2022



hybrid approach to instructional content delivery may have served a transitory purpose during the 2020-21 school year, by 2021-22, nearly all ACSI schools (99.1%) reverted back to primarily in-person instruction, while the remaining 0.9% of schools utilized a hybrid mode. (See Figure 2 above).

Finding #3: ACSI schools experienced steady enrollment growth throughout the pandemic.

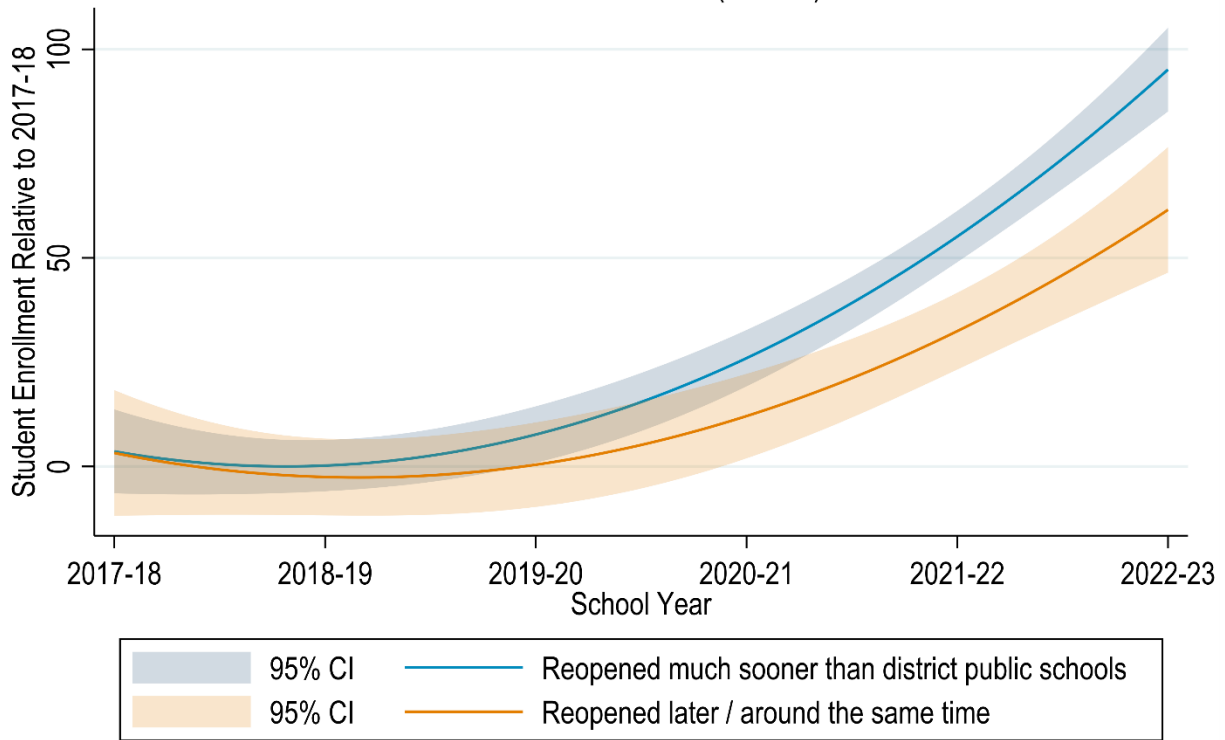
ACSI schools on average maintained fairly steady enrollment in the 2017-18 school year. Since the first year affected by COVID (2019-2020), however, ACSI schools on average have grown 35%. Since the 2020-21 school year, ACSI schools on average have continued to experience enrollment growth

(by 28% since that year). This growth suggests an influx of students from other educational sectors, whose families chose Christian schooling over other options that would have been available to them.

On average, ACSI schools in our sample added 89.6 students to their rolls since 2017-18. Again, mode of instruction appears to be an important factor. ACSI schools that returned to in-person instruction “much sooner” than district public schools added an average of 94.6 students. In contrast, those that returned “around the same time” or “much later” added only 62.3 students on average in the same time.

In Figure 3 (above), we plot fitted values for change in student enrollment by year, along with a 95% confidence interval. The divergence appears clearer during years

Fig. 3. Average Student Enrollment Change in ACSI Schools
2017-18 to 2022-23 (current)



affected by the pandemic. While we observe considerable overlap in confidence intervals from the 2017-18 to 2019-20 school years, we observe no overlap in confidence intervals by the 2021-22 school year.

When asked about the factors that have contributed over the past few years to enrollment change, three factors were most often cited by ACSI member schools. Among schools that experienced enrollment gains, parents’ desire for in-person instruction was among the most common reasons reported by school leaders (78 percent). In addition to providing in-person instruction, parents’ response to social issues in public schools (82 percent) and parents’ desire for faith-based education for their children (78 percent) also were cited by school leaders as reasons for enrollment growth.

Conclusions

It is clear that ACSI member schools made the difficult but right decision to serve their families by returning quickly to in-person instruction. Families rewarded ACSI schools for making this decision, as seen in enrollment trends during COVID-19. The recent NAEP results suggest a positive relationship between in-person instruction and student learning.

ACSI schools flourished throughout the pandemic with respect to student achievement, mode of instruction, and enrollment. These findings reinforce the importance of private school choice policy, which benefit not just schools, but more importantly families. ACSI schools were more responsive to families’ needs and desires by returning quickly to in-person

instruction and providing a faith-based education.

About the Authors

Matthew H. Lee is Director of Research at ACSI, where Eric W. Price serves as Research Associate.

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<https://www.acsi.org/docs/default-source/website-publishing/research/acsi-schools-weather-pandemic-storm.pdf>

Appendix A—Methodology

We estimated the average difference between a tested ACSI student and the Normal Curve Equivalent using the following model:

$$\overline{difference}_t = \frac{\sum_{g=0}^{12} \sum_{i=1}^N (test_{itg} - NCE_g)}{N_t} \quad (1)$$

In this model, $test_{itg}$ is the TerraNova 3 (TN3) Reading or Math score for the i th student in grade g in year t and NCE_g is the Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) for Reading or Math in grade g . We estimated the difference average difference by dividing the sum of all differences for students i through N in all grades from kindergarten (grade 0) to 12th grade by the total number of test-takers N_t in each year 2019-22.

It is important to note that the TN3 NCE was calculated in 2017, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Positive differences indicate that ACSI schools on average maintained student achievement levels that exceed pre-pandemic national norms.