

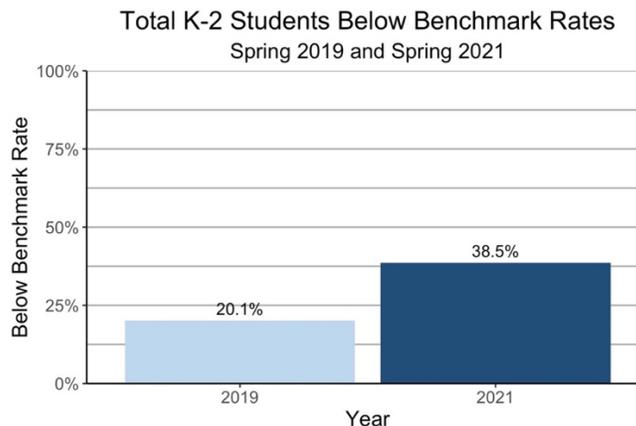
## **Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Identification of At-Risk Students Spring 2021 Literacy Screening Findings**

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) K-3 assessments are used in 131 of 132 school divisions in Virginia to evaluate students’ risk for reading difficulties (i.e., students who score below the ‘benchmark’ are at high risk for persistent reading difficulties). The benchmark score guides the allocation of state funding in support of early literacy intervention through the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI). Students who score at or slightly above the benchmark are also at elevated risk.

In an effort to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on literacy development, this report compares end-of-year PALS Spring 2021 data to end-of-year data collected in the Spring of 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, a virtual administration of the PALS assessment was an option in the Fall of 2020 and Spring of 2021.<sup>1</sup> Data analyses suggest that virtual and in-person administration yielded similar results; reported findings include students assessed by either mode of administration. This report compares Spring 2019 scores to Spring 2021 scores because, due to the onset of the pandemic, PALS data were not collected in Spring 2020.

### **Key Takeaway #1:**

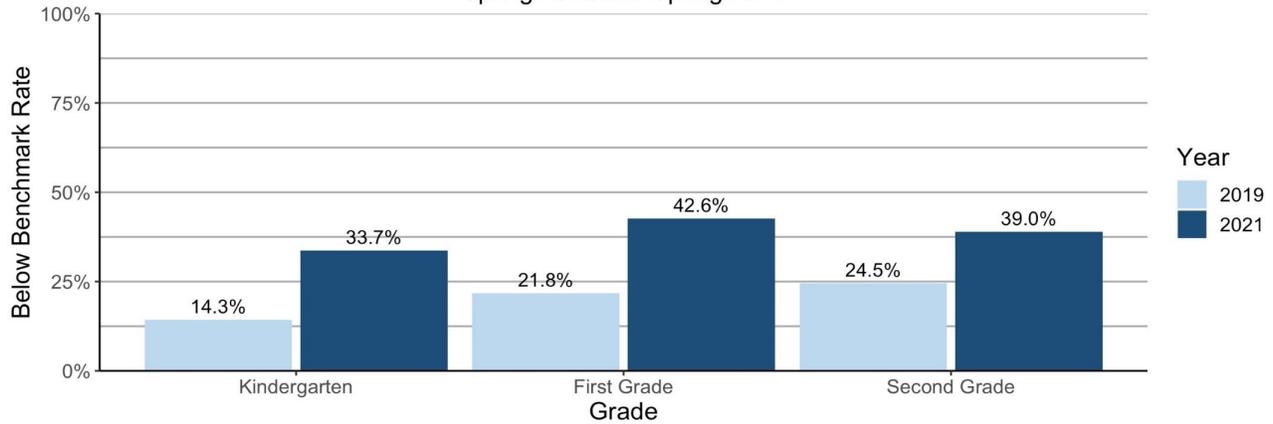
**PALS data from Spring 2021 show that significantly more students ended the school year at high risk for reading difficulties as compared to Spring 2019.** There were 82,000 students below benchmark in Spring 2021 which is an increase of about 36,800 students or 1.8 times as many students compared to pre-COVID (Spring 2019).<sup>2</sup> The proportion of students identified as high-risk in the Spring of 2021 represents the largest group of students ever identified in this category by the PALS assessment.



<sup>1</sup> See superintendent’s memos for more information on the virtual testing option:  
[https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents\\_memos/2021/071-21.pdf](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2021/071-21.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> In Spring 2021, data was collected on 6.6% fewer students as compared to Spring of 2019 across K-2 due to lower enrollment in public schools statewide

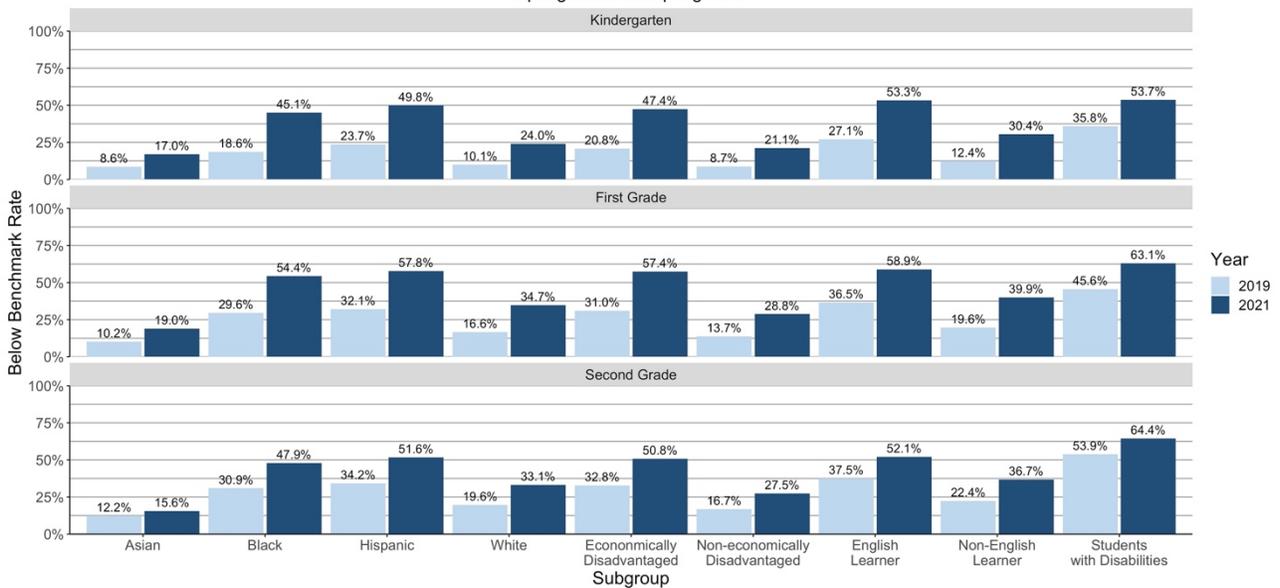
### K-2 Below Benchmark Rates Spring 2019 and Spring 2021



#### Key Takeaway #2:

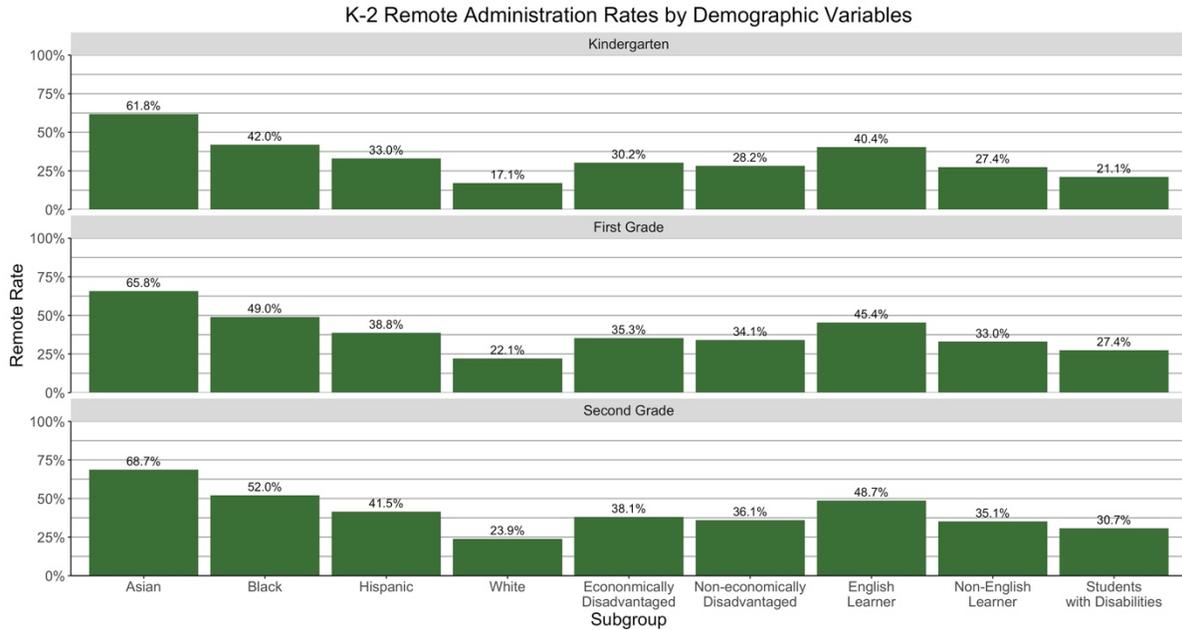
**When the literacy data are examined by subgroup (e.g., demographic variables, economic status) there are indications that students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and English learners were disproportionately identified as being at high risk for reading difficulties.** The at-risk proportions within these subgroups were higher than the statewide rate across K-2. Historically on PALS screenings, a large proportion of students with disabilities (SWD) also have an elevated risk for reading difficulties. The 2021 Spring data suggest that a larger number of SWD are at high risk for reading difficulties.

### K-2 Below Benchmark Rates by Demographic Variables Spring 2019 and Spring 2021



### Key Takeaway #3:

The remote administration option for PALS was an important tool for creating visibility of the early reading risk of all students enrolled in public school, and particularly for Asian, Black, Hispanic, and EL students. Overall, 29% of kindergarten assessments, 35% of first grade assessments, and 37% of second grade assessments were administered remotely.



### Implications

The data in this report indicate that many more students, and a higher proportion of students, ended the 2020-2021 school year at higher risk for reading difficulties as compared to students pre-COVID-19 (Spring of 2019). In particular, the data indicate that the early reading and literacy development for students of color, English learners, and students from lower SES backgrounds were disproportionately negatively impacted. The Spring data also demonstrate that more children were at high risk for reading difficulties in Spring 2021 as compared to Fall 2020.<sup>3</sup>

In preparation for the 2021-2022 school year, it is important to highlight that the number of students who are at-risk for reading difficulties far exceeds historical data. Division and schools will require an increase in instructional capacity in order to meet the literacy needs of these students. Without adequate, sustained, and targeted reading instruction and intervention, it is likely that many of these students will continue to have reading difficulties. Students who do not learn to read adequately during their first three years of schooling typically have persistent reading difficulties.

The data presented above suggest that the literacy development of our youngest learners was impacted by the disrupted learning opportunities they experienced during the pandemic. Ensuring

<sup>3</sup> For Fall 2020 benchmark data see this report: [https://pals.virginia.edu/public/pdfs/login/PALS\\_Fall\\_2020\\_Data\\_Report\\_5\\_18\\_final.pdf](https://pals.virginia.edu/public/pdfs/login/PALS_Fall_2020_Data_Report_5_18_final.pdf)

that every child is a successful reader will require that students who have been identified as at-risk, or below benchmark, learn how to read at an *accelerated* rate. School personnel, and in particular classroom teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists, must be equipped with the knowledge of how to implement evidence-based reading instruction and have access to the tools necessary to successfully teach students how to read.

For more information:

<https://pals.virginia.edu> • [pals@virginia.edu](mailto:pals@virginia.edu)