NATIONAL PARENTS UNION

THE CLASS OF 2024:

A Generation Shaped by Recession, Pandemic, and AI

Introduction

Every graduating class has a shared story that is shaped by the times in which they come of age. For the class of 2024, that story is one of growing up through some of the toughest challenges of the past two decades. These students were toddlers during the Great Recession, middle schoolers when the COVID-19 pandemic shut everything down, and high schoolers just as artificial intelligence became a tool they could use in everyday life. Their education wasn't a straight path. It bent and twisted with every disruption—budget cuts, remote learning, canceled events, new technology—but it has given them resilience and perspective. They became creative problem solvers, learned how to adjust and adapt when life threw curveballs, and now, they have stepped into adulthood in uncertain times.

Early Recession Roots

Born in 2006/2007, the class of 2024 came into the world right as the economy was beginning to collapse. The Great Recession meant lost jobs, foreclosures, and families scraping by. For schools, it meant budget cuts that stretched teachers thin, reduced necessary student supports, and eliminated programs like art, music, and afterschool clubs.

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, states faced a financial crisis, and emergency federal aid only closed a small percentage of budget shortfalls. Once that aid was depleted, states started cutting K-12 funding in order to comply with budget requirements. That meant larger class sizes, fewer student services, and less individual support. By 2014 – five years after the Great Recession ended – funding for K-12 schools remained below pre-recession levels in most states. [1]

Even if these kids didn't fully understand what was happening, they grew up in homes where money was tight and stability felt fragile. The recession shaped the way their parents talked about their opportunities, risks, and planning for the future, and the class of 2024 learned early that life can change fast.

"I remember growing up, my parents would talk about money but I never knew specifics. Ever since I can remember, I was told if I wanted money, I needed to get a job and work. But they never showed me how to balance working with keeping up with school, or how to budget to pay bills and buy groceries."

EMMA DIETRICH, '24
Fleetwood, Penn.
Fleetwood High School, PA

Pandemic Schooling

Just as life started to feel more like pre-recession times, another disruption arrived. In March 2020, when the class of 2024 was in eighth grade, schools shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overnight, classroom learning became online learning, and it wasn't an easy adjustment for everyone. Milestones like school dances, sports tournaments, and eighth grade field trips disappeared, and many students felt isolated from their friends and teachers.

The shift to remote learning led to decreased learning time as students and teachers alike struggled to use unfamiliar remote platforms. Students found that learning was hindered, and they struggled to stay focused outside of the classroom. Additionally, they were less likely to seek academic help when it was needed. Teachers were often required to redesign their lesson plans and find innovative ways to keep students engaged. Because of the decreased instructional time, teachers were often forced to eliminate entire sections of their curriculum. [2]

Disparities in access to high-speed internet only served to exacerbate the existing educational inequities for Black and Brown communities, where children spent less time learning and were more likely to drop out of school altogether. Though some kids found new hobbies, the isolation from their friends and classmates often meant students spent more time on devices and got less physical activity, leading to increases in stress, anxiety, and depression.[3] While classes shifted to online learning, extracurriculars – such as sports, band, or theater – were typically suspended completely. This left students without an outlet to connect to their peers, manage their stress, and develop their talents.[4]

In the fall of 2020, just months after the first wave of COVID-19 shutdowns, the class of 2024 started high school. Schools were still figuring out hybrid learning and safety measures, so their freshman year was far from the typical "welcome to high school" experience. Ninth grade was characterized by masked classrooms, canceled extracurriculars, and classmates joining virtually from home. By tenth grade, lives began to shift back to a version of pre-pandemic normal, but schools were scrambling to help students catch up academically. Tutoring, summer programs, and other extra academic supports made a difference for some, but not all. Academic recovery was uneven, and the learning gaps that widened during the pandemic still are not closed.

The First AI Generation

If the recession shaped their early childhood and the pandemic defined their middle and early high school years, technology defined the last few years of their high school experience. By the time they were juniors and seniors, artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT had become mainstream. Students were using AI to brainstorm essays, check their math answers, learn to write code, and even practice for their Advanced Placement exams.

A 2024 survey from Cengage Group found that 75% of K-12 students were using AI for schoolwork, up from 37% in 2023. [5] A report from the Center for Digital Thriving summed it up best: the world is changing. While academic integrity was a concern for the surveyed teens, most of them had positive academic experiences with generative AI, calling it a modern approach to learning and emphasizing that it wasn't being used solely to cheat in school. [6]

Schools responded differently. Some banned AI outright, worried about cheating. Others leaned in by encouraging students to treat AI like calculators or Google – tools that can help, but not replace, critical thinking. In an interview with Wired, Safinah Ali, an assistant professor at NYU's Steinhardt's Department of Administration Leadership and Technology, noted there is a tendency to overestimate the impact of new technology. "I do think that things shift, but I think overall learning as an act doesn't change," she said. "Learning is more than just retrieving some information and some knowledge. You have your social circles, you have friends, you have this teacher-student interaction. Those things all stay." [7]

An Uncertain Future

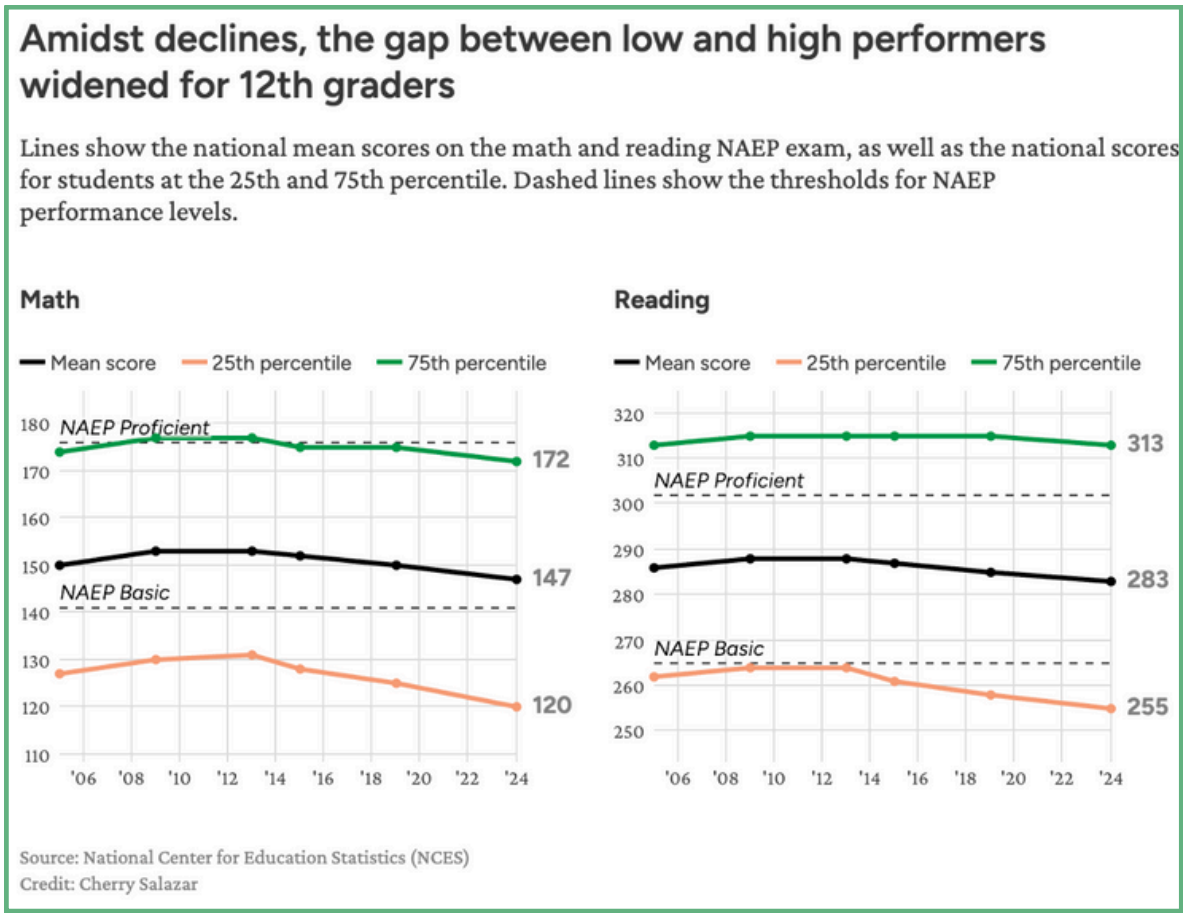
As they graduated, the Class of 2024 entered an unsettled world. The economy is uncertain, politics are polarized, and technology is growing faster than ever. But they know how to adapt, they know how to make due with limited resources, and they know how to use new tools and technology to learn and grow. They are flexible, digitally fluent, and unafraid to speak up.

But were they academically prepared for what came after high school?

The release of the 2024 12th Grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading scores has confirmed what we already knew: the learning loss faced by the Class of 2024 was dramatic and steep, and they graduated with the lowest math and reading scores in nearly two decades.[8] The NAEP report shows drastic declines in both math and reading, underscoring how deeply the pandemic years disrupted their academic progress with months of remote learning, uneven access to technology, and the emotional toll of isolation.

In math, their average performance dropped to the lowest level since 2005, with 45% of seniors scoring below NAEP's 'Basic' benchmark. Declines were widespread across most student groups, sparing only those at the very top. While fewer students reported taking advanced coursework like pre-calculus, many also expressed declining confidence in their math ability, even as enjoyment of the subject inched upward. This combination of lower achievement, reduced rigor, and wavering confidence highlights a troubling disconnect: students may like math more, but they are leaving high school with weaker skills than classes before them. [9]

Reading results were just as sobering. Seniors posted their lowest average score since NAEP first began tracking reading, and 32% scored below Basic, a figure twelve points higher than in 1992. Once again, only top performers managed to hold steady; the majority slipped backward. Students themselves reported less confidence in their reading abilities, though many also said they encountered more rigorous assignments, such as analyzing evidence in persuasive writing. This suggests that exposure to challenging work alone isn't enough—disrupted learning time and pandemic-era instability eroded their ability to master core skills, leaving them less prepared for the demands of college and careers. [10]



These results reflect more than a couple of missed months in the classroom – the data paints a stark picture of readiness. They show a generation whose foundational skills in math and reading were severely disrupted, for whom the return to normal didn't erase the learning gaps. Only 33% of Class of 2024 seniors were prepared for college-level math and 35% for college-level reading. Yet more than half reported being accepted to a four-year college, revealing a gap between aspiration and preparation. The widening achievement gaps between high- and low-performing students, especially in math, are the largest ever recorded. [11]

"…it has been astonishing to hear from our three older children, as they begin their college careers, on how ill-prepared they were for the academic rigor in college. When asked if they felt prepared for college, all three say, unequivocally, they were not."

PERI LYNN TURNBULL
San Diego, Calif.
Mom of 4, ages 14-22

Looking at the Class of 2024, what stands out most is the sense of contrast that defines them. They are resilient, having lived their formative years in the midst of a recession that changed their educational supports, and a global pandemic that completely altered their middle and high school experiences. But they are also still healing from the toll those experiences took. They are comfortable with AI and social media, but are also nostalgic for the simpler times of their partially analog childhoods. More than anything, they are pragmatic in recognizing that stability isn't guaranteed, while also idealistic in their determination to build a better future.

However, they also face real challenges. Many colleges are reporting an uptick in students needing remedial classes in core subjects like math, even when those students had similar GPAs to pre-pandemic cohorts. This isn't unique to the Class of 2024, however, and a recent study conducted by ACT found that students who completed high school during the pandemic were more likely to be placed in developmental or remedial courses. This suggests that high school grades may not be an accurate indicator of a student's post-secondary academic readiness. [12]

Peri Lynn Turnbull, a mother of four from San Diego, California, shared that her three older children felt unprepared for what they faced in college. Her children attended different K-12 public schools so their unique needs could be met, and now attend UCLA, Wake Forest, and Mesa College. All three have aspirations of academically heavy careers in law, accounting or engineering, yet they all felt unprepared for the rigors of college.

While her three children did not require remedial courses, Turnbull said: “There is no question that they have had to work harder, longer, and with more support to ensure that their college experience will make a difference in their career progression and economic mobility. From critical thinking, to the speed at which they must get through content, to the amount of writing required to complete assignments, they have been challenged with the transition.”

It's not just academically that this generation has struggled; employers are also sounding the alarm. While most executives believe that college graduates are generally prepared for the workforce, only 49% say that graduates are prepared in basic oral communication, indicating lingering gaps in soft skills. Additionally, only about half of the respondents indicated students were prepared in areas of critical thinking and complex problem-solving.13 Taken together, the Class of 2024 stepped out into the world full of adaptability and digital savvy, but academically underprepared in ways that will reverberate into higher education and the workforce.

Conclusion

The Class of 2024 was marked by disruption to their academic journey, but also by resilience. They saw what instability looked like, and they found ways to adapt. They were the first class to graduate with AI as a tool they used regularly as part of their education. But it would be a mistake to overlook the academic reality: this is a class that, through no fault of their own, was left less prepared for college and careers than those who came before. Their story is one of challenge, but also of creativity, grit, and hope.

NAEP scores may show us where the deficiencies are, but the story behind those numbers is about kids, families, and the future of our communities. If we’re serious about student success, we need resources, not reductions.

Footnotes

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