



September 19th, 2023

Dear Dr. Durán and the Arlington School Board,

We are writing in advance of the September 26 work session on the APS Instructional Vision, which appears to be the only work session, of the 16 scheduled sessions, devoted to academic instruction. We appreciate that one of the Board's stated priorities for this school year is to "invest with urgency in improving educational outcomes for students" at APS. Based on the data from this year's SOL tests, it is apparent that such urgency is critically needed for APS' students. Specifically, APS should:

1. Invest with Urgency to Recover from Learning Loss;
2. Identify and Adopt Meaningful Solutions, and a Plan to Close the Performance Gap; and
3. Renew APS' Culture of Academic Excellence.

I. APS Must Invest with Urgency to Recover from Learning Loss

SOL Data Reflects Slowing Recovery. The SOL data reflects that after suffering dramatic setbacks in performance on all subjects and in all grades as a result of the decision to close schools, APS' recovery efforts to return SOL pass rates to historically normal levels has slowed, stalled and even reversed, leaving pass rates far below historic norms. (See Appendix Tab 1)

- In reading, writing, and science, performance improvements have stalled with passing scores declining this past year in reading and writing.
- While math and history saw modest gains, the rate of recovery in those subjects has more than halved, while historic pass rates were 10-12 percent higher than this year.
- Just five years ago, 86-87% of APS students passed the SOLs in each of the five state subjects. Now the pass rate is at or below 80% in all subjects.

Collectively, this data suggests it will take years for APS to return to its level of performance prior to the pandemic absent the kind of urgent action this Board has pledged to pursue.

Thousands of students impacted. Such trends are not just abstract data. These data points represent the progress, or lack thereof, of thousands of students in the system. (See Appendix Tab 2).

- 1092 **more** students **failed** the reading SOLs in 2023 than in 2015-2016, a 65% increase.¹
- 1,142 **more** students **failed** the math SOLs in 2023 than in 2015-16, a 57% increase.
- 865 **more** students **failed** the science SOLs in 2023 than in 2015-2016, an 87% increase.

Recovery requires more than business as usual. We have advocated for more urgent and large scale investment in additional instructional time in [2021 \(also here\)](#) and [2022 \(also here\)](#), when APS received [\\$18.9 million](#) from the federal government and [\\$8.4 million](#) from the county respectively.

¹ Although we have [previously noted](#) the deteriorating performance on DIBELS of students in fifth grade and middle school, we would note that the 2762 students failing the Reading SOLs, and the 1092 **additional** students failing the Reading SOLs, are evenly distributed across each grade from third through 8th.



Those investments were not made. APS argued that these once-in-a-century learning losses could be recovered through its routine application of “accelerated” learning and a tiered system of support. The data confirms that modest actions simply will not deliver the results our students need and, disturbingly, will result in possibly thousands more students who fail the SOLs again next year. [Leaders](#) in the [education community](#) have underscored that this moment requires an urgent investment in resources at far [larger scale](#) than most school systems have delivered. The same is true here.

APS Actions are Too Modest. Respectfully, the current actions outlined at the September 7th School Board meeting continue the business-as-usual actions that have failed to deliver the needed results over the past two years. We are doubtful those actions will have any greater impact this year than they have had the past two years. Additional professional training, a routine practice in all districts, may improve teacher skills over the long term, but is unlikely to result in significant near-term impacts. New assessments (once APS staff/teachers can effectively use them) may help identify additional gaps in student skills. But there is no evidence that the old assessments dramatically failed in that regard. Use of updated instructional tactics—such as “Math Workshops” (which APS has used since 2016), “Bridging Standards” (which is also years old), and “PACT”—may provide modest benefits. But we are unaware of any instructional tactics that alone have dramatically altered the educational results of students. The presentation contains no mention of the strategies that [research](#) confirm are most effective in recovering lost learning: additional instructional time, double-dose instruction and intensified tutoring.

APS should Implement Intensified Tutoring by October 16. The Virginia legislature recently approved a bipartisan budget providing \$418 million in additional funding for districts to address learning loss, with districts encouraged to allocate 70% to high-intensity tutoring. This represents a third opportunity for APS to invest aggressively in learning loss recovery. The Governor has challenged districts to implement high-intensity tutoring programs by October 16th so that the tutoring can benefit students *this year*. And VDOE has issued a [playbook](#) for implementing high-intensity tutoring. We request that the APS Board devote time during the instructional visioning work session to develop a plan to implement such a program and direct the APS Administration to implement that plan by October 16th. This School Board has identified the need for urgent action to address the continuing effects of the 2020-2021 school closures, the state has provided the resources. We ask that you follow the state’s lead in taking such critical action.

II. **APS Should Identify and Adopt Meaningful Solutions to Close the Performance Gap.**

The School Board has rightly identified closing the performance gap as one of its primary goals. APS has adopted (and continues to adopt) policies aimed at addressing inequities in the system, including the adoption of culturally responsive teaching, the creation of a DEI office, and the adoption of disciplinary, grading, technology and homework policies all intended to address equity issues at APS.

The Performance Gap has Widened. Although well-intended, APS’ actions have not only failed to close the performance gap, the gap has increased across all subjects over the past five years, and the gap continued to increase this year for Black and Hispanic students in reading and writing.

- For economically-disadvantaged students, what had been a 20-25 percent gap across subjects is now a 30-35 percent gap. Across every SOL subject, 40-50 percent—nearly half—of economically-disadvantaged students are not passing the SOLs. (See Appendix Tab 3).
- For Black and Hispanic students, the gap in pass rates **increased** this year in reading and writing. Other than history, the gap narrowed only by a couple percent in other subjects. Three years after APS closed its schools, 40-50% of Black and Hispanic students are still failing the SOLs in most subjects. (See Appendix Tabs 4 and 5).

APS Needs Meaningful, Concrete Actions. For a school system that has prioritized closing the performance gaps, the SOL results confirm that APS’ efforts are insufficient. Concerningly, at the present rate, it could take another four to five years just to return to the performance gaps that existed in 2015-2016, which were already far from acceptable. APS has devoted much rhetoric to closing these gaps “with urgency,” but we have seen no plan—much less an urgent one—to take concrete steps that might narrow this gap more quickly, such as additional instructional time, dramatic increases in teachers and personnel, meaningful parental engagement, or school-specific improvement plans. We urge you to devote time in your instructional visioning session to identify specific steps APS should take to address the growing performance gap, evaluate the basis for believing that such actions will have more meaningful impact than prior actions and direct APS to provide a plan to implement those actions.

III. **APS Should Renew its Culture of Academic Excellence.**

Although not mentioned in the School Board’s 2023-24 priorities, we are sure that ensuring educational excellence at APS continues to be one of the system’s long-term goals. Educational excellence starts with all students meeting the Virginia standards of learning and closing large gaps in performance. But, it also includes increasing the portion of its students performing at advanced levels, whether as measured by the SOLs, the AP and IB exams, or other criteria.

Recent Data Reflects a Decline in Advanced Academic Achievement. Recent data confirms that APS advanced academic achievement is declining.

- APS has 5 to 10 percent fewer students scoring at advanced levels across reading, writing, science and math in 2023 compared to five years earlier. (See Appendix Tab 6). In math, this represents over 1000 fewer students scoring at advanced levels.
- APS has a [smaller percentage](#) of students scoring a four or higher on the IB exams, a smaller percentage of students scoring a three or higher on the AP exams than pre-covid (67% in 2019), and a [smaller percentage](#) of students taking algebra or higher by 8th grade (58% in 2019). (See the APS Equity Dashboard).

APS Should Develop a Plan to Renew its Culture of Academic Excellence. A culture of academic excellence will improve the performance of students across all levels of academic performance and in all socio-economic circumstances. Our [three-part series](#) on academic excellence identified many actions APS should take to return the district to a focus on academic excellence. Examples include:



- Automatically enroll qualified students into intensified middle school courses to increase enrollment of under-represented students and prepare them for AP and IB courses.
- Expand AP and IB course offerings and set targets to increase participation in those courses, particularly among underrepresented students.
- Implement the research-based writing program recommended by the English Language Arts Advisory Committee (ELAAC) and fund additional secondary teachers so that teachers can provide adequate feedback, which cannot happen if teachers have 140+ students per teacher.²

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We appreciate the School Board’s call to invest with urgency in improving educational outcomes for students. With the recent SOL data highlighting the pressing need for a new and different approach to addressing learning loss, and with the new state-level funding, playbook, and mandate, we ask the Board to act with that sense of urgency during its instructional visioning work session. We urge the Board to direct the Superintendent to implement high-intensity tutoring by October 16, to deliver a meaningful and concrete plan for reducing the performance gap to 2015 levels within two years, and to adopt an instructional vision that calls for academic excellence and incorporates many of the actions we have identified.

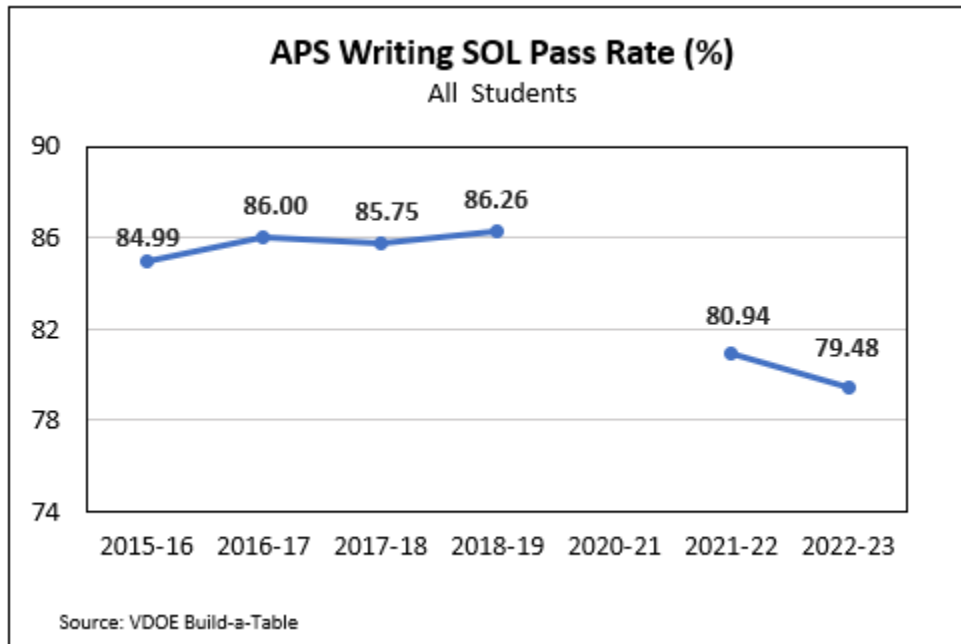
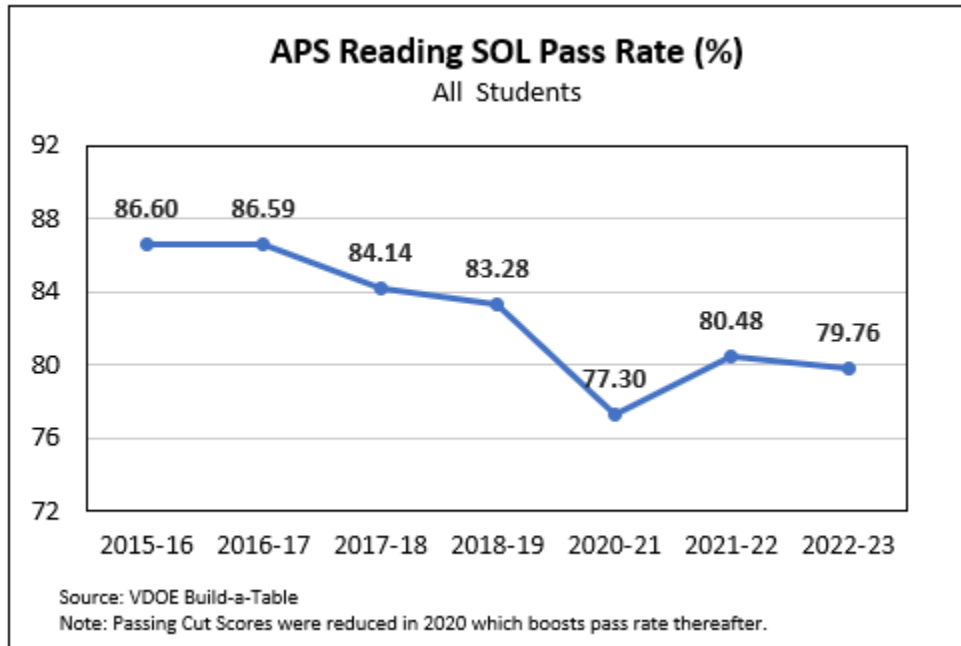
Thank you.

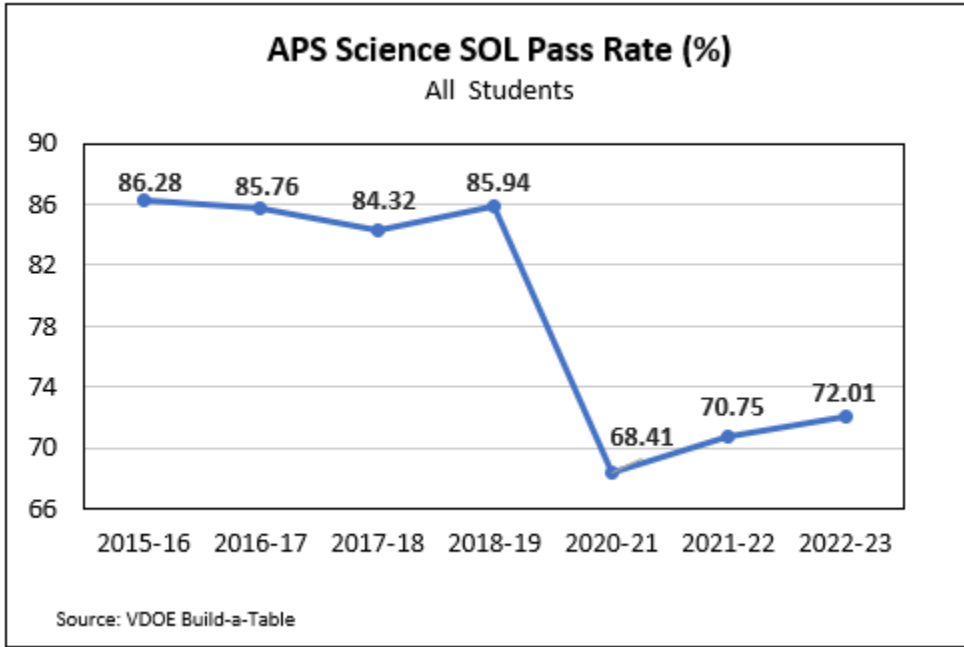
Arlington Parents for Education

² Note: While APS has proposed an additional or modified writing program to prepare students for the state’s revised SOL writing exam, that is not a substitute for the writing program proposed by ELAAC. The ELAAC program focuses on research-based writing, which is a critical skill set for college-level writing and one that our students reported they were missing after graduation from APS.

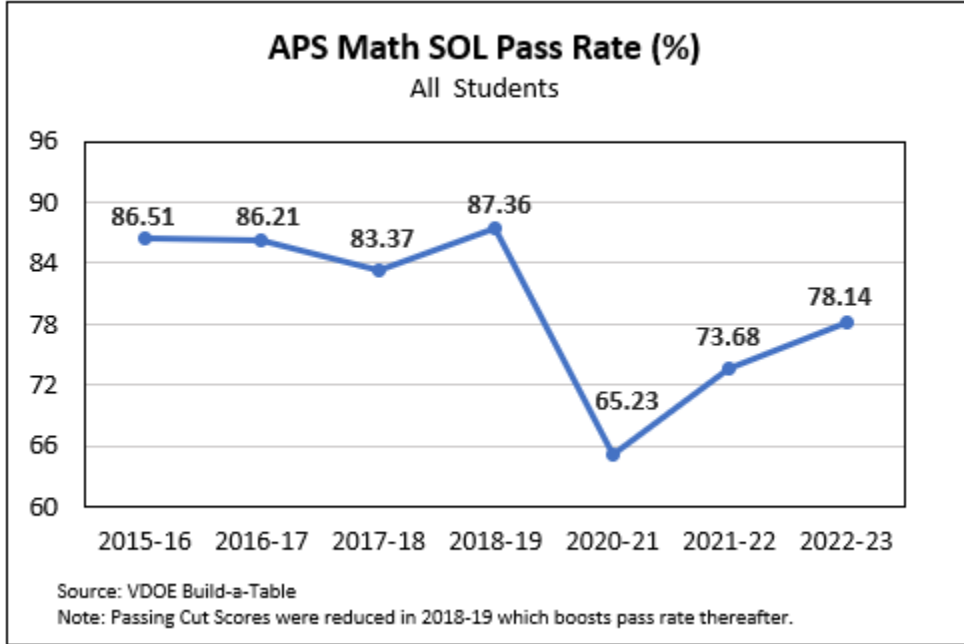
Appendix Tab 1: Historic SOL Pass Rates by Subject

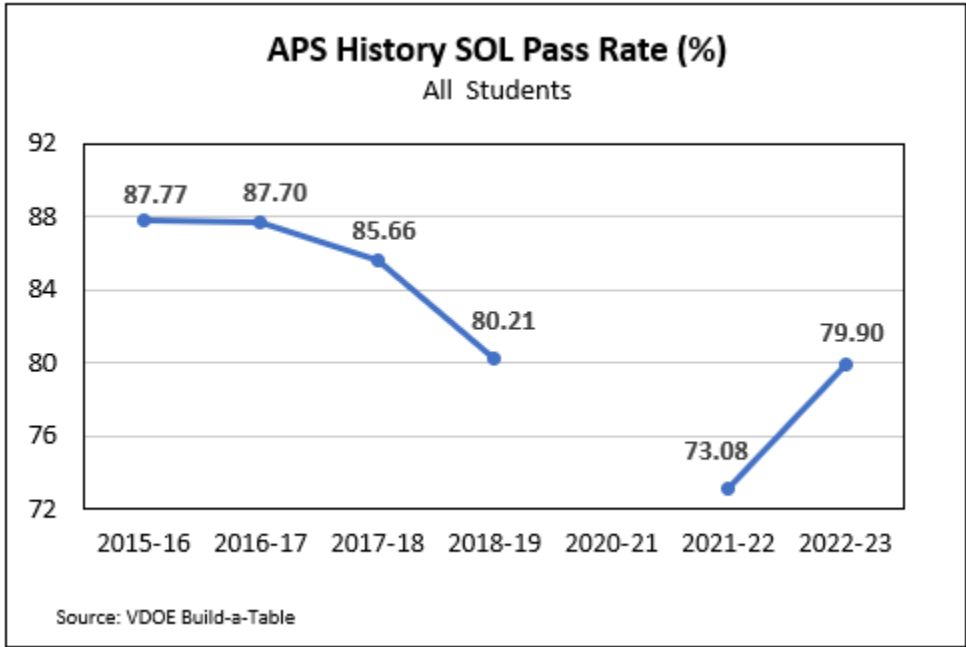
SOL Pass Rates Declined Dramatically in All Subjects During COVID Shutdowns, and Recovery Efforts Over the Past Two Years Have been Insufficient to Return APS to the Pass Rates Seen Five Years Ago.





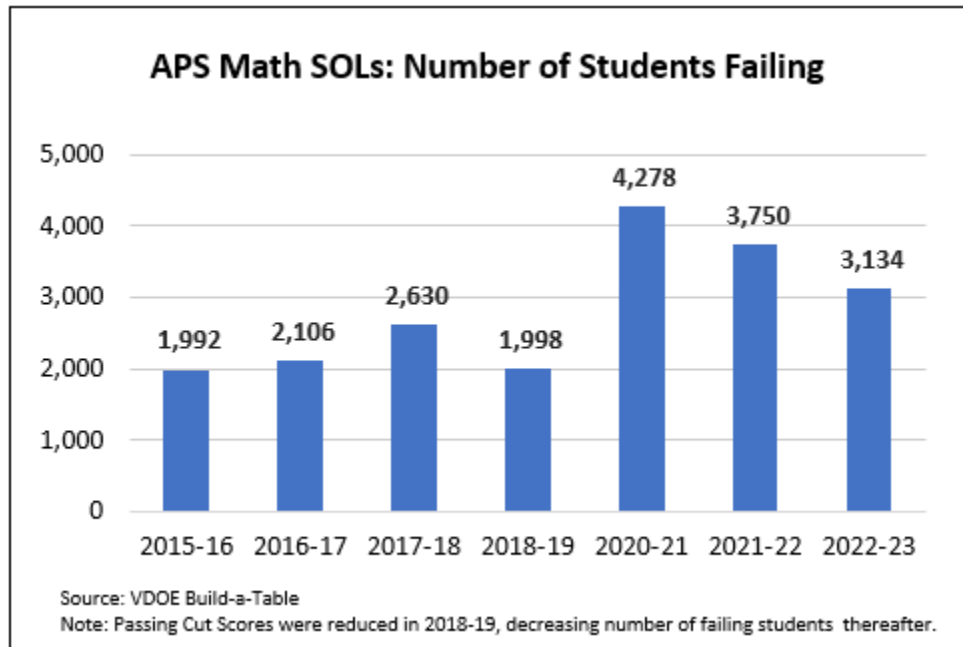
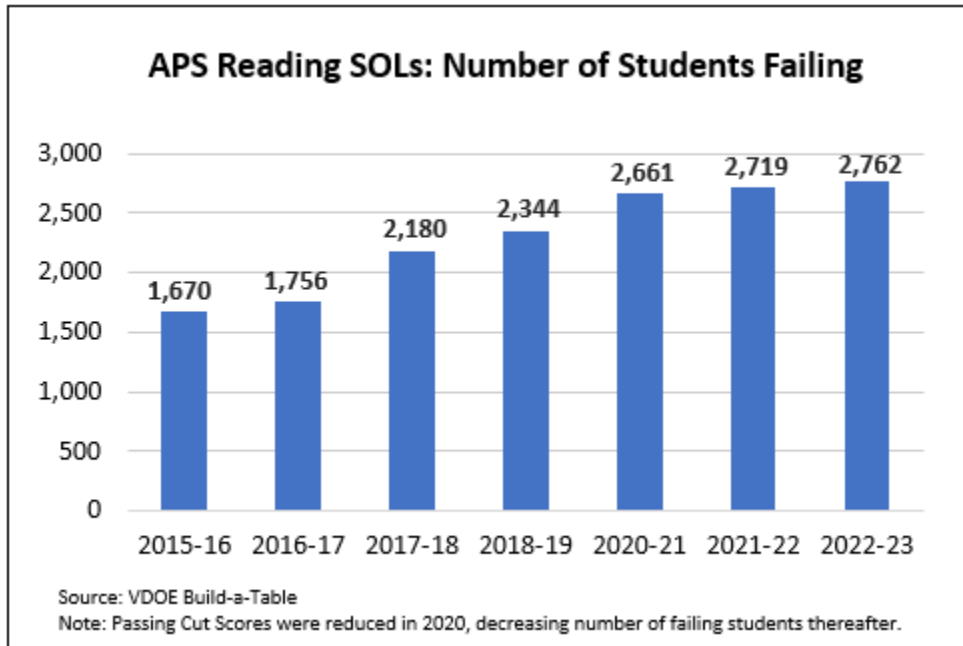
- [Math cut scores were reduced in 2018-2019](#)

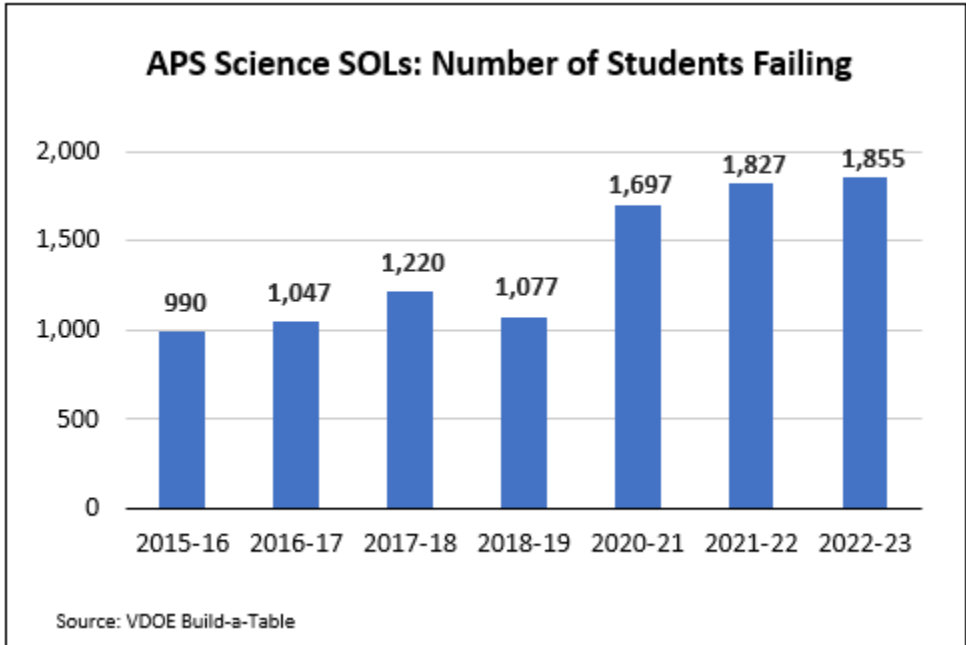




Appendix Tab 2: Number of Students Failing SOL Tests

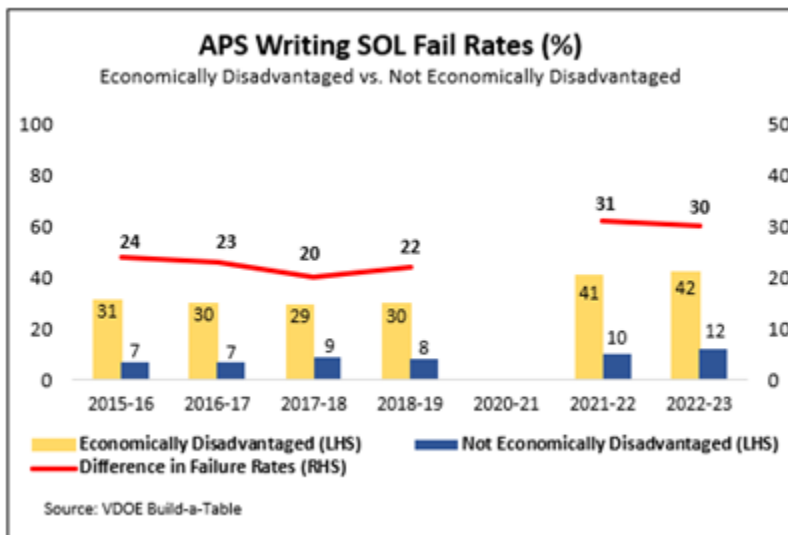
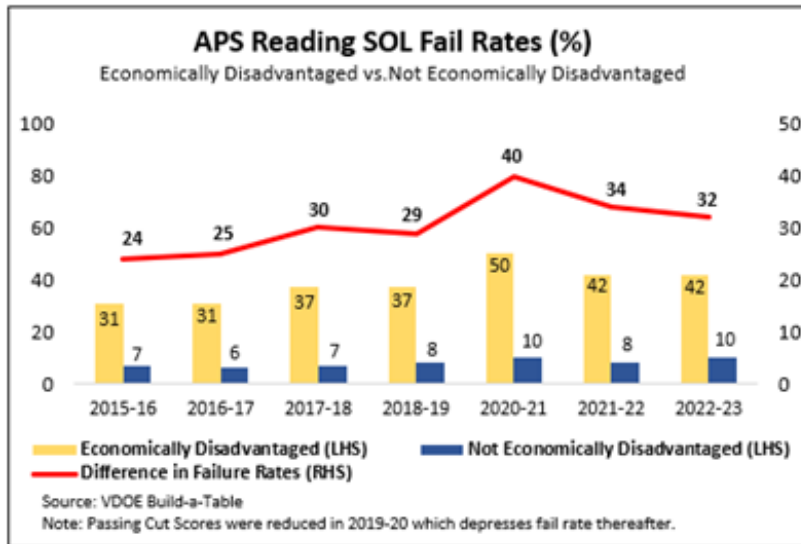
APS' Reduced Pass Rates Means that Thousands of Additional Students are Failing their SOL Exams for Each of the Past Three Years When Compared to the Prior Years.

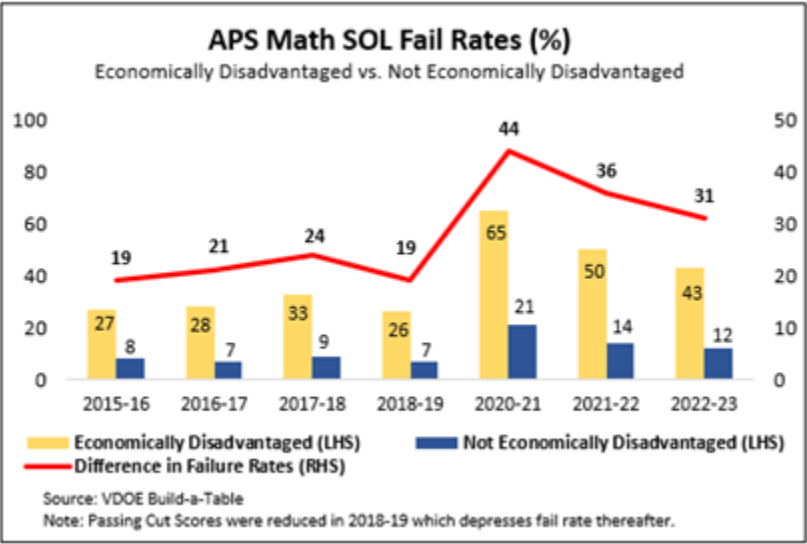
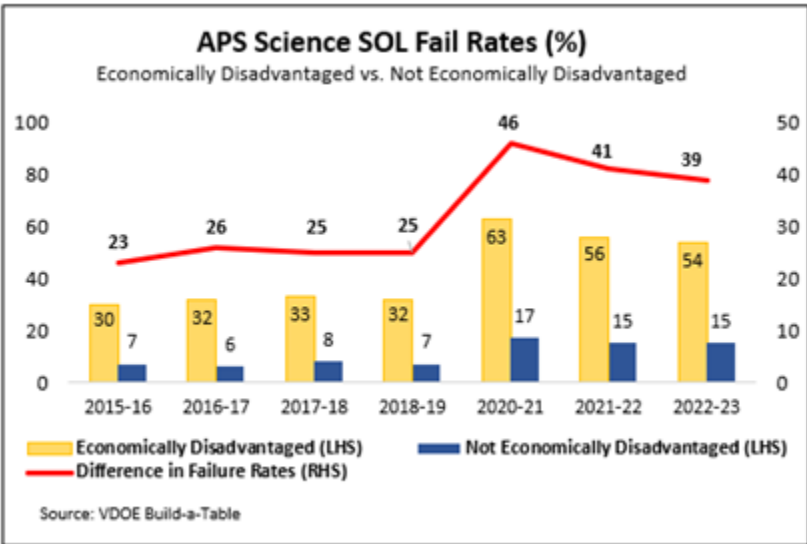


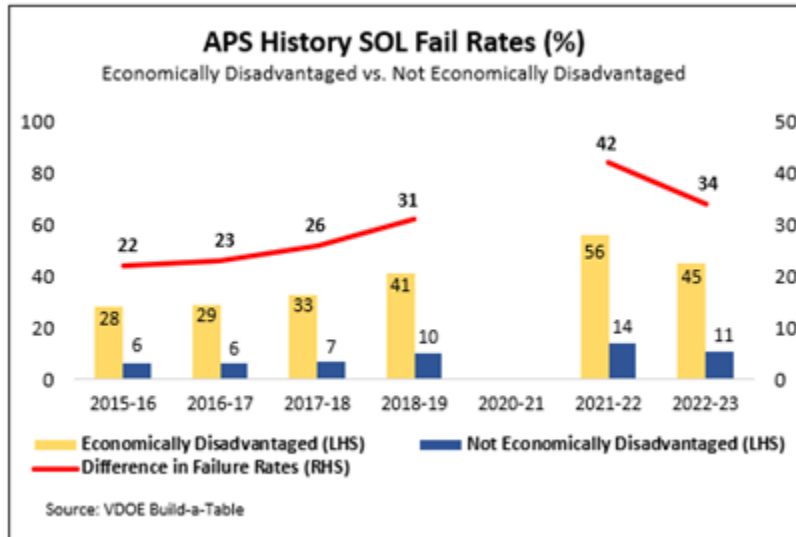


Appendix Tab 3: Historic Trends in Performance Gaps for Economically Disadvantaged Students

With Respect to Economically Disadvantaged Students, the Gap in Performance (measured by fail rates on SOL exams) Increased Dramatically During COVID. Remediation Actions Over the Past Two Years Show Diminishing Effectiveness in Closing the Gaps. Forty-two to Fifty-four Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students Fail the SOLs.

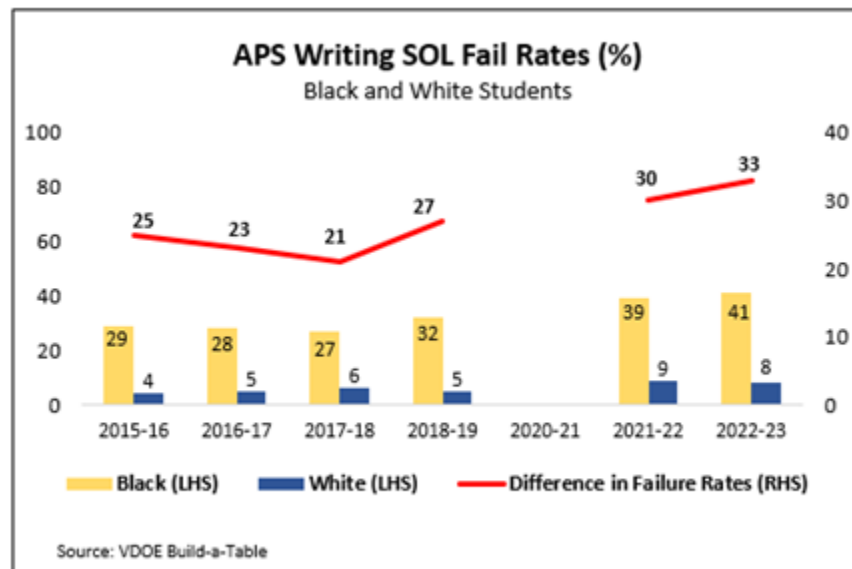
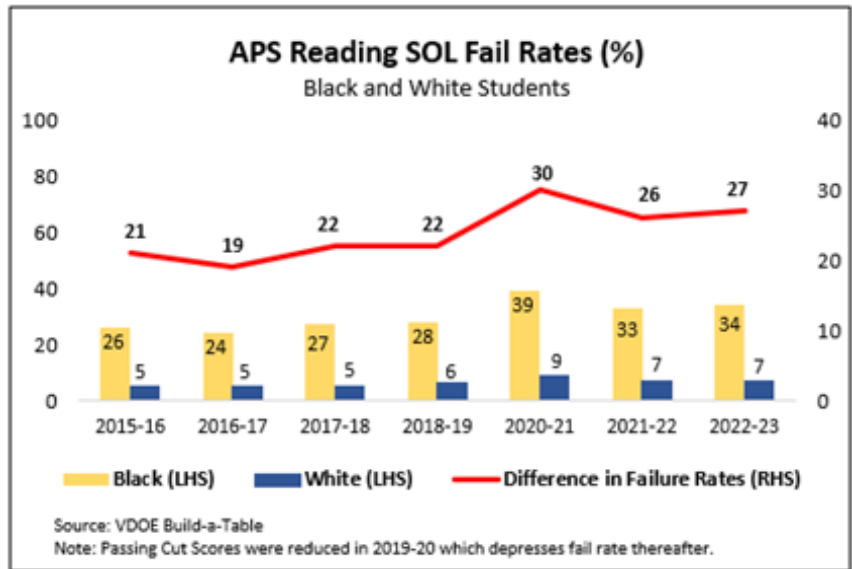


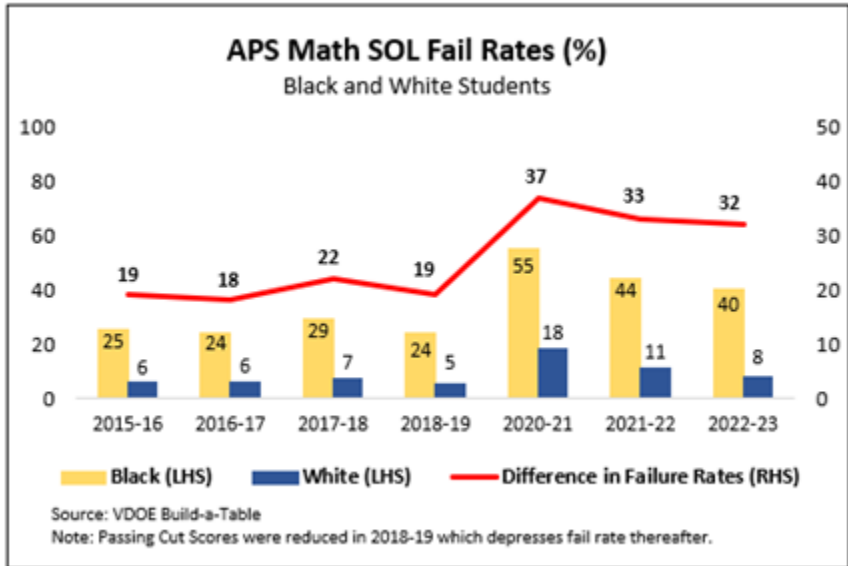
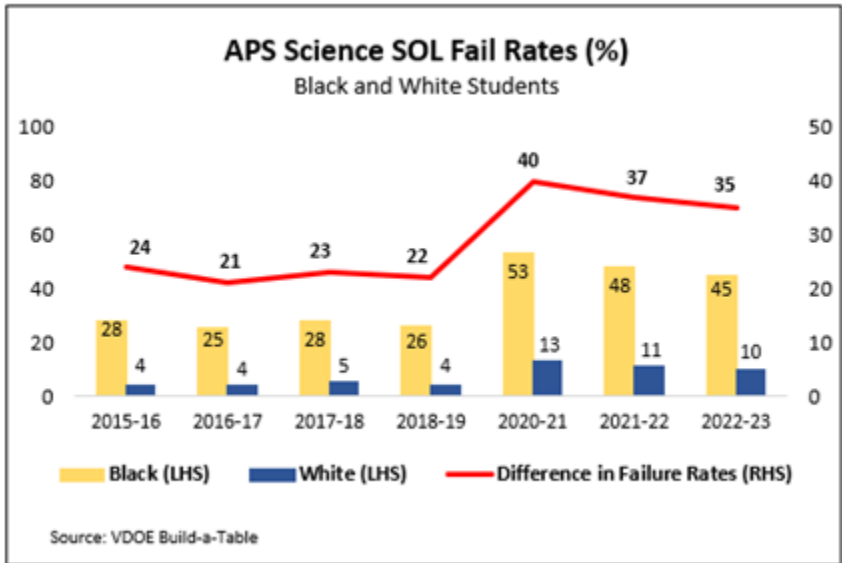


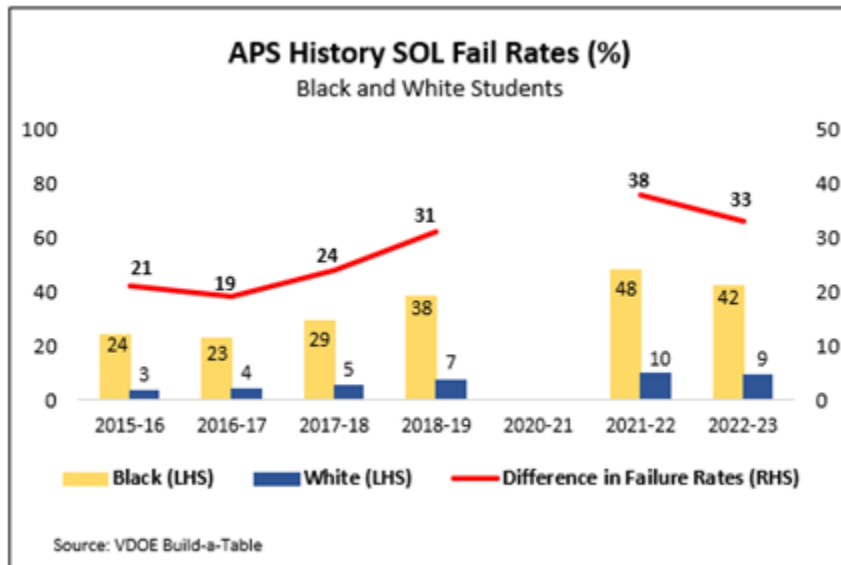


Appendix Tab 4: Historic Trends in Performance Gaps for Black Students

Black Students Experienced a Widening of the Performance Gap in Reading and Writing This Past School Year. In Math and Science, the Gap was Reduced by Only 1-2 Percentage Points. APS' Business-as-Usual Actions Are Not Sufficient to Close the Gap.

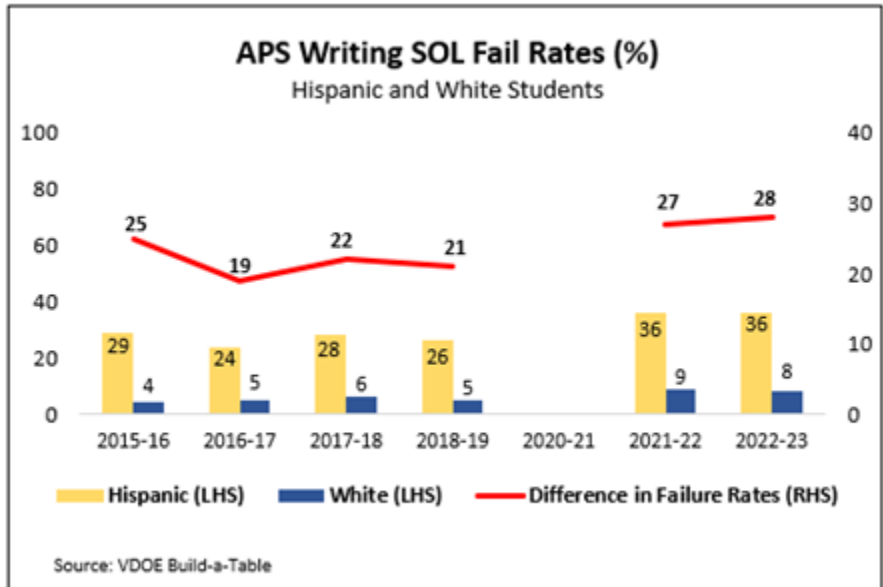
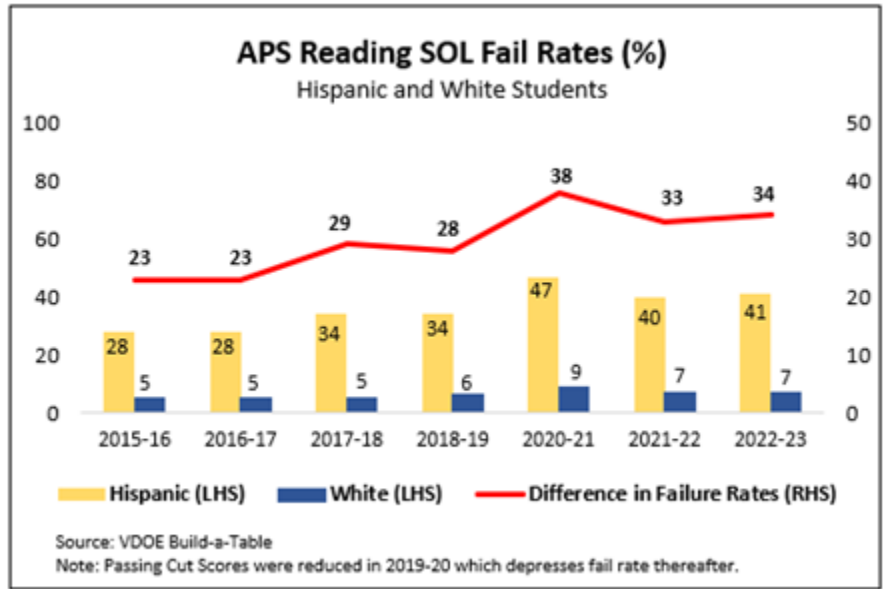


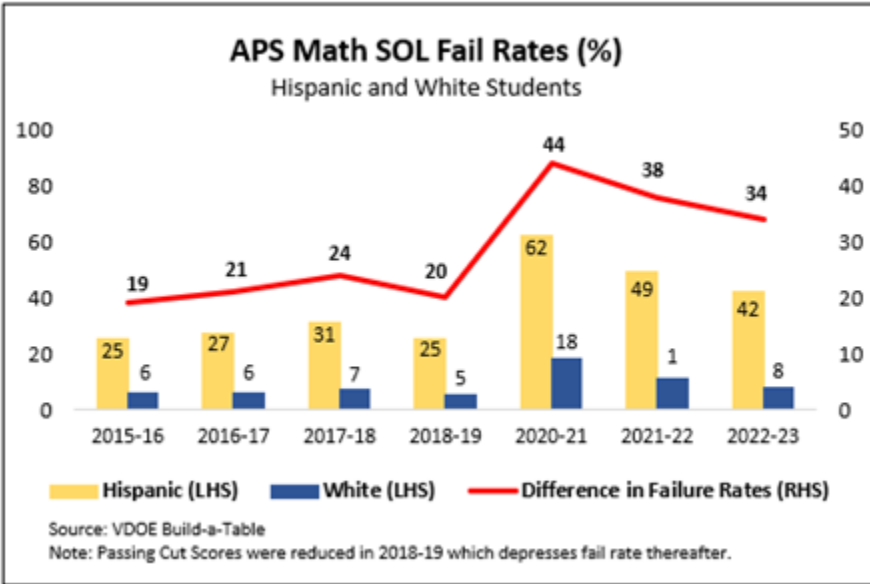
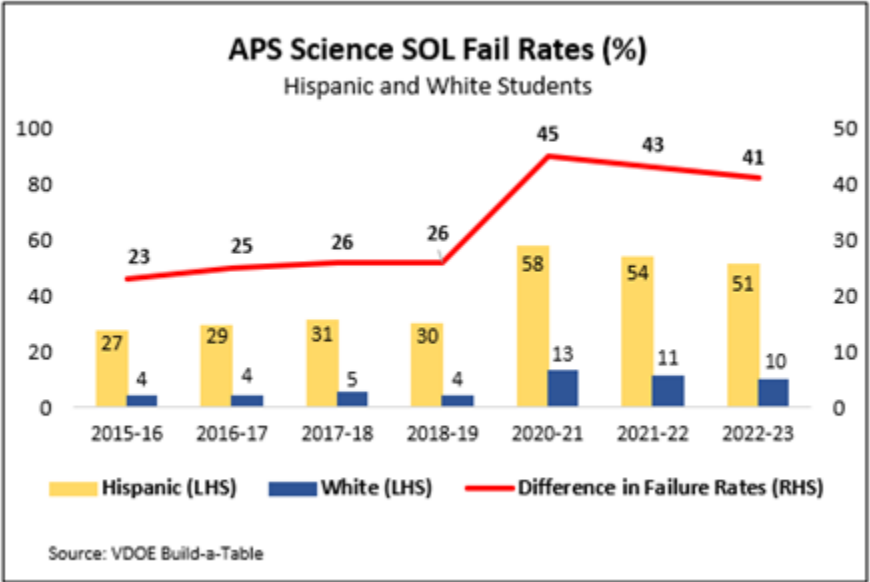


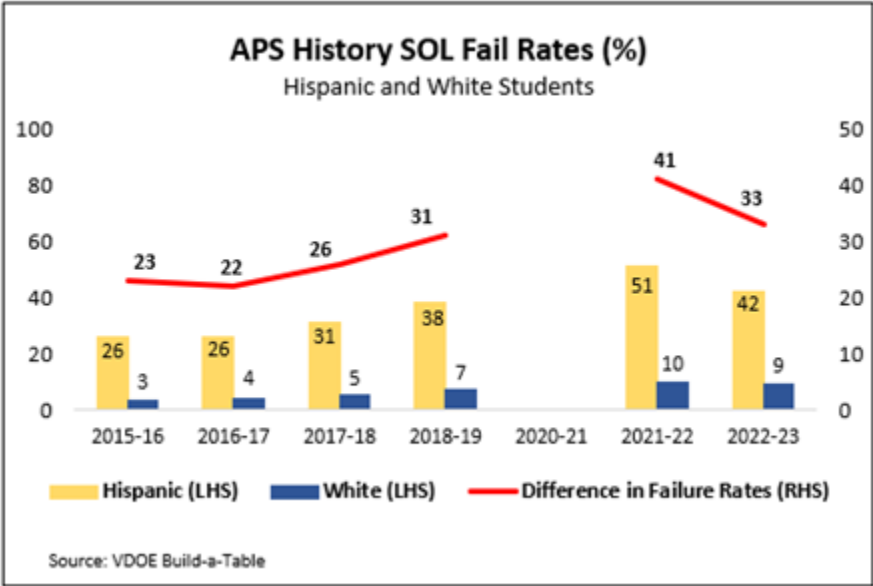


Appendix Tab 5: Historic Trends in Performance Gaps for Hispanic Students

Hispanic Students Also Experienced a Widening of the Performance Gap in Reading and Writing This Past School Year, and only a 2 percent Narrowing of the Gap in Science.







Appendix Tab 6: Historical Trend of Students Scoring at Passed Advanced

Across Reading, Writing, Science and Math, APS Has Five to Ten Percent Fewer Students Scoring at a Pass Advanced Level Compared to Five Years Ago, Which Represents a 15-30 Percent Reduction in the Advanced Pass Rate. For Math, this represents more than 1000 fewer students scoring at advanced levels, and in science 664 fewer students.

