Pittsburgh Public Schools Goal Monitoring Report:
Status Update
3rd Grade English Language Arts Proficiency

Introduction and Goal

This report provides an update on District Leadership's progress in improving English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency among 3rd-grade students in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). In alignment with best practices established by the Council of Great City Schools, our goal monitoring report seeks to communicate both the current landscape of student performance and our plan for a targeted strategic response. By the end of the 2024-2025 school year, we aim for 49.4% of our 3rd-grade students to meet proficiency on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA) in ELA. Third grade is a pivotal year in a child's educational journey, representing a critical transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Research shows that students who are proficient in reading by the end of third grade are more likely to succeed in subsequent grades and beyond. We currently have 46.1% of 3rd grade students meeting proficiency on the PSSA and PASA. At the end of the 20-21 school year, 40.20% of third-grade students were proficient, establishing the baseline for our 5-year goal of achieving 54% by 2027. Currently, there are 48 3rd grade ELA educators, with 23 (48%) teaching in self-contained classrooms, meaning they instruct students in all content areas and 25 (52%) are departmentalized, meaning they are dedicated ELA teachers. There are 13 Literacy Academic Coaches (one vacancy) supporting this initiative across 34 schools with varying degrees of support based on data, most supporting three schools (SEE COACHING ASSIGNMENTS). In November 2024, we introduced three strategies to enhance 3rd grade ELA outcomes: refining lesson design, implementing differentiated instruction, and identifying and scaling best practices across schools.

The Data

To support the attainment of 3rd grade reading goals, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) uses two key assessments: the Classroom Diagnostic Tool (CDT), and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). The CDT is administered three times a year and is a computer adaptive assessment designed to provide diagnostic information to guide instruction that supports intervention and enrichment. The DIBELS Acadience assessment provides a breakdown of students' foundational literacy skills, measuring aspects like oral reading fluency, comprehension, and decoding accuracy. The DIBELS Composite score reflects student performance across multiple subtests: Oral Reading Fluency Accuracy and Words Correct, Retell, and Maze. Oral Reading Fluency (ORF), measures how fluently and accurately a student reads a grade-level passage, assessing both the number of words read correctly per minute and overall reading accuracy. Maze measures reading comprehension and the ability to construct meaning from text. This is the first year, as a district, we are administering the Retell and Maze subtests, providing us with a composite score in DIBELS Acadience. The composite score is designed to give an overall indication of a student's reading ability and help identify students who may need additional support in specific areas of literacy. This score can help guide instructional decisions, track progress over time, and assess whether students are meeting the grade-level expectations for reading proficiency. Together, these assessments provide a comprehensive view of current student performance and areas for improvement in 3rd-grade ELA.

The presentation of the initial 3rd Grade ELA goal monitoring was presented to the Board of Directors on November 12, 2024. The window for the second administration of the CDT opened on November 12, 2024. The window for the second administration of DIBELS Acadience began on December 16, 2024. This timing indicates that the district is deploying strategies while simultaneously collecting new data, meaning the CDT second administration results will not fully reflect the impact of recently implemented strategies. Instead, this data serves as a checkpoint to inform ongoing adjustments to ensure alignment with the district's continuous improvement cycle.

Mid-Year Assessment Timeline

- 3rd Grade Initial ELA Goal Monitoring Presentation: November 12, 2024
- CDT Second Administration: November 12, 2024
- Second Administration of DIBELS Acadience: December 16, 2024

Classroom Diagnostic Tool (CDT) Results

The CDT provides a different lens for evaluating student progress, offering insights into how students are likely to perform on the PSSA. The second administration of the CDT assessment reveals a positive trajectory, with the percentage of students classified as "Performing At/Above Grade Level" increasing from 21% in the first administration to 30.2% in the second administration, marking a 9.2% gain. Breaking performance down by subgroups, White students exhibited the highest growth, with a 13.2% gain. Next in growth were economically disadvantaged students who improved by 9.5%. African American students saw a 7.2% gain in improvement. English Language Learners also demonstrated gains of 5% and students with IEPs demonstrated gains of 3.1%. This suggests that while progress is being made, continued focus on targeted interventions and differentiated supports are necessary to further close achievement gaps (SEE ATTACHMENT A).

DIBELS Acadience Data

As students are transitioning from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," it is important to note that if students are not performing well on DIBELS Acadience, they may be struggling with foundational literacy skills that are critical for comprehending more complex texts and acquiring knowledge across subject areas. The Middle of Year (MOY) administration of the DIBELS Acadience assessment highlights both strengths and areas for improvement in third-grade literacy. The completion rate for this assessment increased from 84% at the Beginning of Year (BOY) to 91% at MOY, demonstrating a concerted effort by district leaders, teachers, and school staff to ensure more student participation (SEE ATTACHMENT B). However, despite this increase in participation, the percentage of students performing at or above benchmark on the DIBELS composite score declined from 56.4% to 49.6%, with a corresponding increase in students classified as Below Benchmark and Well Below Benchmark.

Breaking down the results by subtests, Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Accuracy scores remained relatively strong, suggesting that students are able to decode words correctly. However, ORF Words Correct and ORF Retell scores declined, indicating that while students can read accurately, they are struggling with fluency and comprehension. The Maze subtest, which assesses reading comprehension by requiring students to choose missing words in a passage, also revealed challenges in students' ability to understand and extract meaning from text. Given that Maze is being administered for the first time in our District, these results provide valuable insights into comprehension skills that were previously unmeasured at this level (SEE ATTACHMENT C).

When examining subgroup performance, disparities remain evident. African American students saw a decline in Core (at or above benchmark) scores from 46.6% to 37.2%, with an increase in students performing Well Below Benchmark from 40.5% to 46.2%. White students maintained the highest performance, with Core scores decreasing only slightly from 72.5% to 68.9%. Students with IEPs saw the most significant decline, with Core scores dropping from 26.6% to 19.5%, while ELL students declined slightly from 28.9% to 25.4%. Economically disadvantaged students also experienced a decline, with Core performance falling from 49.1% to 40.2%. The highest percentages of students performing Well Below Benchmark were among IEP students (66.0% at BOY, increasing to 68.8% at MOY) and ELL students (64.1% at BOY, decreasing slightly to 60.6% at MOY). (SEE ATTACHMENT D).

Superintendent's Evaluation of the Data

The Middle of Year (MOY) assessment results highlight key challenges in third-grade literacy development. While assessment participation rates increased, a decline in Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Words Correct and Retell scores, along with lower performance on the Maze comprehension subtest, indicates that students are struggling with both reading fluency and comprehension.

As third graders progress through the year, they are expected to shift from simply decoding words to reading fluently while also processing meaning (which is why one of the district's strategies was targeted towards ensuring teachers understood lesson design and progression). This transition requires students to balance accuracy, speed, and comprehension simultaneously, which can lead to a temporary slowdown in fluency scores. The decline in ORF Words Correct suggests that many students are focusing more on decoding accuracy, which can come at the expense of automaticity and reading pace. Additionally, the drop in Retell and Maze scores confirms that comprehension remains a challenge, particularly as students engage with more complex texts that demand deeper understanding.

Despite the challenges reflected in the DIBELS results, the CDT data shows positive momentum, with a 9.2 percentage point increase in students classified as "Performing At or Above Grade Level." This suggests that while fluency scores may have declined, students are developing the broader literacy skills needed for long-term success. The contrast between DIBELS and CDT results underscores the importance of balanced literacy instruction that builds both fluency and comprehension.

Continuous Improvement Approach

In November 2024, we outlined our strategy for making improvements in 3rd Grade ELA proficiency by adopting continuous improvement cycles, specifically through the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) methodology. This iterative process allows for systematic evaluation and refinement of identified strategies, ensuring that our efforts are consistently aligned with student needs and educational outcomes. This approach has been deemed effective as it promotes ongoing progress through evidence, reflection, and refinement. Additionally, we seek to address achievement gaps systematically while implementing practices that are responsive to real-time data and adaptable to students' changing needs. Continuous improvement cycles ensure that every step taken toward the ELA goal is driven by data, grounded in evidence, and focused on students, fostering sustainable improvements throughout classrooms.

Strategic Responses and Plan

Our strategic responses within implementation of continuous improvement cycles focus on three critical areas designed to address gaps revealed by our assessment data: lesson design, differentiated instruction, and identifying and scaling best practices across schools. These research-based areas are key to ensuring that instruction is tailored to meet the diverse needs of students, bridging gaps in achievement and promoting sustained academic growth. Again, there are 34 schools in our district that serve 3rd-grade students.

Timeline for Implementation

Since the November 2024 presentation, PPS has implemented a series of targeted instructional strategies designed to improve literacy outcomes for third-grade students. The implementation timeline reflects a structured, data-informed approach that combines professional learning, instructional supports, and leadership engagement to drive progress (SEE ATTACHMENT E).

Between **November 2024 and April 2025**, key initiatives have included:

- **Second CDT Administration (November 2024):** This assessment was launched the same day as our initial presentation to the Board of Directors, ensuring a clear baseline for mid-year performance tracking.
- **Professional Learning for Leaders and Teachers:** Principals and educators participated in coaching cycles, instructional strategy sessions regarding expectations of visual posters that detail lesson progression, and data analysis workshops aimed at enhancing reading instruction and addressing student needs.
- **Leading and Learning Feedback Sessions:** Principals received feedback on their classroom observations, ensuring that their observations were done in a way that allowed them to focus on providing actionable feedback with support with culturally inclusive teaching.
- **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) Training:** Professional learning in CRP was provided to offer a foundational understanding of CRP.
- **Leadership Engagement:** Regular updates and discussions were conducted with instructional coaches, school administrators, and assistant superintendents to align strategies with district goals.
- **Third CDT Administration (February 24 – March 7, 2025):** Due to the timing of this assessment, the results will not be included in this report but will be critical in measuring final student progress.

Implementation of Strategies

1. **Lesson Design through Visualization of Expectations**
    - **Plan:** Key Components of this strategy include designing and sharing visual models, providing professional learning and support on lesson design, and principals conducting classroom observations while providing actionable feedback. The feedback provided for teachers should focus on planning, instructional delivery, teacher moves, and fidelity to the curriculum throughout the lesson.
    - **Do:** Visuals were created and distributed in December to serve as a guide for lesson design and implementation. Professional learning was facilitated for Literacy Academic Coaches, School Leaders, and Teachers. Literacy Academic Coaches also provided job-embedded professional learning for teachers around lesson design. Principals have conducted observations and have provided feedback to teachers focusing on lesson design. Assistant Superintendents reviewed all principal observations and provided written feedback to principals.
    - **Check (Challenges):** A key part of this strategy was ensuring teachers consistently followed a structured lesson design to support literacy development. To reinforce expectations, quality control emails were sent to principals, reminding them to ensure that visual lesson progression posters were displayed in a location where both teachers and students could consistently reference them as an incidental learning tool to shape expectations. While many schools successfully integrated lesson progression posters as instructional tools, some faced challenges in positioning them for optimal visibility, which impacted their effectiveness. In addition, time for professional learning with teachers is limited and must be used strategically to maximize its impact on lesson design, ensuring that teachers can effectively implement best practices, differentiate instruction, and respond to student needs.
    - **Act (Next Steps):** Coaching support will be refined to prioritize direct, real-time feedback for teachers on how to integrate structured lesson design effectively. On-going conferences will be held with coaches to review their instructional support. Additionally, professional learning sessions will be job-embedded to reinforce lesson planning and execution expectations, allowing for sustained engagement. The district will also ensure that school leaders are actively monitoring the implementation of lesson design during their formal observations. This means that principals must commit to observing the entire lesson for at least 90

minutes. Assistant Superintendents will ensure school leaders are actively reviewing observations and providing additional feedback to support principal growth with actionable feedback.

2. **Data-Informed Differentiated Instruction**
   - **Plan:** Key components of this strategy include teacher and principal engagement in comprehensive data analysis, facilitating teacher professional learning and principal support, leveraging technology-based tools, and conducting teacher observations with actionable feedback.
   - **Do:** Data collection tools using CDT and DIBELS Acadience data identified trends in growth and areas for support. Professional learning was facilitated for coaches, teachers, and principals on differentiated instruction. The "6 Step Lesson Plan" from The Reading League was shared with examples and applicable resources to support teachers with planning for data-driven small group instruction within the instructional block (90 minutes) on the districtwide professional learning (January 24, 2025) with 80% attendance. Supplemental, technology-based tools, such as Imagine Learning, My Path and Achieve 3000, should be utilized to address students' individual literacy needs. Professional learning was provided for literacy academic coaches, principals, and teachers.
   - **Check (Challenges):** A core component of this strategy was ensuring that school leaders were effectively monitoring differentiated instruction through formal classroom observations. To ensure that school leaders could effectively monitor differentiated instruction, an initial LLI session was held to train principals on how to provide meaningful feedback to teachers. During this session, principals practiced delivering feedback with one another, emphasizing the importance of structured, observation-based coaching. The goal was to equip school leaders with the skills needed to assess instructional differentiation through formal classroom observations and provide targeted support to third-grade ELA teachers. However, when it came time to implement this strategy, many principals conducted informal observations rather than full-period formal observations, limiting their ability to assess lesson progression, culturally relevant teaching practices, and differentiation. Recognizing this gap, a follow-up LLI session was held to redirect school leaders, reinforcing the expectation that they conduct full-period observations. This session clarified the importance of structured, in-depth evaluations to ensure that differentiation was being implemented with fidelity and that teachers received actionable feedback to strengthen their instructional practices. Additionally, there is continual work on developing an appropriate data analysis tool that allows our data department to populate essential assessment data while allowing teachers to focus their energies on analysis, goal setting, and strategy development with support from colleagues in professional learning communities.
   - **Act (Next Steps):** To strengthen instructional leadership, PPS is prioritizing formal, structured classroom observations as a key practice. Principals will engage in ongoing training to enhance their ability to assess lesson progression and differentiation effectively. PPS has reinforced the expectation that formal, structured classroom observations are a non-negotiable component of instructional leadership. Principals will receive additional training on conducting in-depth observations that specifically assess lesson progression and differentiation. Additionally, to support accountability, school leaders will be required to submit observation reports detailing their findings and action steps. The district will also create a system for tracking the impact of these observations, ensuring that differentiated instruction practices are consistently monitored and refined.

3. **Identifying and Scaling Best Practices**
    - **Plan:** This key strategy includes collecting and analyzing data, observing teachers with strong outcomes, leveraging Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to share effective practices, providing targeted professional learning sessions on high-impact strategies, and establishing a feedback loop through ongoing monitoring and support.
    - **Do:** Schools with promising practices were identified based on initial performance data. Students in these schools are achieving at higher levels with recognized smaller subgroup gaps in achievement compared to other schools.
    - **Check (Challenges):** While the district aimed to identify high-impact literacy practices through school visits and data analysis, the findings were inconclusive due to inconsistencies in implementation across schools. The mid-year data from high-performing schools did not align with initial projections, making it more difficult to pinpoint which practices were yielding the strongest results. Additionally, professional learning focused on best practices was deprioritized in some schools as the district worked to first establish consistent implementation of lesson design and differentiated instruction. Furthermore, while strong instructional practices were observed in select classrooms, they largely mirrored existing district guidance rather than revealing new strategies for broader replication.
    - **Act (Next Steps):** To address these challenges, coaching support will remain focused on solidifying lesson design and differentiated instruction before expanding to broader best practices, ensuring a strong foundation for instructional improvement. Professional learning will be strategically designed to reinforce implementation consistency, providing targeted support for teachers and school leaders. Additionally, we will leverage insights from school visits to refine coaching and professional learning efforts, emphasizing not just knowledge of effective literacy instruction but also the conditions and supports necessary for consistent execution across schools. Finally, we will develop a structured approach to monitor implementation fidelity and addressing barriers to ensure alignment between instructional practices and student outcomes.

Conclusion

While Pittsburgh Public Schools has made progress toward its goal of achieving 49.4% proficiency in third-grade English Language Arts (ELA) by the end of the 2024-2025 school year, mid-year data highlights both promising gains and persistent challenges in closing achievement gaps. Ongoing assessments like DIBELS Acadience and CDT have helped identify strengths and areas for improvement, particularly among certain subgroups, reinforcing the need for a continued focus on foundational literacy skills as students transition to more complex reading tasks. Efforts such as structured lesson design, differentiated instruction, and identifying best practices are driving progress, but consistent implementation remains a challenge. The continuous improvement model calls for analyzing data, reflecting on strategy and implementation, reassessing key approaches, and learning from the process. Moving forward, targeted coaching, enhanced classroom observations, and data-driven support will be critical in refining strategies and ensuring equitable access to high-quality instruction. By sustaining a cycle of continuous improvement, Pittsburgh Public Schools will continue to strengthen literacy outcomes for third-grade students and move closer to achieving both the 2024-2025 goal and the broader target of 54% proficiency by 2027.