Pittsburgh Public Schools Goal Monitoring Report:

Status Update – 3rd Grade English Language Arts Proficiency

Introduction and Goal

This report provides the first goal monitoring update for the 2025–2026 school year on the District's progress toward improving English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency among third-grade students in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). In alignment with the Board's Student Outcomes Focused Governance model and practices recommended by the Council of the Great City Schools, this report is designed to communicate where student performance currently stands, interpret trends, and outline the District's strategic response within a continuous improvement framework that will continue during the 2025–2026. Third grade represents a pivotal transition in a child's educational arc—from "learning to read" to "reading to learn"—and marks the first year that students participate in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) for English Language Arts. Ensuring that students reach proficiency by the end of this year is critical for long-term academic success. Students who exit third grade without a solid foundation in reading fluency and comprehension are more likely to experience learning gaps as content becomes more complex and increasingly reading-centered in the upper grades. At the end of the 2020–2021 school year, 40.20% of PPS third graders scored proficient or above in ELA. This baseline established the District's five-year goal of reaching 54% proficiency by 2027. For the 2025–2026 school year, an interim target of 51.7% proficiency has been established.

The Data

The assessment data for third grade English Language Arts provides a comprehensive and urgent picture of student performance across the District. Three primary assessments—**the PSSA, the Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT), and DIBELS Acadience**—offer insight into grade-level proficiency, predictive performance, and foundational literacy skill development. Collectively, these data sources highlight both areas of improvement and significant gaps that must be addressed through coherent, equity-driven instructional strategies.

1. **PSSA Results**
   The 2024-2025 PSSA data show that 43.9% of third graders are proficient or advanced on the PSSA and PASA, representing a decline from the previous year (46.2%) and signaling the need for intensified efforts to achieve the 2025–2026 target of 51.7% proficiency. Disaggregated data reveal persistent and widening gaps among key subgroups. White students remain the highest-performing group and the only subgroup whose multi-year trend demonstrates upward movement. In contrast, **African American students, students with IEPs, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged students** have experienced declines in proficiency. For the 2024–2025 PSSA, subgroup proficiency rates remain markedly uneven, with gaps between White students and African American

students exceeding 40 percentage points, and gaps for students with IEPs and ELL students even more pronounced. These disparities underscore the continued need for targeted instructional supports that address both foundational and grade-level reading skills across diverse student populations.

2. **Classroom Diagnostic Test (CDT) Results Fall 2025**

   The Classroom Diagnostic Tool (CDT) is a **state-provided, computer-adaptive assessment** developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. It is designed to give teachers real-time, standards-aligned diagnostic information about students' strengths and areas for growth in reading, writing, and mathematics. The purpose of the CDT is to inform instruction, guide grouping decisions, and help teachers plan targeted interventions and enrichment based on individual student needs. The Fall 2025–2026 CDT results offer a predictive "look ahead" to future PSSA performance and illuminate where the most urgent instructional needs lie.

   Nearly 80% of all third graders fall within the High-Risk (Red) Range. At the beginning of the school year, many students score in the red or green ranges below the midpoint for several reasons:

   - **Instructional Timing:** The CDT is given early in the year, before students have received instruction on current grade-level content. Scores often reflect where students ended the previous year.
   - **Skill Retention:** Some students experience **learning loss over the summer**, particularly in foundational reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies.
   - **Developmental Progress:** Early-year assessments capture a snapshot in time; students may not yet demonstrate mastery of skills that will develop with explicit instruction and practice.
   - **Diagnostic Nature:** The CDT intentionally adjusts to each student's ability level to pinpoint learning needs, so a lower score isn't failure—it identifies where targeted support is needed to promote growth.

   Pinpointing Equity Needs: The CDT highlights the exact subgroups requiring our most intensive and differentiated supports:

   - **Black Students and Students with IEPs:** With over **90%** in the high-risk Red Range, this tells us that our current MTSS supports and Tier 1 instruction are not yet meeting the needs of these students. This disparity requires immediate, high-leverage adjustments to curriculum access and intervention dosage.
   - **English Language Learners (ELL):** The **95.3%** in the Red Range, with **0%** projected as Likely Proficient, is the clearest diagnostic signal we have. This indicates an urgent need to ensure our literacy instruction is fully integrated with language acquisition strategies and that our assessment process is culturally and linguistically appropriate.

3. **DIBELS Acadience Data**

   DIBELS Acadience is a research-based assessment system designed to measure the foundational literacy skills that predict reading success, including phonological awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and early comprehension. Administered three times per year, DIBELS provides teachers with timely information about how well students can decode words, read connected text fluently, and understand what they read. Unlike CDT—which offers a predictive view of grade-level proficiency—DIBELS focuses on the building blocks of reading, helping educators identify students who need intensified support in foundational skills. The BOY results provide a critical baseline for understanding the instructional needs that students bring into third grade.

   The BOY data show that a substantial proportion of third graders entered the school year without the foundational skills necessary to fully access grade-level ELA content. At the district level, 35.4% of all students scored Well Below Benchmark, and another 10.9% scored Below Benchmark, meaning nearly half of the district's third graders began the year requiring significant support in decoding, fluency, or comprehension. While 53.7% of students met benchmark expectations (At or Above Benchmark), subgroup data reveal deep variation in skill readiness that has significant implications for teaching and learning.

   At the subgroup level, the disparities are pronounced. Black students began the year with 40.7% scoring Well Below Benchmark, while an additional 14.4% fell Below Benchmark. English Language Learners (ELLs) showed the most significant needs, with 63.4% scoring Well Below Benchmark, underscoring the need for literacy instruction that integrates language development and provides opportunities for vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension scaffolds. Students with IEPs exhibited similar patterns, with 62.3% scoring Well Below Benchmark, indicating that the majority require intensive, structured intervention aligned to individualized learning plans and the Science of Reading.

Interpretation

The PSSA, CDT, and DIBELS results collectively reveal a clear and urgent picture of third-grade literacy performance in Pittsburgh Public Schools, highlighting persistent proficiency gaps, foundational skill deficits, and substantial differences in readiness across student groups. Together, these data sets underscore the need for a coherent, systemwide instructional response that strengthens Tier 1 core instruction, integrates targeted supports, and prioritizes equity in both design and implementation.

The PSSA results show that overall proficiency has declined to **43.9%**, with White students representing the only subgroup demonstrating a positive trajectory over the past year. In contrast, Black students, students with IEPs, ELL students, and economically disadvantaged students have seen proficiency rates fall. The gaps between these subgroups and their

White peers—often spanning 20 to 40 percentage points—remain pronounced. These trends reinforce the need for instructional strategies that account for students' diverse academic histories, learning profiles, and linguistic needs. Without significant adjustments to instructional rigor, access to grade-level content, and targeted intervention, these proficiency gaps will persist.

The CDT Fall 2025–2026 data deepen this understanding by offering a predictive lens into future performance. Nearly 80% of all third graders fall within the High-Risk (Red) Range, indicating that the majority of students are not yet demonstrating readiness for grade-level literacy expectations. Subgroup results are particularly concerning. More than 90% of Black students and students with IEPs are in the Red Range, and ELL students demonstrate the highest level of risk, with 95.5% in the Red Range and 0% projected as Likely Proficient or Advanced. These findings provide the strongest diagnostic signal of where instructional supports must be most urgently directed. The CDT's predictive projections also highlight the need to significantly reinforce Tier 1 instruction, ensuring that every student receives rigorous, coherent, standards-aligned literacy instruction aligned with the Science of Reading. The CDT confirms that the system must elevate its expectations for core instruction and ensure that intervention and acceleration practices are deeply integrated into daily instruction.

The DIBELS BOY results add essential context by revealing substantial disparities in foundational literacy readiness at the start of the school year. Nearly half of the district's third graders entered the year below benchmark expectations, with 35.4% scoring Well Below Benchmark and another 11% Below Benchmark. Subgroup differences again point to inequities that must be addressed through instruction and support structures. Black students, students with IEPs, and ELL students entered third grade with foundational skill gaps at far higher rates than their peers—more than 40% of Black students, 62% of students with IEPs, and 63% of ELL students scored Well Below Benchmark. These data illustrate that many students began the year without the decoding automaticity, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills required to access grade-level text. Without targeted, explicit instruction in these foundational skills, students are unlikely to grow at the pace necessary to meet end-of-year expectations or close long-standing gaps.

Overall, the data reinforce the need for a comprehensive, equity-driven literacy strategy that strengthens lesson design, deepens differentiated instruction, enhances principal instructional leadership, and ensures consistent, high-fidelity implementation across all schools.

Continuous Improvement Approach (PDCA)

The District is using continuous improvement cycles grounded in the Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) methodology to refine strategies and respond to evolving data. This approach ensures that implementation is actively informed by evidence and that adjustments are made in response to the challenges and successes surfaced during analysis. In November 2024, the District identified three foundational strategies to support third grade ELA

improvement: strengthening lesson design, implementing data-informed differentiated instruction, and identifying and amplifying promising practices across schools. The District will continue to rely on PDCA cycles throughout the year to sustain progress monitoring, identify roadblocks, and refine instructional supports. This same continuous improvement lens also shapes the strategy and plan for 2025–2026, which is designed to deepen alignment to the Science of Reading, strengthen return on investment in literacy resources, and build explicit accountability and support structures for school leaders and coaches.

Strategic Response and Implementation Progress for 2024–2025

During the 2024–2025 school year, the District initiated three core strategies to strengthen third-grade literacy instruction: improving lesson design, deepening data-informed differentiated instruction, and identifying promising practices across schools. Each strategy follows the District's continuous improvement model and reflects the early learning that has emerged through implementation.

Lesson Design.
The District prioritized a structured approach to lesson design to ensure that every third-grade ELA lesson has a clear progression that is visible and consistently implemented. Visual lesson progression tools were distributed to guide planning and instruction, and Literacy Academic Coaches provided job-embedded support through co-planning, modeling, and feedback. Principals conducted observations and provided instructional feedback aligned to district expectations. Early monitoring revealed variability in the visibility and consistent use of lesson progression tools, as well as inconsistent depth and duration of classroom observations. In response, the District is refining coaching to provide more explicit, real-time feedback and is requiring principals to conduct full-period ELA observations so they can meaningfully assess lesson progression, student engagement, and lesson closure. Assistant Superintendents will continue to support leaders through ongoing coaching cycles to strengthen the quality of feedback and reinforce expectations.

Data-Informed Differentiated Instruction.
To improve small-group instruction, the District developed tools using CDT and DIBELS data to identify trends in student performance and guide instructional planning. Professional learning for teachers, coaches, and principals emphasized differentiation routines, the use of the Reading League's 6-Step Lesson Plan, and the integration of supplemental instructional tools such as Imagine Learning, MyPath, and Achieve 3000. Principals also engaged in professional learning sessions during Leading and Learning Institute (LLI) to strengthen their ability to observe and support differentiated instruction. Implementation monitoring, however, revealed that many leaders relied on informal walkthroughs rather than full-period observations, limiting the District's ability to assess fidelity to small-group expectations. Moving forward, PPS is establishing full-period observations as a non-negotiable expectation and will provide leaders with continued training on how to analyze evidence of differentiation and deliver actionable feedback. The District is also finalizing a streamlined data tool to support efficient analysis, goal-setting, and planning within PLCs.

Identifying and Scaling Best Practices.
The District began visiting schools with promising early results to identify effective instructional practices, examine student work, and analyze assessment trends. These visits highlighted strong examples of small-group structures, culturally responsive text integration, and alignment between core instruction and supplemental supports. At the same time, variability across classrooms and inconsistent fidelity to foundational practices made it difficult to isolate specific strategies that could be scaled. As a result, the District is maintaining its focus on solidifying lesson design and differentiation as the instructional foundation before expanding efforts to replicate broader best practices. Professional learning and coaching will emphasize implementation consistency, and the District will establish structures to monitor fidelity, address barriers, and identify the conditions that support high-quality literacy instruction. Insights from school visits will continue to guide refinements to coaching and professional learning.

Looking Ahead: Strategy and Plan for 2025–2026

As the District continues to respond to PSSA and beginning of year data, the Superintendent and Academic Cabinet are also looking ahead to a more comprehensive strategy for 2025–2026. This strategy is designed to deepen alignment with the Science of Reading, strengthen return on investment in literacy resources, and establish explicit accountability and support structures for coaches, principals, and teachers.

1. Align Strategy with the Science of Reading

To strengthen literacy outcomes and ensure coherence across classrooms, PPS will implement a districtwide strategy explicitly aligned with the Science of Reading in 2025–2026. This strategy will focus on lesson design, instructional practice, and professional learning that make expectations for high-quality literacy instruction visible and actionable in every classroom.

Key components include:

• **Professional Learning and Support:** All K–3 teachers will participate in a mandatory asynchronous Science of Reading professional learning series as a cornerstone for improving literacy outcomes. This series will focus on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and will help teachers understand how these components work together to support skilled reading.

• **Curriculum and Instruction:** The District will develop a Science of Reading Playbook that includes embedded QR codes linking to exemplary lessons, strategy videos, and classroom look-fors for immediate use by teachers and principals. This playbook will provide concrete examples of effective instructional routines, aligned tasks, and student discourse that reflect SoR-aligned practices.

• **State Assessment Expectations:** PPS will conduct detailed item analyses to strengthen alignment between classroom instruction and state assessment expectations. Teachers will

receive support in understanding how the skills and standards they teach are assessed on the PSSA and how to integrate these expectations into daily instruction and formative assessment cycles.

This alignment is grounded in the reality that recent district data show persistent challenges in fluency and comprehension. By ensuring that all aspects of literacy—from professional learning and lesson design to classroom practice—are rooted in the evidence base for how students learn to read and write, PPS aims to build teacher capacity, foster consistency, and accelerate literacy growth for all students.

2. Strengthen Return on Investment and Partnerships

To maximize the impact of district investments in literacy resources, PPS will implement a structured strategy that ensures high-fidelity implementation, measurable student outcomes, and sustainable capacity-building through strong publisher and research-based partnerships.

Key components include:

• **Core Resource Evaluation and Response:** PPS will leverage a third-party evaluation of the recently adopted core literacy resource and its alignment with the Science of Reading. The District will develop and implement a response plan to address any identified gaps and strengthen supports where necessary.

• **Publisher Partnerships**: The District will establish clearer expectations with literacy resource publishers to support high-fidelity implementation, including coaching, professional learning, and joint analysis of student work and assessment data. Publishers will be expected to align their services with PPS outcomes and capacity-building goals.

• **Local and Research-Based Partnerships:** PPS will strengthen partnerships with universities, literacy organizations, and research-based experts to guide implementation, inform professional learning and coaching, and ensure that instructional materials are used in ways that drive improved student outcomes.

These efforts recognize that simply purchasing high-quality materials is not sufficient. By evaluating resources, leveraging expertise, and fostering mutual accountability with partners, the District aims to ensure that materials are used strategically to support high-quality instruction, measurable student growth, and sustainable teacher capacity—creating equitable learning opportunities for all students.

3. Establish Explicit Accountability and Support Structures

To ensure consistent, high-quality literacy instruction across the District, PPS will establish explicit accountability and support structures for both instructional coaches and school leaders. By defining clear expectations, measurable metrics, and non-negotiable practices, the District will create a framework that strengthens teacher growth, promotes effective use of instructional materials, and drives meaningful student outcomes.

Key components include:

• **Accountability Metrics for Coaching:** PPS will implement a coaching impact framework with measurable indicators linked to student achievement, teacher practice, and lesson quality. Coaching logs will document goal setting, observation, feedback, and reflection cycles, and data will be analyzed quarterly to identify trends and areas of need.

• **Instructional Leader Supports:** Principals and assistant principals will receive ongoing support and professional learning tied specifically to literacy instruction. Participation in instructional walkthroughs, feedback cycles, and PLC facilitation will be monitored. Leaders will be expected to model and reinforce SoR-aligned practices.

• **Non-Negotiables:** The District will establish non-negotiables for materials use, PLC structures, and data routines. These include using data summary statements, SMART goals, and KASABs (Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, Aspirations, and Behaviors) to guide adult learning and collaboration. Walkthrough tools and PLC artifacts will be used to monitor adherence to these expectations at the school level.

Overall Accountability Measures

Across the 2025–2026 strategy, PPS will use regular progress monitoring cycles that combine student outcome data, implementation fidelity measures, coaching logs, and leadership walkthrough evidence. These data will inform continuous improvement cycles, ensuring that supports are refined in response to what is working and where gaps persist. Science of Reading–aligned indicators will be incorporated into teacher observation and coaching tools, and non-negotiable expectations will be integrated into school improvement planning and leadership evaluations.

Conclusion

This Goal Monitoring Report provides a comprehensive view of the current state of third-grade ELA performance across Pittsburgh Public Schools, drawing on PSSA, CDT, and DIBELS assessment data to illuminate trends, strengths, and areas requiring immediate attention. The collective results reinforce the need for a coherent, equity-centered instructional response that strengthens foundational literacy skills while expanding access to rigorous, grade-level content. The systemwide instructional priorities for 2025–2026, including alignment with the Science of Reading and strengthened accountability and support structures for school leaders and coaches, will further enhance the District's capacity to deliver evidence-based, high-impact literacy instruction. The District is committed to using data transparently, responding to gaps with urgency, and supporting educators in delivering the high-quality instruction that all students deserve.