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Pittsburgh Public sets academic goals for this year — but are they too narrow?
Board President says district is on track to meet or exceed goals

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Pittsburgh Public Schools Board President Gene Walker believes the district is on the "right track" to meet its four academic goals this year, as well as into the future.

Superintendent Wayne Walters' goals for this school year measure third-grade English and math proficiency scores, graduation rates, and the number of students earning career technical education industry credentials. The goals were approved by the school board Wednesday in an 8-0 vote. Tawana Cook Purnell was absent.

Pittsburgh Public aims to increase the percentage of third-grade students proficient on state English exams to 46.06% by June; an increase from 43.9% in June 2025. The district set a 42.98% proficiency rate goal for third-grade math, an increase from 40.7% in June 2025.

The district also aims for an 85.5% cohort graduation rate, up 0.6% from June 2025; and to raise the percentage of graduates earning industry-based qualifications from 50% last year to 51.92% at the end of this school year.

In April, the school board approved long-term goals for each category.

"The goals are set for the next five years," Walker told TribLive. "Those increments will change annually, but the focus of the work that we're doing will not. I think that consistency is what's going to help us drive toward a better, more productive, more effective, PPS."

Goals too narrow?

The school board drew scrutiny in August when it voted 6-3 to approve an $80,000, two-year contract renewal for the "Student Outcomes Focused Governance" model from the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of large urban school districts.

The governance model aims to set goals for student achievement — in this case, the third-grade math and reading proficiency, graduation rates, and industry credential certifications.

It also establishes guardrails, monitors progress and allows the superintendent to delegate responsibilities.

Opponents of the model say it decreases accountability and communication in the district. They also said it limits public voice in school district decisions.

Walker supported Student Outcomes Focused Governance. He said Wednesday that the board holds Walters accountable. On the district website, a sentence reads that the board evaluated Walters as "meets expectations" for the 2025-26 school year, but no other information is provided.

"We will, as we have every year, do a superintendent evaluation," Walker said. "This year, it will be much more formal as we're hopefully finishing up a discussion on what that new process will look like for the future."

That more-formal process could include a mix of student outcomes and subjective measures like leadership and communication, Walker said. Specific personnel notes would remain private due to legal reasons, Walker said, but "there may be an opportunity" to make the evaluation form public for transparency.

Walker said that, to achieve the four goals, there has to be a focus on other things like attendance, discipline and culture.

"Once we get kids into the building, then they have an opportunity to learn, which then drives the student outcomes and all of those things work together," Walker said. "When you're talking about math, or graduation, you have to show up, you have to feel safe, and you have to feel supported, right? Or you're not going to get there.

"They are integral pieces into how we do our work. But in order to be able to effectively evaluate the superintendent, we did have to narrow that scope."

Walker confident in district's ability to meet goals

Pittsburgh Public aims for a 54.7% third-grade English proficiency rate by June 2030.

District officials previously reported an interim target of 51.7% third-grade English proficiency for the 2025-26 school year. Ebony Pugh, district spokeswoman, said that goal was established from the district's 2020-21 baseline where 40.2% of third-grade students were proficient in English.

The appropriate comparison, Pugh said, is a 43.9% actual proficiency rate in 2025 to 46.06% at the end of this school year, ultimately progressing to 54.7% by 2030.

"The board's newly adopted goals establish a new accountability cycle using more recent data," she said.

Teachers are implementing multiple strategies to improve student scores in English, Walker said. He referenced the "Science of Reading" curriculum the district implemented in the 2023-24 school year at the elementary level.

The science of reading emphasizes phonics and the relationship between how letters sound and are written. The state Department of Education is requiring all public schools to implement such a curriculum starting next school year.

"As we continue to refine that process, teachers get more adept and comfortable with teaching it," Walker said. "We feel confident that not only will we reach our goal, but hopefully we'll exceed that goal by 2030."

The same is the case for math scores, Walker said.

The district wants its third grade math proficiency rate to meet or exceed 52.1% in June 2030.

Walker said the district is strengthening its math curriculum, and he highlighted the hiring of Theodore Thompson as deputy superintendent, to help meet those goals. Thompson started in August and is tasked with overseeing and leading the district's academics and operations, officials said at the time.

"The challenge with any new curriculum is that there is a learning curve," Walker said. "I think our teachers are settling in, and now with Dr. Thompson coming in as deputy, we have someone else that can come in and help really drive that performance."

Pittsburgh Public set an 87.8% graduation rate goal by June 2030.

"The strategy there is to continue doing what we're doing," Walker said. "As we continue to get better at educating kids, those numbers continue to increase."