



Addressing the Achievement Gap – Reframing the Literacy Discussion November 2022

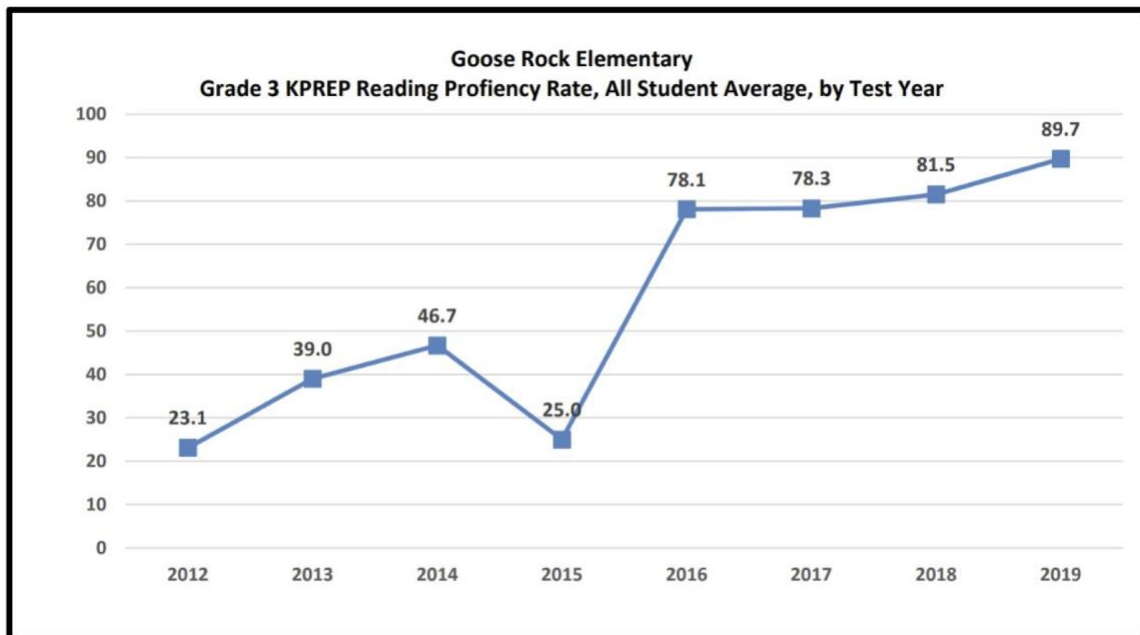
Summary

- The WNY Education Alliance analyzed 3rd grade ELA proficiency scores by school district in Erie County using NYSED data from 2020-21.
- In our first report, we used the data to show that the differences in ELA proficiency scores across school districts in Erie County were driven primarily by differences in income levels as opposed to differences in reading instruction. This is consistent with the findings from other researchers, including The Education Trust.
- In this analysis, we show that **the same achievement gap that exists between school districts in Western New York also exists within the highest-achieving districts.**
- Since we are more interested in understanding the reading crisis in Western New York than assessing the performance of individual school districts, we aggregated the data from the wealthiest school districts in Erie County and compared the reading proficiency scores of economically disadvantaged students with non-disadvantaged students.
- If reading instruction were largely responsible for the relatively high proficiency scores in higher-achieving districts, there would not be a significant difference in proficiency scores between economically disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged students.
- However, the data shows that there are significant differences in reading proficiency rates within the higher-achieving districts based in income levels. Using the 2020-21 NYSED reading proficiency scores for 3rd graders, we found that the average reading proficiency score for non-disadvantaged students in the wealthiest districts in Erie County was 87%. **For economically disadvantaged students within the same districts, the average ELA proficiency score was just 63% - representing an achievement gap of nearly 25 percentage points.**
- While the average reading proficiency scores for these districts are quite high, particularly when compared with other districts in the region, the data suggests that a meaningful portion of the higher scores is driven by the lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students in these districts as opposed to a much better approach to providing reading instruction.
- In other words, the very same reading problem that exists in our region also exists within our highest-achieving districts, namely that educational outcomes are being



driven primarily by differences in income levels – not differences in instruction. This is an important conclusion.

- The initial response to our request to have a conversation about literacy rates in Western New York has been mixed. While teachers and parents are eager to learn more the science of reading, and while community organizations and charitable foundations are eager to help in whatever way they can, some stakeholders have been reluctant to engage. We understand their reluctance. Some are concerned that the low reading proficiency scores in their districts may reflect poorly on their reading instruction. But, as we have shown, the differences in reading proficiency are driven much more by differences in income levels than differences in reading instruction. On the other hand, some believe that the relatively high reading proficiency scores in their districts imply that there isn't a reading problem in their districts, despite the achievement gap that we have highlighted in this report.
- **Our conclusion is that we need to reframe the literacy discussion. This effort is 100% about addressing the achievement gaps that exist across the region and within individual school districts.**
- It will be impossible to narrow the achievement gap within schools and across Western New York if we do not: 1) recognize that collectively we can do much better, and 2) work together with all education stakeholders across all school districts in the area.
- **The achievement gap is an equity issue that disproportionately impacts economically disadvantaged children in all districts across all communities in our region.** Literacy is a civil right and addressing the inequities that exist in our educational system requires more than having a DEI statement on a website.
- In order to improve educational outcomes for all children, including economically disadvantaged children, students of color, children with dyslexia, and struggling readers, we must commit to: 1) aligning reading instruction with the scientific research which explains how children learn to read, and 2) providing equal access to educational supports outside of school, including preschool.
- Critically, impoverished school districts that have moved to provide evidence-based reading instruction have been able to narrow the achievement gap significantly. **At the Goose Rock Elementary in rural Kentucky, where 85% of students are economically disadvantaged, 3rd grade reading proficiency scores increased from just 23% in 2012 to close to 90% in 2019 after the school trained teachers in the science of reading and aligned reading instruction with the research.**



Source: Kareem Weaver

- The achievement gap that exists today in Western New York is largely a function of providing reading instruction in a way that is not aligned with the scientific research and the data. By using Balanced Literacy, we are leaving too many children behind. **The data shows that the method does not work well for children with dyslexia, struggling readers, and economically disadvantaged students.** It is an inequitable and discriminatory approach to providing reading instruction that impacts future educational and life outcomes.
- Moving from Balanced Literacy to Structured Literacy is clearly the right thing to do to narrow the achievement gap, reach all students, and create a more equitable society. However, **it will take time, significant investment in professional development, and, above all else, leadership.**
- The magnitude of the undertaking necessitates that all education stakeholders work together collaboratively across districts, urban, suburban, and rural, and with literacy experts, cognitive scientists, local universities, community organizations, parent groups, and education non-profits.
- As the *ExtraOrdinary Districts* podcast from The Education Trust highlights, <https://edtrust.org/extraordinary-districts/>, this can be done when our school leaders and educators put their minds to it. **We can do this, WNY.**