

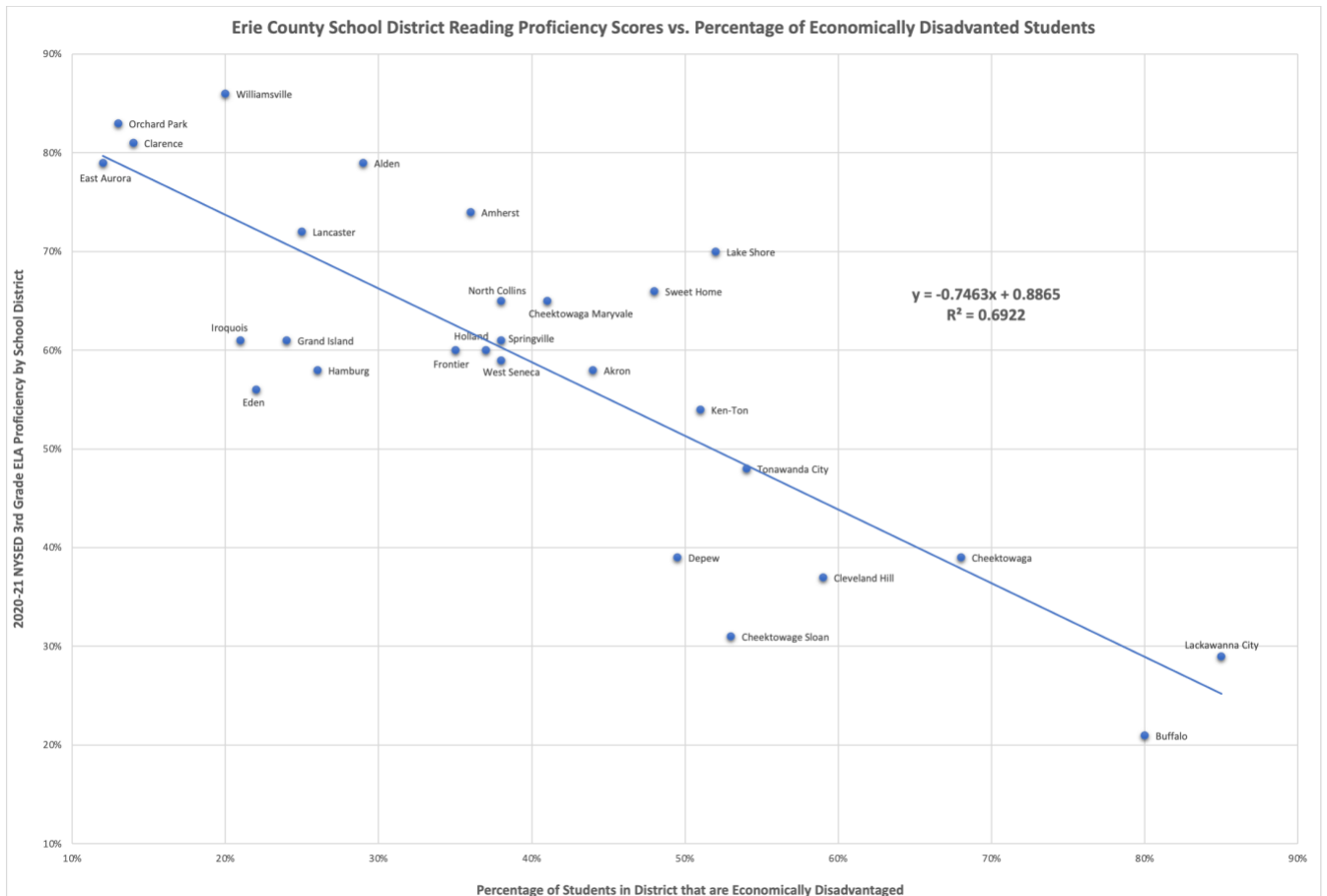


## What Drives ELA Proficiency Scores in School Districts?

November 17, 2022

### Summary

- The WNY Education Alliance analyzed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ELA proficiency scores by school district in Erie County using NYSED data from 2020-21.
- We chose to use the data for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because: 1) more students elect to take the state assessment tests at younger ages so there is more data, and 2) 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores are highly correlated with longer-term educational outcomes.
- It is important to note that test participation rates can impact the reading proficiency scores. The average participation rate for the state assessments across Erie County school districts was 73% in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, with a low of 13% and a high of 96%. It is not clear if the reading scores would have been higher or lower if the participation rate had been higher. Nonetheless, the 73% average participation rate is high enough to provide meaningful data and conclusions.
- **Conclusion #1** – There are significant differences in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency scores across Erie County, with a high score of 86% and a low score of 21%. **The average reading proficiency score across Erie County school districts was just 59%.** Yes, we do have a reading crisis in our region.
- **Conclusion #2** – We found that the student-teacher ratio and the amount of spending per student were not particularly important in explaining the differences in reading proficiency scores across Erie County school districts.
- **Conclusion #3** – Interestingly, the most important driver of differences in reading proficiency scores across districts is differences in socioeconomic variables. **In this analysis, we found that roughly 70% of the differences in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ELA proficiency scores across school districts in Erie County could be explained by the percentage of students in that district that are economically disadvantaged.**



- The percentage of economically disadvantaged students is a rough measure of the socioeconomic conditions in a district. If we used a more precise measure, we suspect that the relationship between reading proficiency scores and income levels would have been even stronger.
- This is a very important conclusion as we evaluate the performance of school districts and, more importantly, as we consider ways in which we can work together to help improve literacy rates in Western New York.
- Why are differences in income levels so important in determining educational outcomes? We don't have the exact answer, but we believe that the students of higher-income families are more likely to benefit from: 1) the background knowledge and reading instruction provided at earlier ages before kindergarten,



whether in preschool or at home, and 2) help with school work and experiences outside of school, both at home and through private tutoring.

- **Conclusion #4** – The data would suggest that only a small part of the differences in educational outcomes, such as reading proficiency, can be explained by what is happening inside of schools. This isn't to say that great things aren't happening in schools; rather, **the data simply shows that the variability in educational outcomes between districts is driven more by differences in the access to supports outside of school than significant differences in the way in which instruction is provided across school districts.**
- When evaluating individual school districts, we must normalize for differences in socioeconomic variables. We shouldn't be so quick to praise school districts in wealthier areas and we shouldn't be so quick to criticize school districts in economically disadvantaged areas.
- Instead, we should work together to help provide additional educational supports for students in economically disadvantaged districts. In addition, stakeholders across all districts should work together to push the line higher by sharing best practices, improving teacher access to high-quality professional development opportunities, and aligning reading instruction with scientific research and empirical data.
- **To that point, the data out of places like Mississippi suggest that moving from Balanced Literacy to Structured Literacy can increase reading proficiency across all districts at a given level of income.** In Mississippi, which began training teachers in the science of reading in 2013, reading proficiency scores have risen by about 10 percentage points in just over 5 years. This is statistically significant and explains why school districts in other regions, including New York City and suburban Rochester, are moving in this direction.
- In Western New York, home to the City of Good Neighbors, we need to have an honest conversation about the relationship between income levels and educational outcomes. We need stakeholders across all districts, economically advantaged and disadvantaged, to help one another, and we need to seriously consider ways in which we can improve literacy rates throughout the region – including training teachers in the science of reading and providing evidence-based reading instruction.
- We cannot allow arbitrary divisions to prevent stakeholders from working together to improve literacy rates for children throughout Western New York.