Buffalo Public Schools students in Felicia Glogoza's first-grade class at Lorraine Elementary show their excitement during a timed math challenge. This First in Math tool is part of Buffalo Schools' efforts to make districtwide improvements in math, especially at the elementary level.
A key group of Buffalo Public Schools students and their teachers can celebrate their growth last school year in reading and math, hard work that is also meaningful to top administrators.

The district’s economically disadvantaged third graders exceeded their targets – which doubled as evaluation markers for Superintendent Tonja M. Williams – in the two core subject areas, according to data presented last month by Chief Academic Officer Anne Botticelli.

"We met and we exceeded, and it is a happy day," Williams said.

Among her three goals for the 2023-24 school year, the Buffalo School Board, a consultant for the Council of the Great City Schools and Williams last August agreed the superintendent would focus on the academic growth of this small population of about 1,730 students. The mission was less about how the district stacked up against its peers and more to determine whether its students were learning.
The district would ensure these students – whose first school years were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic – were equipped with strong curricula, implementing research-backed reading strategies such as Orton-Gillingham and popular game-inspired math activities including First in Math.

Their growth would be tracked in both subjects over the course of the year with specific digital tools – DIBELS for literacy development and i-Ready for math – which would display the percentage of the group that met or exceeded the district’s grade-level expectations.

Third graders at the end of the 2022-23 school year read at or above grade level at a rate of 33%, so district leaders collaboratively set the end-of-year goal for third graders in 2023-24 at 39%. According to the district’s latest data, 40% of economically disadvantaged third graders were reading at or above grade level at the end of June.

The degree of math growth expected of the population was smaller, but research has shown that the subject was stunted more by the pandemic than reading. Of 2022-23 economically disadvantaged third graders, 13.3% were at or above grade level in math at the end of the year, and this year’s third graders were tasked with reaching 15.9%.

Data released at the beginning of the year, however, revealed how much ground this year’s third graders would have to make up. Just 4% of economically disadvantaged third graders were doing math at or above
grade level in i-Ready tests administered in September. In June, however, the percentage of third graders meeting or surmounting grade-level expectations rose to 21%.

Williams was ecstatic with the results in both categories, but especially in math.

"This is great work," she said. "We should all feel proud of it. The board should feel proud for setting these goals. We should be running and telling everyone from the rafters what the children in the Buffalo Public Schools can do and have demonstrated."

"We had two years that we were struggling really in a big way, but we turned this around," said Sharon Belton-Cottman, the School Board president.

For several reasons, Buffalo Schools over the last year pivoted away from just relying on New York State standardized testing, in part due to state delays in releasing scores, as their most important barometer.

The district Office of Shared Accountability advocated using DIBELS, a diagnostic assessment for reading used for decades, and i-Ready, a more recent math tool that gauges a student's level by asking more difficult or easier questions, depending on the accuracy of a student response.

While there are significant differences between the two programs, both generally track skill development through substantial data collected over time, rather than the snapshot provided by an annual standardized test. Among the perks praised by Buffalo Schools is the assessments at the beginning, middle and end of the year, as well as rapidly available results to then inform what interventions might help a student reach the next level. There are benchmark and growth elements to both programs.

The third marker for Williams' evaluation is the district's June graduation rate, which should be released later this month. After initial confusion about the appropriate number, the solidified goal was to at least match the June 2023 graduation rate of 75.7%.
In the meantime, district leaders beamed with pride after the steps forward.

"If I could do a cartwheel," Williams said, "I would."

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