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Most districts fail to meet state average on third-grade reading

BY CORINA CURRY

Most public schools in the region are struggling to get their third-graders to read at or above grade level, a benchmark that's getting more and more attention as educators work to improve student achievement.

An abundance of research points to third-grade reading as one of the strongest predictors of a child's future success in school. That's when students shift from learning to read to reading to learn, a shift that easily becomes a life-altering obstacle if students are not ready.

Third-graders in only four public school districts in Winnebago and Boone counties — Prairie Hill, Kinnikinnick, Pecatonica and Durand — scored higher than the state average for third-grade reading.

Statewide, 36 percent of third-graders met or exceeded state reading standards. That number goes down to 35 percent in the Rockton School District, 24 percent in Harlem, 22 percent in Belvidere and 17 percent in Rockford Public Schools.

In Rockford, 958 of the district's 2,229 third-graders — 43 percent — are in the very lowest category of achievement, "did not meet."

In all other districts, the majority of third-graders testing below state standards fell into higher categories of "partially met" and "approached," putting those students closer to crossing the threshold from not meeting to meeting.

"We happen to have a long way to go to be where we want to be," Rockford Superintendent Ehren Jarrett said. "We are taking immediate steps to change what we're doing in our classrooms and to help our teachers be successful, but this alone will not be the solution."

"These challenges reflect where we are as a community right now. ... We are a community that needs to tackle this problem together."

A huge challenge

Children who do not read at grade-level by third grade are at much greater risk of struggling academically in future years, developing behavioral and social problems at school, failing to graduate and living in poverty as adults.

They are the third-grade version of an ACT score of less than 22.

In order to meet or exceed Illinois academic standards, students must show — by taking annual exams designed to measure growth in math and reading skills — that they are on track to get a 22 on the ACT, a benchmark that puts them at the 62nd percentile nationally and allows them to avoid remedial coursework in their post-secondary studies.

“This is a huge challenge for us,” Jarrett said. “We have set a very audacious target for what we’re defining as third-grade literacy. It’s not literacy versus illiteracy. We’re not setting a basic proficiency target as a state anymore. You can be highly literate as a third-grader and not be counted among those who are at proficiency.”

In the third grade, it looks like this: Students are expected to demonstrate understanding of text. They must be able to determine central messages and explain how they are conveyed through the story. They must be able explain how a character’s actions contribute to subsequent events, distinguish point of view and compare and contrast themes, among other skills.

A raised bar is just part of the challenge.

The four school districts that scored above the state average in third-grade reading spent between \$8,700 and \$14,800 per student and had average third-grade class sizes between 19 and 24 students. In those districts, between 8 percent and 29 percent of students lived in poverty.

Rockford, Harlem and Belvidere spent between \$11,100 and \$12,700 per student and had average third-grade class sizes between 16 and 24 students. The number of low-income students in those districts ranged from 51 percent to 58 percent.

Although having a large population of low-income students often is cited as a major contributing factor to students not being able to read at grade level, results vary by district.

Take the **Elgin School District**, for example. Elgin’s U-46 school district serves 39,000 students, 61 percent of whom are considered low-income. Twenty-two percent of its third-graders meet or exceed state standards for reading. Thirty-three percent fell into the “Did not meet” category, the lowest level of achievement.

‘They can learn’

Superintendents of the region’s largest school districts echoed these complexities at an educational forum sponsored by the Rockford Area Association of Realtors last week.

The forum came a week after Alignment Rockford, Transform Rockford and the Northern Illinois Center for Nonprofit Excellence, known as NICNE, held a half-day workshop focused on third-grade reading outcomes for children in Rockford Public Schools.

“There are students that have poorer levels of support at home or may have support at home but had some kind of traumatic experience,” said Dan Woestman, superintendent of schools in Belvidere.

“You have families with food insecurity. Kids that really struggle in that learning environment. They struggle retaining content and retaining strategies. There are all kinds of factors that go into a kid being able to show up for school to learn what they’re supposed to learn and be where they’re supposed to be.”

Knowing that, school districts across the region are focusing more attention on intervention, social services, early childhood education and curriculum development, especially in the lower grades.

In Rockford, every elementary school is getting an instructional coach to help implement curriculum. Some schools are getting multiclassroom leaders to spread best practices across grade levels. Everyone is using the same elementary reading curriculum. Elementary school teachers are being trained differently.

In Belvidere, Woestman is hiring more reading interventionists, social workers and paraprofessionals to help lower student-teacher ratios.

In Harlem, Superintendent Julie Morris said the district has developed a laser focus on each child.

“What do our students really need?” Morris said. “We believe in our heart of hearts that unless we know that child individually, we don’t know what that child needs. So it comes down to having the resources so our staff can understand the needs of that child.

“We have children living with trauma. We have children living in poverty. ... They can learn. We know that. What do they need to feel safe and secure to take on the academics?”

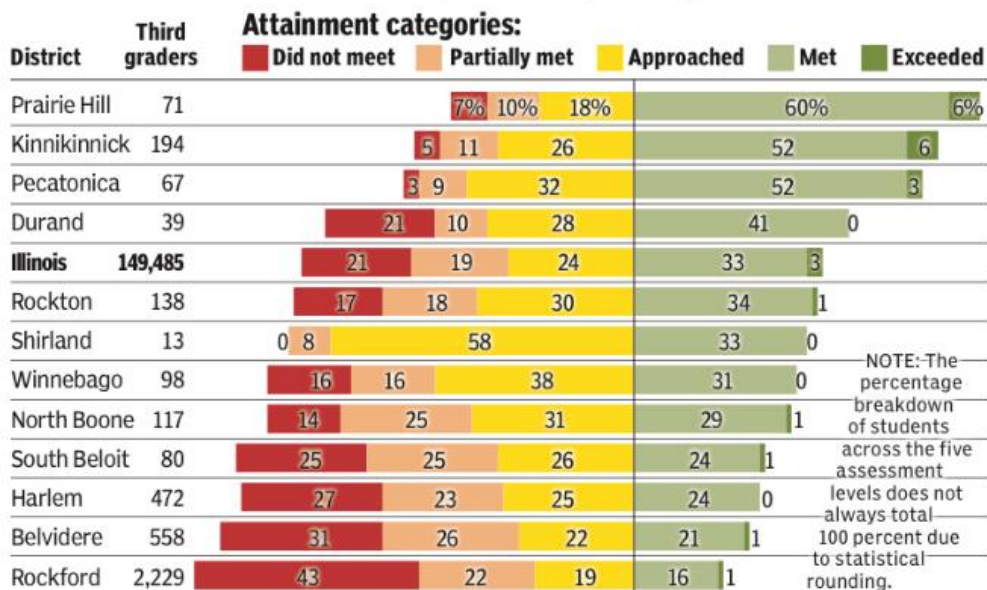
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A reading challenge

Reading at grade level by third grade is at the center of a newly launched community effort aimed at raising academic achievement in Rockford public schools.

Of the 12 public school districts in Winnebago and Boone counties, only four beat the state average for reading at or above grade level in third grade.

The 2,229 third graders of the Rockford School District, where the community’s efforts will concentrate, fared the worst with 1,850 of its third graders coming in below grade level.



Source: Illinois Report Card

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