

NewsHub

The quarterly newsletter of your Erie's Public Schools

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Erie's Public Schools

814-874-6000

148 W. 21st St.

Erie, PA 16502

www.eriesd.org

Brian J. Polito, CPA
Superintendent



McKinley Elementary School teacher Monica Riggle helps English Language Learner (ELL) students.

Student scores show growth

Academic improvement a point of great pride

Erie's Public Schools students continue to make great academic gains, newly released state data show.

Students across grades 4-8 demonstrated academic growth "well above" annual growth standards in math, English/language arts and science in the 2022-23 school year, according to Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System data. PVAAS measures individual student growth from one academic year to the next.

"What this means is students are making academic progress from one point in time to the next, exceeding the growth standard," Assistant Superintendent Teresa Szumigala said. "This helps us recognize strengths and opportunities for improvement within our infrastructure to impact student learning."

Growth measures are based in part on results from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).

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Academic improvement follows investment

District leaders say new curriculum, student supports are fostering growth



McKinley Elementary School teacher Kielely Kearney reads a book to her kindergarten students.

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The percentage of students scoring proficient on the English/language arts PSSA test in 2022-23 increased in six out of 10 elementary schools, while the percentage of students struggling the most on the test, those who scored “below basic,” decreased in all 10 schools, Szumigala said. The percentage of students who scored proficient in math increased at all 10 schools. All but three schools saw a decrease in the percentage of students scoring below basic in math.

Data from a different diagnostic test that measures basic early literacy skills also show improvement in the reading skills of the district’s youngest students.

Seventy-four percent of kindergartners scored well below benchmark on the DIBELS test in 2022-23. That percentage dropped to 46 when those students were tested as first graders this school year.

“We’re very hopeful that as we continue to work with our younger students and make sure they have early basic literacy skills...we’re going to see more success when they get to middle school and high school,” Szumigala said.

District leaders attribute the gains in part to an overhaul of district curriculum — the first in more than 20 years — that includes new English/language arts curriculum based on the science of reading. The district has also invested in increased student supports, including after-school and summer academic supports for students who are not on grade level.

The data show that no matter where a child begins academically, Erie’s Public Schools will help them make meaningful progress, Superintendent Brian Polito said.

“The main take away from all of that data is we’re seeing consistent improvement in our scores, both in achievement and in growth, across grades and across buildings, and that’s something we’ve never seen before in the district,” Polito said.

“When I started here I remember sitting through presentations on (standardized test results) and we’d have to point to a third grade in one elementary school that had positive improvement and the rest were all over the place. Putting all this curriculum in place and putting support systems around these students is... starting to show results.”



Emily Jonas, a learning support teacher, works with a student.

District leaders chart progress, challenges

Polito pushes community, legislators to back a fair funding formula for districts

In the not too distant past, Erie's Public Schools was struggling to pay bills, meet payroll and repair crumbling ceilings.

During a recent gathering of legislators and community and business leaders, district administrators painted an entirely different picture — one marked by progress in every aspect of district operations, from finances and facilities to student academics and support.

Superintendent Brian Polito told nearly 60 attendees who gathered for a “State of the District” event hosted by Erie Insurance that the district has rigorously followed strategic, financial and facility plans created in the wake of that decade-long fiscal crisis, resulting in a district that is operationally stronger than ever before.



Assistant Superintendent Teresa Szumigala speaks to a group of community leaders.

Though challenges remain, “we are in a much better place right now than we were a couple of years ago,” Polito said.

In recent years, the district overhauled its curriculum for the first time in more than two decades, put Chromebooks in the hands of every student, and revamped its student support system, a transformation that included hiring mental health therapists for every school and increasing academic support options for students who are not on grade level. With the partnership of United Way of Erie County, the district also has expanded the community school model - a model that seeks to remove nonacademic barriers to learning, including hunger, housing instability and lack of appropriate medical care - to all elementary and middle schools. The model will expand again in 2024-25 to include Erie High School.

Those and other investments are beginning to pay off in academic growth, Assistant Superintendent Teresa Szumigala said. She pointed to recent data from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and the DIBELS early literacy test as two examples (*please see cover story*).

Assistant Superintendent Neal Brokman highlighted the district's multiyear, multimillion-dollar facilities improvement plan. The plan focused on ensuring all schools are warm, safe and dry learning spaces, a mission that included a \$72 million overhaul of Erie High School, the first major renovation since the school was erected in 1957.

The plan also includes the construction of a new, \$34 million Edison Elementary School for Erie's east side, the first new construction in the district in 25 years. Work is scheduled to begin in early 2024.

“It's a total transformation and it's something we are definitely extremely proud of,” Brokman said.

Polito closed the event by reminding those in attendance that the district continues to face challenges despite recent progress, including improving attendance, graduation rates and teacher retention. To best meet those and other challenges community leaders and legislators must work together to change the state's current school funding system, he said.

During recent testimony in front of the state's Basic Education Commission, Polito argued that all education dollars should be funneled through a fair funding formula that takes into account student enrollment and recognizes that some students in some districts require more resources than others, and that not all communities have the same ability to locally fund education through property taxes.

Only 25 percent of basic education funding is being funneled through that formula now; the remainder is distributed through a “hold harmless” approach that guarantees that no district will receive less funding than the previous year even if enrollment drops. That system creates an unlevel playing field for students — and the community as a whole.

“On economic development, that is a big issue for us,” Polito said. “How can we as a school district compete and attract people into the city if we don't have the resources we need to be competitive with the surrounding school districts?”

 Read Superintendent Polito's call to action for funding reform at <https://tinyurl.com/EPSPairFunding>

A Fresh Approach

Erie's Public Schools Farm to School program grows

HEALTHY HABITS

Did you know that all of Erie's Public Schools have a school garden?

With funding from several United States Department of Agriculture and Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture grants, and with the volunteer help from the Penn State Extension Master Gardeners and many community members, each school garden provides outdoor learning experiences and fresh, seasonal produce to EPS families, staff, neighbors, and local agencies through EPS's Erie Farm to School program.



Garden signs made by students. Below, students from Strong Vincent Middle School's Garden Club visit Wild Field Urban Farm.



In addition to planting, tending, and harvesting from their own school gardens, students learn about gardening, the environment, and careers in the food system through Erie's Farm to School programs. In 2022, EPS was awarded a \$279,840 Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grant to support year-round urban food programming at EPS schools, as well as new programs with collaborative partners Edinboro Market, the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House, and Wild Field Urban Farm.

This new funding connects EPS students with local farmers, culinary artists, and other local entrepreneurs in the food system through classroom visits and field trips throughout the region. Students will conduct math lessons with pepper plants and create art projects and grow food indoors through projects like microgreens, hydroponics, and seed starting.

The evolution of the school garden program started as a small container garden at Collegiate Academy to a thriving outdoor educational system in 14 school gardens since its inception in 2009. The benefits are many. In 2020, 1551 pounds of food were donated to our families as they picked up meals during the COVID lockdown. Donations are given to the Parade Street "Pay as You Can" Farm stand, Sacred Heart Food Bank, Multicultural Community Resource Center, ECAT farm Stand, and others. Eight home gardens have been installed directed by "expert gardeners" from the Strong Vincent Garden club. The Erie High School landscape management students provide labor and expertise for large garden renovations. Groundwork Erie, a local environmental trust, employs EPS students to maintain the gardens.



HANDS-ON LEARNING

Thanks to the Erie Farm to School Program, students take part in unique opportunities throughout the year, including visits to Wild Field Urban Farm (see photos, previous page and above), Goodell Gardens, Mercyhurst University's dining hall, and more. Below, East Middle School students show off the fruits of their labor in the school garden.

A collaborative community effort continues to spread the Erie Farm to School mission: "The Erie Farm to School Program seeks to connect students and their communities to fresh, healthy food by engaging students in hands-on gardening and culinary activities, highlighting careers in the food system, enriching required curriculum topics, cultivating relationships with local farmers and producers, and promoting innovative agriculture."

- Stephanie Ciner, Project Educator/Gardener
- Doreen Petri, Project Manager



EPS receives grant to promote student wellness

Dollars aim to improve academic growth by bolstering child, community health

Erie's Public Schools students will be the first to benefit from a \$2 million federal grant to implement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. Funding will be awarded to the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Erie's Public Schools through 2028 to create an outline for other school districts to adopt.

"Students in schools across the state will benefit from the work we are starting here in Erie," said Acting Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen. "The Shapiro Administration wants to provide all students equitable opportunity to attain the knowledge, skills, and services needed to achieve the highest level of health and academic success. The whole school, whole community, whole child model can help us reach that goal."

Establishing healthy behaviors during childhood is easier and more effective than trying to change unhealthy behaviors during adulthood. Schools play a critical role in promoting the health and safety of young people and help them establish lifelong healthy behaviors. The WSCC

model focuses on improving the physical, nutritional, psychological, educational, and community components that make up a whole child, while schools can implement the parts of the program that work best for their district and community.

Erie's Public Schools will begin implementing the WSCC model in the 2023-2024 school year with the hiring of the district's first wellness coordinator. In the next five years, the district will revive its wellness council, strengthen community partnerships, and annually assess and improve health policies, programs, practices, and curriculum in the areas of physical activity, school nutrition, school health services, and emotional well-being.

"We are incredibly proud to be working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Pennsylvania Department of Health on one of the most critical issues we face every day: the health and wellness of our students," said Brian J. Polito, CPA, Superintendent of Erie's Public Schools. "If we are truly serious about helping our students reach their full academic potential, we must give them, their families, and our teachers and staff the resources and tools they need to support students' health and wellness. This grant allows us to do just that. With the help of this funding, Erie's Public Schools will become a model for districts across the state that recognize the importance of investing in the health and wellness of their students and, by extension, the health and wellness of their community as a whole."

In collaboration with several partners, the Department of Health will offer statewide training, convene a statewide school health coalition, and support the implementation of WSCC in Erie's Public Schools from 2023-2028.

"A healthy student is a student ready to learn, and that is why this investment in our children's health and wellness is so important," said Secretary of Education Dr. Khalid N. Mumin. "The WSCC model recognizes that the education and health sectors serve the same child, and it takes a collaborative approach to improving student development while engaging students themselves. This is an important step to ensuring every child has the freedom to chart their own course and the opportunity to succeed."



Superintendent Brian Polito greets Acting Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen at an event announcing the grant.



SPORTS SPOTLIGHT

The Erie High School girl's tennis team posted a very successful season, finishing 8-7 and capping off the year with appearances in the District 10 singles, doubles and team championships.

Enisa Siljkovic placed second in the D10 singles tournament. The senior at Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy also placed second in the D10 doubles tournament with teammate Riley Gloystein, a junior at Collegiate Academy. The team placed second overall in the district.

“Our biggest goal this year was to beat McDowell, and not only did we beat them once, but we also beat them a second time to advance to the D10 Team Championship match,” said Head Coach Kim Nikolai, who leads the team along with Assistant Coach Cole Held. “Coming in clutch in this playoff match vs. McDowell was (Collegiate Academy senior) Mackenzie Bruce, whose third singles match decided the match to send us to the playoffs.”

Siljkovic also received the D10 Good Sportsmanship Award.



Collegiate Academy senior Enisa Siljkovic. The team (left) placed second in D10 team competition.



Career & Tech Engineering Lights up Pumpkin Walk



Students in Erie High School’s engineering program designed, programmed and executed an incredible Halloween light display that got visitors into the spooky spirit at the 2023 Master Gardener Pumpkin Walk at Waldameer Park on Oct. 6 and 7. Weren’t able to see it in person? Watch a video of their creation at <https://tinyurl.com/58f76bt7>.



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The mission of the Foundation for Erie's Public Schools is to mobilize resources and build support for the students and faculty of Erie's Public Schools. We provide opportunities for students in the areas of academics, advocacy, arts, assistance and athletics.

This fall we will be opening our Innovative Classroom Mini-Grants and our Graff-Hoehn Teacher Education grants. In the past five years, FEPS has provided over \$85,000 in grants to teachers. The Foundation has funded projects such as video and technology equipment, musical instruments, classroom libraries, science fairs, school plays, school gardens and so many more.

The following statements are typical of the positive feedback we receive after teachers are awarded their FEPS classroom grants:

- “It will be great to be able to give our students this opportunity,” Lee Scandinaro, Wilson Middle School, who used grant dollars to fund cooking labs that taught students the value of family meals.
- “YAY!!!! Thank you so much!!!! I can't wait to start this!” Donna Newell, Erie High School, who used grant dollars to help students build metal bike racks.
- “Thank you so much! This is an honor, and I cannot wait to support the learning styles in my classroom!” Amanda Biebel, Harding Elementary, who used grant dollars to purchase flexible seating for her classroom.

Visit the FEPS website at www.foundationeps.org for more information.