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SPECIAL REPORT: RANKING WESTERN NEW YORK'S MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Top schools credit elementary steps

Small class size, extra instruction, revamped curriculum all help out

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Dennis Enser/Buffalo News
Second-graders Macy Krysztofowicz, left, and Brittany Hine work in the computer lab at Charlotte Avenue Elementary School in Hamburg.

Second of two parts

As the emphasis on state tests grows more intense every year, some elementary schools are finding ways to succeed on them like never before.

North Collins Elementary is reaping the benefits of small classes.

School 77 in Buffalo saw test scores skyrocket after revamping its curriculum.

Buffalo United Charter School pupils get 2¹/₂ hours of reading and writing instruction every day, helping to boost their scores.

North Collins, School 77 and Buffalo United Charter are three of the six schools added

this year to the "best performing elementary schools" list in the annual Buffalo News analysis of state test scores.

The other additions are William T. Hoag in Lake Shore, Henry J. Kalfas Magnet in Niagara Falls and Charlotte Avenue in Hamburg.

"There are high expectations, from my office and the teachers. There's a big emphasis on that," said Hoag Principal Paula J. Eastman. "I have the attitude of, you will do it, you will succeed, you will learn. It's not a choice."

This year's analysis builds on a News study last year of fourth-grade test scores in Erie and Niagara counties, which factored in pupils' family

News analysis factors in expectations, family incomes

income levels to see which elementary schools do the best job helping children achieve beyond expectations.

The analysis identifies schools as best-performing if pupils exceed expectations in both their math and English language arts tests.

The study is similar to the type done by national academics and other policy analysts to determine how well schools do educating children from various backgrounds - in a sense, identifying how much "value added" the schools provide. Family income has long been established as one of the strongest determining factors of student achievement.

The six schools new to the best-performing list join five others on the list for the second year in a row: Smallwood Drive in Amherst; School 64 Frederick Law Olmsted in Buffalo; Westminster Community Charter School in Buffalo; and Charles A. Upson and DeWitt Clinton elementary schools in Lockport.

Most of the 11 top-performing schools have student bodies with a significant amount of poverty, which brings certain challenges to the class

room.

Children from poorer families tend to have life experiences that are more likely devoid of such things as trips to art galleries and theater productions. They are less likely to have an adult at home to help with homework. And the basics - a healthy breakfast, warm clothes, a bed - are not always a given for some children.

Nevertheless, three of the schools, Hoag, Olmsted and Upson, all with at least 40 percent of their pupils from low-income families, have some of the best raw test scores in the region. Olmsted includes a magnet component for gifted children.

And two top-performing schools with 90 percent or more of their pupils coming from low-income families - Westminster Charter and School 77 - scored higher on the tests than some schools with one-third the poverty.

The 11 top-performing schools also include two that are among the wealthier in the region - Smallwood and Charlotte Avenue. Pupils in these schools are expected to excel. In both cases, however, the schools push their pupils to achieve beyond expectations.

New programs in use

Two of the schools new to the top-performing list use a program called America's Choice. All Niagara Falls elementary schools, including Kalfas, and a few Buffalo schools, including School 77, adopted it.

The program introduces effective approaches to math and English, School 77 Principal Philip Friot said. In math classes, for instance, rather than having children memorize facts or formulas, teachers emphasize how and why certain answers are derived.

Using the program, the West Side school boasted an 80 percent passing rate on the state math test last year, overcoming the challenges that come with overwhelming poverty and a large population of immigrants. One-third of the pupils are not native English speakers.

"We have refugees from countries in Africa who have never been in school before," Friot said. "But they are tested in math, and we are responsible for their scores. We have at least eight different languages kids speak here. Last year, we had an influx from Sudan and Somalia."

North Collins Elementary School relies on small classes to help pupils excel. There is an average of 17 pupils in each room. That fosters closer relationships, Principal John A. Cataldo said.

"They know the kids well because of the small class size," he said. "They're able to help specific kids with specific problems."

The school recently adopted the Everyday Math curriculum, which gradually exposes children to concepts before holding them accountable for mastering the math. The change helped boost scores in North Collins, Cataldo said. The small rural school earned higher raw scores in fourth-grade math and English last year than several Williamsville and Orchard Park schools.

At Buffalo United Charter School, which is in its third year, pupils begin each day with an hour and a half of reading and English lessons.

That's followed by an hour of writing workshop. Children are initially allowed to write whatever they want. Then, teachers present one skill at a time, and children go back and edit their work for that one item.

"You teach the child one thing at a time, and not multiple things," said fourth-grade teacher Carrie Stevens. "You don't just mark up the page with a lot of red marks. When the kid realizes you have to capitalize the beginnings of sentences, then you can move on to putting

periods at the ends of sentences."

Languishing at bottom

On the other end of the spectrum, two schools appeared on the "worst-performing" list for the second year in a row. Schools on this list performed worse than expected in both math and language arts tests, given the socioeconomic status of their pupils.

The two schools are School 71 WEB Early Childhood Center in Buffalo and Stepping Stone Charter in Buffalo. The state decided not to renew Stepping Stone's charter, citing its poor performance, and the school will close in June.

Schools new to the "worst-performing" list include five suburban and rural schools - Main Street School in East Aurora, Eden Elementary, Harold O. Brumsted in Holland, Thomas Edison Elementary in Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda and Windom Elementary in Orchard Park.

Six Buffalo public schools made the list for the first time this year: School 17, School 27 Hillery Park Academy, School 31 Harriet Ross Tubman, School 61, School 80 Highgate Heights and School 82.

Pinnacle Charter School, located in Buffalo, was also on the list this year.

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