

# public citizens for children + youth

**Testimony before the City Council of Philadelphia**

**Committee on Education**

**March 12, 2018**

**Presented by Donna Cooper, Executive Director**

**Public Citizens for Children and Youth**

Thank you to the members of the Education Committee assembled today for this important hearing to learn how our schools approach early literacy instruction.

As any parent knows the process of becoming literate requires children to develop a myriad of skills from growing their vocabulary to phonemic competency, building the capacity to summarize and employ the basic tools of analysis, and exploring, and practicing, creative and critical thinking, and, I could go on and on. In fact, most experts agree, teaching a child to become literate *is* rocket science.

My testimony assumes that the experts from the Philadelphia School District answered your insightful questions regarding what the district relies on for early literacy standards.

As you've heard, Pennsylvania has robust early learning standards in place and those standards guide the content of learning in all publicly funded learning settings from high quality child care centers, to Pre-K programs and in our traditional public and charter schools.



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And, we are among the elite of all states ensuring that our early learning standards used to guide instruction in pre-school settings are aligned with the k-3 standards so that with appropriate leadership the learning continuum can be seamless.

(You can find these standards at this link:

<http://www.education.pa.gov/Early%20Learning/Early%20Learning%20Standards/Pages/Infant-Toddler-Pre-K-Learning-Standards.aspx>.)

Obviously, standards are meaningless without a system to ensure they are implemented with fidelity. I hope you will consider holding a hearing to learn from the Office of Child Development and Early Learning about the state's technical assistance, teacher training and classroom observation systems that assess and improve the capacity of high quality early learning providers to deliver instruction in ways that meet the standards. It's an impressive set of supports and oversight that continues to evolve and improve. Together with the Philly Pre-K infrastructure we are making real gains in the number of early providers who are expert in delivering instruction to our youngest children that meets our state standards.

I want to make sure you know that Philadelphia is one of a very small group of districts that employ the state's Kindergarten Entrance Inventory to assess school readiness and well as a second tool used locally by the district to help kindergarten teachers customize their class instruction the individual levels of learning of their students. From the data the district collects on its own tool, we know that children who are enrolled in district-managed Pre-K are twice as likely to have important basic literacy skills than their peers when they start kindergarten. I consider that great news!

While, Pennsylvania is among the states focused on boosting and assessing school readiness, we still have limited data to compare Philadelphia with other districts.

Moreover, due to state data limitations we cannot tell if children in Philadelphia who are enrolled in high quality early learning programs, other than those run by the district, are better prepared to start school ready to learn, than their peers who do not have access to these critical programs. However, I've seen many, many high- quality programs in action and as a result I am confident that when the state's data system can tell us more, we will be likely to have strong evidence that children enrolled in our high quality early learning settings will be outperforming their peers who can't yet access those essential early learning settings.

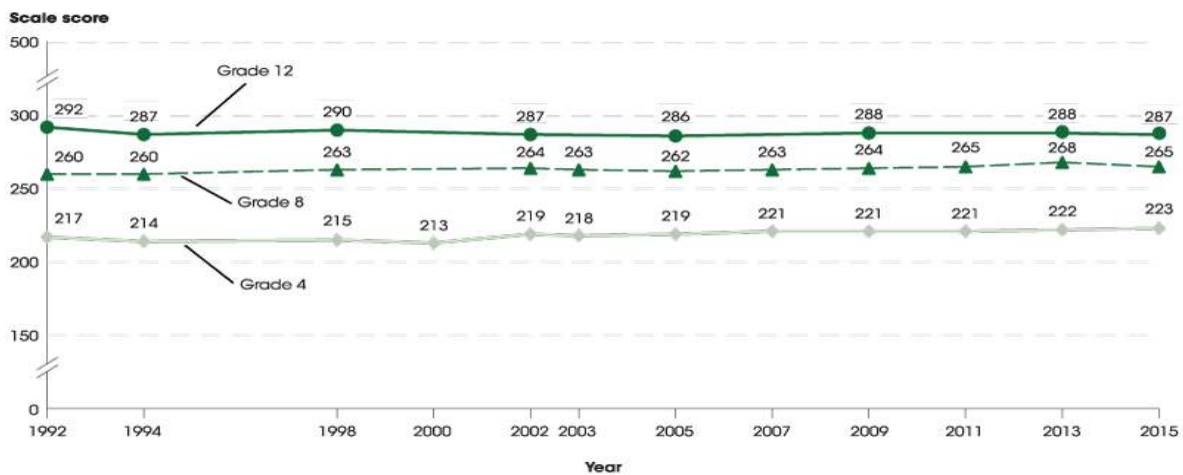
Access to high quality early learning has been dramatically improved by the courageous action taken by this City Council, and our Mayor, to dedicate most of the proceeds of the tax on sweetened beverages for Pre-K expansion. The research tells us that we can make the greatest positive impact at the lowest cost by focusing on child development before the age of five. There simply is not better way to spend a dollar aimed at boosting learning outcomes, than to focus on a child's development before they start Kindergarten.

But the fact remains that learning doesn't stop when a child enters kindergarten. It simply must keep going, and the rate of learning must continue to accelerate. That's why I applaud this hearing today and urge everyone invested in Philadelphia's success to learn and actively support the Read by 4<sup>th</sup>! Campaign which is galvanizing education leaders across sectors, parents, businesses and community organizations to work in consort to raise the share of students reading at grade level. That campaign and the district's work is not waiting till third grade to focus on these basic skills. Instead every year is considered valuable, and work is going on to boost reading performance at every grade from k through third grade.

I think we all know from first-hand experience, that our general model of education assumes that the first three years of school build the foundation that is used from grades 4 to 12 to acquire more advanced skills. When a child doesn't know how to proficiently read by 4<sup>th</sup> grade, odds are much greater they won't graduate, and, they are more likely to will become impoverished or remain in poverty as adults compared to students who enter 4<sup>th</sup> grade competent in the basics of reading.

(For a summary of this data see: <http://gradelevelreading.net/uncategorized/study-links-3rd-grade-reading-poverty-and-hs-graduation>)

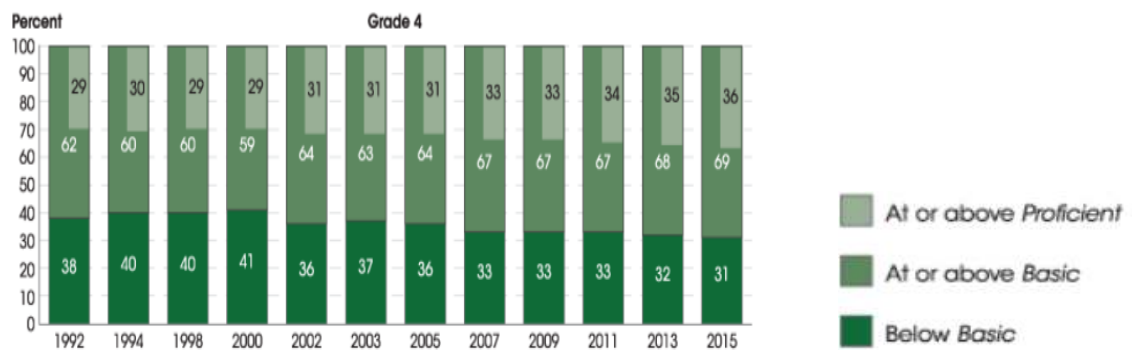
Yet, the following chart shows that are nation's third grade scores have been stubbornly low. The National Assessment of Educational Progress at grades 4, 8, and 12 shows that since 1992, educational performance has remained basically flat.



NOTE: Includes public and private schools. The reading scale scores range from 0 to 500. Assessment was not conducted for grade 8 in 2000 or for grade 12 in 2000, 2003, 2007, and 2011. Testing accommodations (e.g., extended time, small group testing) for children with disabilities and English language learners were not permitted in 1992 and 1994.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), selected years, 1992–2015 Reading Assessments, NAEP Data Explorer.

For thirty years, not only has our country’s academic progress has been as flat as a plateau. In fact, no major city has been able to get above a 50% proficiency rate for third grade reading on any legitimate assessment. Worse yet, the share of minority children on grade level by 4<sup>th</sup> grade has been consistently about 20%, if not 30%, behind the share of white students at grade level. In Philadelphia, we found from 2008 to 2013, the same disparities existed for all our public-school students, those in traditional public schools and those enrolled in charter schools. It’s unfortunate that we can’t assess the share of students on grade level in our Catholic school system where nearly 22,000 students are educated, since their students are not required to take the PSSA.

Despite that disappointing news, we are seeing a positive shift on reading scores. What the following chart shows is that the share of kids in the lowest scoring bracket, called “Below Basic” began dropping in 2002 and has continued to do so through 2015, the last year for which this data is available.



It’s this information - the good news and the bad news - that in September 2013, caused my colleague Sharmain Matlock Turner and I to invite the district, charters, the Archdiocese, and hundreds of child-serving organizations together to devise a plan to boost the share of children reading at grade level by the time they start 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Our plan's goal was tackle the problem with an ambitious, yet, pragmatic plan that would enable our students' performance to be on par with, or better than the highest performing school district in the state by 2021. Our best comparison in this regard is Lower Merion where 88% of third grade students are testing on grade level for the English portion of the PSSA.

We recognized then, as we do now, that Lower Merion has twice the resources to spend per child to achieve those results than Philadelphia has. We understood from the get-go that resources were going to be a challenge, but we devised one of the most ambitious reading overhauls in the nation tapping the talent our parents, non-profits, companies, philanthropies and the dedication of our school leaders and teachers.

Our local campaign, called Read by 4<sup>th</sup> is not only one of the best in the country, but it's impressive track-record was the catalyst for Philadelphia to be selected as the host of the national Grade Level Reading by 3<sup>rd</sup> Campaign this June. I took the liberty of inviting Jenny Bogoni to be with me today with hopes that you might ask her questions about the focus of the campaign and this upcoming national meeting. I recognize our time is limited so I won't go into depth about the Campaign. But I want to share with you the conclusions of national research aimed at solving this problem. Our challenge with early literacy is not simply cognitive, it also has a social component.

Far too many young children miss too many days of Pre-K and school. The research tells us students cannot stay on grade level if they miss more than 5% of the school year – to put it simply if a child misses 9 or more days of school in a school year, they will fall behind. When we began this campaign, the average absence rate in kindergarten was 8.5 days.

This year, the Campaign and the district are helping principals increase school attendance. I urge every member of council to be part of this enormous attendance matters campaign, because it does. Reach out too your principals and offer prizes for the students who show the greatest improvement in attendance. Spend time with parents in your community and help them build a greater appreciation for getting their child to school every day.

In addition to attending school, the research tells us that children must continue reading over the summer, especially when they are under 8 years old. When that doesn't happen, they can lose two months of learning semester of learning gains or more. Summer learning loss accounts for two-thirds of the 9th grade achievement gap in reading between students from low-income households and their higher-income peers. With more than 30,000 children enrolled in grade three or below living in poverty, a serious plan of attack to arm parents and summer camps with books and reading activities has been put in place, but more must be done to sustain school-year reading skill gains, I hope you will part of this important work as well.

The challenge is also systemic. It requires more access to high quality Pre-K. Only 40% of our children entering kindergarten can attend high quality Pre-K programs. Thus, the Campaign worked to support your efforts to boost access.

The Campaign also recognizes that a parent is a child's most important and hopefully effective first teacher so its building a robust set of resources available to parents at the touch of their cellphone to help boost their child's literacy development. Here too, more must be done to equip our parents and our communities to help children develop the skills to love reading.

Finally, the real rubber meets the road on teaching reading in our schools. Here is where Philadelphia shines. We've had the charters, represented by PSP, the Mission Schools and the Archdiocese on our steering committee for three years. I hope you will hear today about what charter schools are doing to boost the share of student testing proficient or better on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading portion of the PSSA. The District has already shared the enormity of their turn-around effort.

I want to tell you a bit more about that work. First, we cannot underestimate the impact of Dr. Hite's commitment to this work. He has not simply made resources available, which given the district's funding challenges is a clear demonstration of executive support, he has led the charge to change how the district supervises its principals and associate superintendents by ensuring that early literacy improvements remain a top priority. When the leader at the top changes how they evaluate their managers, then things can really start to change.

The district has also improved what it looks for in elementary school teachers and its boosting its capacity to attract and keep effective teachers in grades k-3. Here, I think there is much more we can do to replicate the effective practices used in other states, but we are heading in the right direction.

These are not easy changes for a large organization to make in a short period of time, but they did it. I urge no one to take that kind of leadership and level of organizational investment for granted.

Second, the district brought in the best and brightest experts in literacy to retrain every teacher, elementary principals and other elementary school staff on how to teach reading. They taught school personnel that they *could* be rocket scientists.



After the summer training, every elementary school was given books for their classrooms and at least two years of coaching to help its teachers practice, apply and become expert literacy teachers. Here again, I must call out another partner, the William Penn Foundation who stepped up and paid for this very ambitious training.

Let me close with my conclusion from launching this campaign, being on the steering committee and witnessing the amazing retooling of the teachers in our district. First, we are already seeing real results. Philadelphia's growth in the share of students reading at grade level in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was among the largest in the country of any major city or large school district. I am inspired by those results. But, here's the real take away.

I attended these trainings over the last three summers. What struck me most was the number of teachers who said to me, "No one ever taught me how to teach reading". Today you will hear from experts who can describe the challenge of early literacy and the progress they are making in traditional public and charter schools. But, across these systems, when teachers with their bachelor's degrees in education can consistently say that no one ever taught them how to teach reading, then we have a much deeper problem than we thought.

We face a crisis in this country that we define as a public-school crisis. We look to the charter sector for answers, but the best of the charters that teach our poorest students face the same persistent challenge with less than half of their students on grade level as well. Behind closed doors far away from the fiery debates of publics vs. charters, I find ready agreement that two biggest obstacles to greatness for our great public schools have little to do with how our schools are run.

Instead, our problems are a function of: 1) the weak political will at state level to fund the schools as required by our constitution; and 2) the broken teacher training system managed by the higher education sector that fails to connect college level courses to the state of the art needed in our schools.

We must, including this council to begin the important dialogue needed with our schools of higher education. Until our teachers are trained to become expert instructors that can meet the needs of our kids, our progress will be disappointing. Every higher education program from which our school district hires students must be forced to recognize that they are part of the problem and they have a critical role they can play as part of the solution.

In closing, let me commend this council committee for today's hearing and urge this committee to recognize that there is a direct connection between the progress we can make on improving early literacy skills and the ambitious ask the Mayor made to increase locally funding for our schools. We stand firmly behind the ask for \$980 million for our schools and look forward to working with you to ensure those resources are in place to strategically continue our early literacy progress.