

What's New About Read! By 4th

Feather Houstoun 27 February 2015

The Read by 4th campaign offers an affirming answer to a classic problem: should we decide "who" shall be responsible before we decide "what" needs to be done?

As a Philadelphia School Reform Commissioner, I've tried to bring to bear everything I've learned in a career in public agencies to help foster success in our schools. One of the most common situations is one in which a lot of energy is expended debating "who" should be in charge, before everyone is agreed on exactly "what" needs to be accomplished. Often, those claiming primary responsibility don't understand how much they rely on others to be successful, because they focus entirely on their own scope of responsibility.

This is such a common phenomenon that I've often described Philadelphia as a place with a thousand rooms - and no connecting doors. Lots of well-intentioned activity but little collaboration with others working in the same field, and not very much progress as a result.

Only when one looks broadly at a public problem and sees what really needs to happen should one fix on leadership, or devise a game plan involving all the right partners. A

case in point is the Obama administration, in replacing the Veteran's Administration leader, went not for the veteran steeped in the organization or in medicine, but for an individual with understood corporate culture, quality assurance and customer orientation.

This isn't just a question of individuals or personalities to fit a perceived gap or public-relations need. It is far deeper than that.

Some years ago, I was confronted with a public-policy question that was garbed in a "who" choice. I headed the Pennsylvania department responsible for mental-health programs, and I needed to decide what entities- counties or Health Management organizations - should be the local delivery system for Medicaid behavioral-health services.. A hard--fought debate ensued among the HMOs, county program leadership, and the mental health community.

To that point, it was entirely a "who should control" conversation. The turning point came when it became a "what" conversation. What should consumers of behavioral health services expect from the system, whoever was running it?

Over time, the advocacy community, the county program officials and the commercial managed-care organizations agreed on system specifications that were the basis for a uniform contract that spelled out service expectations for

consumers, payers, and service deliverers. The "what" was key. Not surprisingly, the "who" question was answered in many ways in the end. But regardless of the "who," the "what" was defined by consumers and by program administrators who were empowered to assure delivery.

While different in some respects, progress in early literacy has been hampered by Philadelphia's "thousand rooms" habits. There has been much earnest work, but not enough attention to the breadth and depth of engagement needed across many organizations, and not enough alignment of purpose and approach between early childhood through 4th grade.

The fifty organizations - with their many partners on the ground serving young children and their families - are building a city-wide approach that starts with the "what," that a child needs to be enveloped in learning environment, every day and every hour, that consistently stimulates and expands her mind for learning.

Early literacy efforts will succeed when we step back and understand that readiness to learn and early literacy cannot be owned or defined by any single part of the early childhood community, nor by the pre-K - 4 school system. The Read by 4th campaign recognizes that everyone who touches a young child holds some part of the responsibility for preparing that child for literacy, and bringing her to a point where she not only learns to read,

but is reading to learn.