

# Who Is Involved in The Read! by 4th Campaign

Shannon Nolan & Paul Jablow 27 February 2015

The list of campaign supporters is long. Memoranda of understanding have been signed by four dozen organizations, detailing what they will do to support three of the main goals of the READ! by 4th initiative – boosting school attendance, reaching out to parents, and preventing summer learning loss. Among the organizations involved are the American Reading Company, the Boys and Girls Clubs, the city's Department of Recreation, and the Maternity Care Coalition, as well as other city departments, museums, civil rights groups, and civic and philanthropic organizations.

Two groups, Public Citizens for Children and Youth and the Urban Affairs Coalition, led the campaign planning phase. Now there is a coordinating organization, the Free Library of Philadelphia; a lead corporate sponsor, Wells Fargo; and a lead media sponsor, iHeartMedia.

The City Department of Parks and Recreation last summer piloted a program that infused literacy activities into its summer camps at 21 of its locations, spending \$70,000 on activities, supplies, and staff. It hopes to expand the program, aimed at stemming what is known as "summer slide," when students can lose skills if they don't read

regularly. Parks and Rec pledged to work with other organizations to collect data to see whether the effort is having an impact.

The Please Touch Museum plans several initiatives, helping parents use play-based learning with their young children. It commits more than \$80,000 in programming to reach 280 children at 14 child care centers.

The Notebook is also a partner, having promised to bring attention to the issue through news coverage.

Some additional participants are highlighted on these pages.

## Free Library of Philadelphia

The Free Library, the coordinating organization for READ! by 4th, provides access to information and promotes lifelong learning for all ages.

President and director Siobhan Reardon said that it was natural for the library to become involved with an early literacy campaign because building skills and a love of reading in children are central to its mission.

"No other organization does it better than us because we get involved in the lives of families and babies from the outset," said Reardon.

The library's primary focus will be on creating year-round readers and on family engagement, which Reardon called

its strongest areas.

In addition to outreach to schools, the library is also expanding programs for families so children can read on level when they enter school and don't fall victim to "summer slide." Children who don't read over the summer can take up until November to get back to where they were, she said.

The library has long had a summer reading program in which children, including preschoolers, can get a reading list and a "bingo card" with suggested activities like reading on the bus and singing the alphabet song

The library has 55 locations across the city, including in a few community centers and technical learning labs. Its 250 librarians are an unparalleled resource; about half are trained as children's librarians.

Reardon said the library will also help boost school attendance as much as it can by "getting the word out about issues [that might prevent] a child from going to school.

To measure success, she said, they are developing metrics to benchmark where children are after they finish the library's programs compared with where they started. This is a priority for the Out of School Year-Round Readers program, which measures vocabulary growth and before-and-after PSSA scores.

"What's also important is how many parents are going to be equally engaged as a child, because often family engagement has to do with a child's success," Reardon said. "Looking at the whole child – knowing the strength of parent participation and activities – is when we have success."

-Shannon Nolan

## Eagles Youth Partnership

Targeting 50,000 underserved youth in Philadelphia, the Eagles Youth Partnership is a nonprofit primarily focused on health and education, with an Eye Mobile, for vision care, and a bookmobile that travel the city.

Executive director Sarah Martinez-Helfman said her organization became a part of the READ! by 4th campaign because of a common interest in early literacy and concern for the "summer slide."

"If you can't read, you are cut off from many options," Martinez-Helfman said. "Literacy is key."

Because of the Eagles' ties, Martinez-Helfman said the organization is positioned to promote reading as cool and fun and reach a wider audience, especially children who look up to the athletes.

Eagles cornerback Brandon Boykin, citing how reading affected his own life, recently became the spokesperson,

with the motto "Do the 22," asking children to read for 22 minutes every day.

EYP sent posters to schools and other organizational participants, reaching between 30,000 and 40,000 kids, and gave \$30,000 to the Free Library to support its role as the campaign's coordinator.

"This is just the beginning of our commitment, though," said Martinez-Helfman. "When we have the opportunity to partner citywide on city literacy, it's in our DNA, it makes sense."

Primarily focused on family engagement and year-round reading, they are now collecting before-and-after reading levels for the summer bookmobile program to measure effectiveness, Martinez-Helfman said.

The Eye Mobile, a staple of their program since 1996, visits a different school each day, providing eye exams for children and glasses and specialized care for those in need.

"If we want children to be able to read their books or the chalkboard, we need to first ensure that they can see clearly," Martinez-Helfman said. "One of five students in the Philadelphia School District cannot see clearly without the help of eyeglasses. Imagine how our literacy rates would increase if these children got the care they need!"

-Shannon Nolan

## Reach Out and Read

This program emphasizes children in the first three years of life. Coordinator Kirsten Rogers says it has been an active member of the READ! by 4th campaign, also donating gently used books to school-age children. The emphasis on the first three years of life is crucial, as children's brains double in size during that time, and the building blocks for cognitive development are formed.

The area branches of the program, run by Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, are in 47 primary care health centers, mostly in Philadelphia but also in Chester, Norristown and Pottstown.

Each practice raises funds to buy developmentally appropriate new books for children age 6 months through 5 years.

"It starts in the exam room," Rogers says. The physician or nurse practitioner always goes into the exam room with a book.

Physicians talk to parents about the importance of reading, even about speaking to the child in utero. "Sing, read, talk to your baby," she says.

"It fits into what pediatricians are doing," she says. "It's about the whole child." Doctors pass on tips on reading to the parents on every well visit, and if they find the parents themselves face reading challenges, they direct them to

appropriate programs.

Since the Boston-based program was implemented in 1989, she says, 15 peer-reviewed studies have shown that participating children are usually ahead of their peers in language development.

-Paul Jablow

## AARP Experience Corps

Experience Corps engages older adults in tutoring and other volunteer activities in 19 cities.

In Philadelphia, the organization has long focused on promoting early literacy and so jumped at the chance to become part of READ! by 4th.

The campaign "fits right with our mission," said director Catherine Mesaros. "We mobilize hundreds of volunteers on behalf of vulnerable families, children, schools, and neighborhoods."

The organization trains people 50 or older to serve as K-3 literacy tutors, and now works in 18 District schools and four charters.

As part of READ! by 4th, the organization has made an extra commitment to work on parent engagement. It is donating \$22,000 for books and materials in both English and Spanish, and has a goal of giving them to 1,200 to 1,500 families.

It is also focusing more intently on summer reading. Tentatively, it plans to place volunteer tutors in neighborhood branch libraries this summer and has talked with Philadelphia READS about also working in two or three of its summer programs in elementary schools.

This year, volunteers will donate over 67,000 hours to nearly 5,000 children who are not reading proficiently.

"We're excited to have such a wide swath of community commitment," Mesaros said. "We've been part of the planning from the beginning." While active in all the campaign's areas, including promoting good instruction and boosting attendance, "we're stressing summer reading and summer engagement."

Mesaros said that the organization has been tracking whether the tutoring is effective. Teachers do pre- and post-tests and keep daily logs for each student, assessing such skills as reading comprehension and fluency.

In 2012-13, she said, 34 percent of the students who started the year reading below grade level finished at grade level. Nearly half, 49 percent, showed improvement in reading and 56 percent showed improvement in classroom behavior.

-Paul Jablow