

Notebook Editorial: We Need This Campaign

The editors of the Notebook 27 February 2015

No skill is more fundamental to learning throughout life than reading. Students who don't develop a love for and proficiency in reading by 3rd grade are likely to struggle in their future lives.

In Philadelphia, that's a large group. Last year, 60 percent of District 3rd graders failed to meet proficiency standards on the state reading test. Among Blacks and Latinos, only one in three was proficient.

By 4th grade these students' learning challenges are likely to extend across the curriculum. Ultimately, they are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. As they fall further behind, the effects spill over to their classmates.

While this is a national problem, Philadelphia ranks near the bottom among big cities on the national reading test given to 4th graders.

And so it is heartening that a citywide campaign has come together to tackle the city's early literacy crisis, with the ambitious goal of doubling the percentage of 3rd graders reading on grade level by 2020. Nearly 50 organizations have made formal commitments to this READ! by 4th

campaign; dozens of other groups are involved. The Free Library of Philadelphia is anchoring the effort. The School District is at the table. There is foundation and corporate support, and growing understanding of the impact of illiteracy on the city. More nonprofits, charter schools, and businesses should join in.

Philadelphia has seen what a coherent, cross-sector collaborative can accomplish. Project U-Turn, a campaign involving the District, the city, and the nonprofit sector, has been able to drive up the city's graduation rate slowly but surely. Illiteracy is a similarly multifaceted problem, with room for improvement on many fronts. Recognizing that, the campaign proposes to work simultaneously on engaging parents as teachers, improving classroom instruction, boosting attendance, and preventing summer learning loss.

Some words of advice at the outset:

Keep kids and their interests at the center. Offer children books at the right level that they are interested in – and comfortable, engaging spaces for reading – and they will take to it. Children bring energy and curiosity into the classroom; a good reading program taps that. Some students need extra help, but the solution is not boring test-prep drills.

Give teachers support. Teaching reading is complex. Good instruction is critical. An effective reading teacher must

have classroom management skills, a deep understanding of literacy development, and the flexibility to diagnose and respond to each student's individual needs. Teachers need professional communities where they can hone these skills.

Start early, the earlier the better. More quality pre-K slots are desperately needed, so children come into kindergarten ready to read. Early diagnosis and support for students with learning issues is also vital. Outside of school, a citywide campaign can foster a book-rich, literacy-rich environment – and support and engage parents, who, more than anyone, can help children develop oral language and literacy skills.

Secure more resources. We cannot gloss over the challenge of launching this campaign at a time when resources are bare-bones; for instance, few schools have functioning libraries or librarians. Politicians sometimes question whether school funding gets to the children who need it. But there is no excuse to withhold support for substantial new investments in ensuring that children learn to read. We can pay now – or pay later.