

Mayoral Candidates Discuss READ! by 4th Campaign

Camden Copeland and Shannon Nolan 23 August 2016

The READ! by 4th Campaign is an ambitious attempt to help increase literacy rates among young Philadelphia students and thereby improve education in the city.

With the May 19 mayoral primary fast approaching, the Notebook asked each of the announced candidates -- Democrats Lynne Abraham, Nelson Diaz, Doug Oliver, Milton Street, and Anthony Hardy Williams -- to say, in 300 words or less, how they plan to support this early literacy campaign's efforts, and what obstacles they thought might hinder its success. Here is what they had to say. The comments of Diaz and Street were edited for length.

Lynne Abraham

Nothing is more important to the future of this city, and the nation, than a well-educated population. Reading is the single biggest component of childhood and lifelong education. Reading is the gateway to entry into the knowledge-based economy and the most meaningful jobs in the modern world, in science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM).

The investment of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the

Philadelphia Free Library system are welcome gifts to our children's future. Teacher training is key, and our branch libraries provide an excellent community venue for children all over the city.

While programs like READ! by 4th require sustainable funding and coordination among agencies, a mayor can help support the program by keeping literacy at the top of her agenda.

As mayor, I will do everything in my power to support childhood literacy in our schools and throughout the branch library system.

Nelson Diaz

Improving education will be my number one priority as mayor. For every \$1 spent now on a child's [high-quality preschool] education, more than \$7 is saved later on. I fully support the literacy efforts undertaken by PCCY, the Urban Affairs Coalition, and the more than 50 public and private partners committed to the READ! by 4th Campaign.

First, we need to get the parents involved. As mayor, I would explore ways in which we can improve the collaboration between the District and community organizations like Springboard Collaborative that are training teachers to effectively work with low-income families on literacy education. I would work to ensure that universal pre-K is available for all Philadelphia's children

and that our most vulnerable children get the community services they require.

I would identify reading education services for children who are monolingual in their native language so that they can then transition those literacy tools to English. I believe that effective literacy tools need to be learned at a young age before they can be prescribed to English in our schools.

I would work with the District to bring back school libraries and hire certified librarians. I would find ways to keep class sizes down, particularly from pre-K to 3rd grade when kids need individualized attention as they are learning to read.

I would continue to address "summer slide" and expand the city's program to use the recreation centers to provide literacy education in the summer. I would also explore the use of educational programs that use technology like smartphones, tablets and computer apps to supplement lesson plans and make reading fun.

The District's budget is my main concern. If the city does not provide the resources to support our children's education, then the work of the campaign will not be able to be reinforced by the school system.

Doug Oliver

READ! by 4th is much more than a literacy program. It is,

in fact, a very good example of how some of today's widespread education challenges can be tackled. Indeed, the real power of READ! by 4th may be in its ability to get diverse constituencies to agree on a common objective and then knuckle down to the hard work of achieving it.

Initiatives such as READ! by 4th don't waste time picking sides or laying blame. They keep kids front and center and are focused on the reality that all of us need to get involved in supporting the needs of children in positive and meaningful ways.

The immediate benefit may be improved levels of literacy, but the potential for other programs built around other issues (math, science, etc.) is significant. I wholeheartedly support this effort on behalf of our city's children.

In the end, we cannot lay the blame for the shortcomings of our education system at the feet of any one group, nor can we avoid the shared responsibility we have in improving education outcomes. That's true whether you're a teacher, parent, mayor, a legislator, a member of the business community or anyone with a stake in this issue, including the kids themselves. Yet the problems are real, and the demand for solutions grows ever more urgent. Which is precisely what makes this literacy program so exciting.

I'll be doing what I can: highlighting the need for improved literacy, calling for real and sustained support for this

program and others like it, and educating myself so that I too can always keep the needs of children front and center.

Milton Street

I haven't heard of READ! by 4th, but I'm questioning who are they hitting, or are they programmed to hit some of the kids, but not everyone?

Being from the inner city, I know we have a lot of children that can and cannot read on level. This is a complicated problem with no easy solution. I think to help we have to stop the violence. If we can correct the violence, these programs get forward in a successful way. There are a lot of complicated problems contributing to children not being able to read.

Right now, [READ! by 4th] is a program I would probably support. I believe early literacy is really important. We have a situation where we don't have programs that are all-inclusive. Is this a program that has the capacity to touch all 4th graders, or will it touch a percentage? Will I put my energy in a program that only touches a small percentage? What happens to the larger percentage of kids?

Once I get that information and make sure it has the capacity to touch all kids who get reading support and is reinforced for people with disabilities like reading and hearing and syntax -- then I will support it. There are a lot

of problems with young people in growth and development. The kids that have these learning disabilities, what do we do with them? If they are in the program, are there any provisions to correct them, and how does it address those? Normally, it's been my experience that those programs only touch a percentage of the population.

With education itself, there's an overall problem with funding, and an overall problem because of violence in school. ... We have to be really serious about our children's education.

Anthony Hardy Williams

Philadelphia's literacy rate among children and adults is among the root causes of poverty, and impacts Philadelphia's ability to field a talented workforce to compete in the global economy. As mayor, I will be committed to making pre-K universally accessible, and I will renew and strengthen the Mayor's Early Learning Advisory Council (MELAC)'s efforts to develop a citywide early learning plan aligned with the campaign, and use the "bully pulpit" to elevate the discussion.

Additionally, addressing literacy challenges for young children requires a "two-generation" approach, as 550,000 adults in Philadelphia are estimated to be low-literate. The Mayor's Commission on Literacy should play an integral role in discussions about parental engagement

and raising the literacy levels of families, not just children.

Ending low literacy in childhood starts with quality child care. Less than 15 percent of child care facilities in Philadelphia are considered quality. As mayor, I will order annual health and safety inspections of all child care facilities that do not meet statewide quality standards, and partner with child care operators to improve their quality.

Achieving success in this campaign requires a proven ability to generate funding – as I have done with the cigarette tax, which has garnered over \$17 million for public schools so far – and sustained coordination between the government, business, and nonprofit sectors. With effective communication and a commitment to put our children first, we will achieve success.

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