

Hite, District Make Literacy Crusade A Priority

Dale Mezzacappa 27 February 2015

The campaign is prompting the District to examine whether the right training, curriculum, materials, and supports are in place.

Important changes are starting to ripple throughout the District as a result of Superintendent William Hite's focus on making all students proficient readers by the time they are 8 years old.

The literacy crusade is one of four key "anchor goals" of Hite's action plan to overhaul schools and improve educational outcomes.

In embracing the READ! by 4th initiative – and its parent effort, the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading – the District has brought new curriculum materials and assessment approaches to classrooms.

Nearly 40 of the lowest-achieving schools now have literacy specialists to coach and support teachers.

"The fact that the superintendent has identified as a key priority having every kid read by 8 sends a message to the whole system," said Donna Cooper, executive director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth, which has helped

spearhead the citywide campaign that nearly 50 outside organizations have signed on to.

The focus is bringing “clarity” to a lot of internal issues, according to Cooper and others. It is compelling the District to look more closely at whether teachers can always accurately diagnose children’s reading issues, whether time is used well during the school day, whether teachers are getting the right kind of professional development, and whether the prevailing instructional methods are most effective.

Now, more than half the system’s 4th graders cannot read on grade level. This means they have missed the critical window for learning the literacy skills they need to succeed in school. As they fall further and further behind, they become at greater risk for learning and behavioral issues, and more problems later on.

For charter schools, which now educate nearly 70,000 students, the percentage of students who read at grade level by 4th grade has in recent years been about 10 points higher, although the aggregate results for charter students citywide for 2013 and 2014 are not readily available.

Cooper said that several charter providers, including Mastery, have been involved in planning the campaign citywide.

Along with the District, charters have been “engaged in

thinking through these issues," she said.

The citywide campaign has four goals: increasing parent engagement around early literacy, implementing evidence-based strategies to teach reading from pre-K on, tracking and boosting student attendance at school, and making sure children have year-round supports for reading so that they do not backslide over the summer.

In a detailed memorandum of understanding, the District has laid out the steps it is taking. In addition to bringing uniformity to how students are evaluated for reading readiness and making sure teachers use the best strategies, they include plans to help parents home in on early literacy and to deal more directly with student health and attendance.

"The campaign is drawing everyone's attention," Hite said. "And it's drawing attention not to something obscure but to evidence-based strategies that will produce outcomes."

He is determined to maintain the focus despite the District's critical shortage of resources. Officials have been able to set aside more than \$3 million for the literacy specialists and extra training, but class sizes are still large and schools are still scrambling for essentials.

Lisa Ciaranca Kaplan is principal of Andrew Jackson School in South Philadelphia, one of two sharing a \$930,000, four-year grant to partner with AIM Academy. AIM, in Conshohocken, is a private school for students

with learning disabilities that has a carefully developed and successful literacy program.

"If I didn't have the grant, I'm not sure I'd be feeling as optimistic about READ! by 4th as I am," Ciaranca Kaplan said. "I would have probably cried, because resources are bare in a school like mine."

Still she added, "This is Dr. Hite's mantra now. ... There is a huge focus at all the principals' meetings on the importance of early literacy."

Hite hired Diane Castelbuono, a former deputy state education secretary, to head the Office of Early Childhood. She has been able to upgrade pre-K curriculum with a \$60,000 grant from the Philadelphia School Partnership. She hopes to create a more consistent approach to literacy instruction and assessment for all students from pre-K through grade 3.

There are nearly 9,000 students in District pre-kindergarten programs. Many are located in schools. Principals are now responsible for evaluating pre-K teachers and are being retrained to recognize effective practices, she said.

She is also working with private pre-K providers to upgrade instructional methods.

Now, only about a third of city students attend high quality preschools.

“We support universal pre-K; that’s critically important,” said Castelbuono. “The second thing is to make sure kindergarten teachers are highly trained and have the support they need to know what kids’ skills are the moment they walk in the door.”

Once children get to school, absenteeism is also a problem. Kindergartners and 1st graders miss, on average, three weeks of school per year.

Pennsylvania has not historically mandated school attendance until age 8, although the law was recently amended to age 6 for Philadelphia. Partly due to this history, Hite said, “Parents are often unaware that their child’s absence is even a concern.”

The District is working with the Department of Human Services to address attendance and is now collecting data with the goal of being able to pinpoint individual students who are chronically absent, meaning that they miss at least 10 percent of school days. Health is also an issue: an estimated 35,000 city students have asthma.

Castelbuono would like to create what she calls a “karate belt” system, color-coded symbols that signify a child’s reading level. No matter where a child goes – school, library, summer program, recreation center – the available books will have a color marking making it easier to identify books of interest that are neither too easy nor too difficult.

“The worst thing to do is give kids books that they cannot

read," she said.

In addition, "kids need to be self-directed," Castelbuono said. And a system like that would provide an incentive to move from one level to the next.

Castelbuono wants to involve other entities in the campaign. One approach she would like to spread is to place signs in supermarkets – "A is for apple," as an example – that encourage parents to take every opportunity to reinforce skills with their young children.

"Some parents who themselves have low literacy levels or didn't have a good experience in school don't do that," she said. Children who are not talked to or read to enough enter school far behind, and the lack of stimulation can affect their brain development.

Whether a multifaceted and difficult campaign like this can be done effectively in the current fiscal climate is still up in the air. "They don't have any money, but are beginning to say, 'We need to prioritize,'" said Cooper. "They are going through a process. And that's a good sign."

Contact Notebook contributing editor Dale Mezzacappa at dalem@thenotebook.org; on Twitter @dalemezz.