

# From Reading to Community

Bill Hangle Jr. 27 February 2015

Stakes are high for literacy campaigns like READ! by 4th. Non-readers can feel isolated, leading to more trouble.

It's family story time at the Lucien E. Blackwell public library on 52nd Street, and the bushy-haired toddler named Rio isn't just here to learn to read.

He's here to join the world.

"Look at this – red!" says Jennifer Walker, the librarian, as she holds open a picture book about colors. "Just like this scarf!" She plucks a bright red scarf from a box full of them. Rio grabs it, gazes from the scarf to the page, and then looks back to Walker. "That's right – red!" she says. Rio ponders this for a moment, drops the scarf and toddles over to his mother, who rewards him with a smile, a cheer, and a hug.

Jamilla Manigault wants the best for Rio. "I want him ahead of the game – to have that intelligence, that love of knowledge," she said. She's been reading to him since he was in the womb. At 17 months, he can write his name ("It's not hard – just R-I-O," she laughs). Today's library visit is one more little step toward what she hopes is a bright future. "On my block, a lot of the children – and a lot of the adults, for that matter – never go off the block or

out of West Philadelphia," she said. "I want him to get off the island."

Research shows that early literacy is a key predictor of adult success, and the cost of falling behind is clearer than ever, particularly for low-income students and students of color. It's an urban myth that state governments use 3rd-grade literacy levels to predict prison populations, but the correlation between poor reading, dropping out, poverty, and incarceration remains troublingly strong.

Among the daunting statistics:

- Over half of Philadelphia's 3rd graders could not read on grade level – in District schools, the figure was 60 percent in 2014.
- Low-income, struggling readers are six times more likely to drop out than their proficient peers.
- Struggling Black and Latino readers are twice as likely to drop out as White students with the same reading levels.
- One in 10 high school dropouts can expect to land in jail, compared to one out of 35 high school graduates.

Ralph Smith, head of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, calls 3rd grade a "make-or-break year" that "essentially predicted what would happen to far too many students."

And as troubling as those links may be, experts and front-line practitioners agree: More is at stake than student success.

Also at stake is the success of classrooms, schools, and entire school districts. None can function effectively when students don't act as responsible citizens – an incentive that fades quickly for struggling readers, Smith said.

"The kids who don't read begin to band together," he said. "When you get a critical mass of those kids, that makes it enormously difficult to teach. Before you know it, you've got a highly dysfunctional environment for everybody."

## **A Doorway to Citizenship**

Teachers say the struggling young reader is easy to spot. "They don't raise their hands," said Tricia Onesti.

"Eyes down, looking away," said Kimberly Tong.

"They try to copy off their neighbor," said Heather Warchold.

The successful reader is another story entirely: "Eyes up." "Hands up." "Glowing face." "Ready to help others."

And teachers know it helps the whole class when the glowing faces outnumber the downcast eyes.

"They all need to feel special, and they all need to feel smart," said Warchold, of Finletter Elementary in Olney.

“That helps every bit of our jobs.”

Tong, Onesti and Warchold are all part of the Children’s Literacy Initiative (CLI), which provides literacy services in 47 Philadelphia elementary schools (in collaboration with the Annie E. Casey campaign). They gathered with colleagues recently at CLI headquarters to brush up on classroom technique.

They say the CLI approach – focused on guided instruction that moves students through skill-appropriate reading levels, giving them plenty of room to choose materials they like – helps students of every demographic profile, including low-income students and struggling readers.

“I changed my whole room,” said Kelly Strusiak, of Greenfield Elementary in Center City. “I got rid of my clutter. They provided us with a whole new library, leveled readers, book bins. It really made the kids light up: ‘Ooo, brand new books!’”

These teachers know that their students, mostly 2nd graders, stand at a critical cognitive threshold, moving beyond “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

They can understand character, plot and content, discuss what they read with teachers and classmates, and chart their own progress through reading levels. And perhaps most important, the teachers say, they’re old enough to get a thrill from reading and learning.

"The exposure excites them," said Allen Garner, from the Russell Byers Charter School. "They think, 'I can go rock climbing! I can go parachuting!' It encourages them to want to be part of that book – to immerse themselves."

But they're also old enough to feel isolation and embarrassment when they struggle. "All children love reading when they're very young," said Walker, the librarian. "[But when] you see them start to slip behind ... you see a loss in confidence, a loss in the pleasure of learning. They want to read to learn, but they're struggling with the mechanics. ... They're already embarrassed."

"As adults we forget how serious childhood is," Walker said. "They have all the same feelings we do."

The CLI approach includes a lot of group work. Students read together, agree on class rules, and help each other make progress.

"I don't have them at their desks. They're around the room, they're talking about books, getting excited," Strusiak said.

And as a result, the teachers say, the entire classroom runs more smoothly as students learn to communicate, collaborate, solve problems and enjoy success – skills that will serve them well in school and life.

"It carries over from literacy into math," said Onesti, of the St. Thomas Aquinas Mission School. "It's the way your

classroom is run. It's a community."

Smith calls CLI a "shining star" in the push for grade-level reading. In Philadelphia, that effort is now backed by an ambitious, new "READ! by 4th" campaign, a local collaboration of over 50 organizations, including the School District and the Free Library of Philadelphia, that launched last summer with the goal of helping all 4th graders reach proficiency by 2020. (READ stands for "Ready, Engaged, Able and Determined.")

Told about the CLI teachers' experience watching their students learn to work together, Smith said that shows what's truly at stake: not just literacy, but community. The student who can read can engage with teachers and peers, experience success, and take command of their own education, he said. "They become an advocate for themselves, a co-author of their academic destiny," Smith said. "Literacy is a doorway to membership and citizenship."

## **The Cavalry Isn't Coming**

But for the students left on the far side of the literacy gap, Smith said, the experience can be profoundly isolating – especially for those in typical Philadelphia schools, where classroom resources and adult attention are infamously scarce.

"The kid who looks around and realizes that other kids are

reading to learn, and that he or she cannot read, [realizes] two things," Smith said. "One, they can figure out that they're in trouble. And two, they figure out that there's no cavalry coming. The adults aren't mobilizing to help them."

Such students don't have a lot of incentive to become good citizens, he said.

"It's not surprising that you can pick up all these behavior problems beginning in 4th grade," Smith said. "Playing by the rules, buying in to the system and respecting adults – that calculus changes.

"It's sometimes said that while kids leave school in 9th grade, they actually 'drop out' in 4th. Because by 4th grade, this kid knows something no adult will admit: It's game over."

Smith has been working on this issue since he was a Philadelphia School District official in the 1980s, and since then he's concluded that this is "a nationwide problem, not merely a Philadelphia problem."

It's also solvable, he thinks. Districts can better assess young students' literacy challenges. The necessary interventions aren't always impossibly expensive or complex. For many, skill-appropriate books, well-trained staff, and focused instruction go a long way.

But much of the literacy gap springs from factors outside the classroom. Many students – particularly low-income

students – don't get much preschool reading experience. Chronic absenteeism and "summer learning loss" also hold students back.

Reversing those trends requires effective partnerships between families, schools, and community groups, Smith said – the kind of collaboration that Philadelphia's broad READ! by 4th campaign hopes to model for the nation. "This is really about parents and caregivers," Smith said.

Back in West Philadelphia, librarian Walker says it's easy to tell which kids come from reading-rich environments – even when they're toddlers like Rio.

"Even children this young, I can tell if their parents read to them," she said. "They know what to expect. They know I'm going to turn the page. They're looking at the book.

"When I meet kids who don't have as much reading time, the concentration level is different. It's much more difficult to read an entire book."

Jamilla Manigault knows which side of the literacy gap she wants Rio on.

"It's really disheartening to see the kids on the other side," she said. "You can see there's a 'want' to learn, but they don't know how."

And when Rio's ready for school, she knows she wants him around other kids who love reading too, so that he

can learn even more.

"I have older boys, and they're ahead of their level," she said. "A lot of times the teacher ends up having them help out the other kids. A little of that is OK, but they need to be challenged.

Just because you can read, because you're above level, doesn't mean they should say, 'Oh, he's OK.' He needs that engagement to get higher."

Disclosure: The Notebook is a partner in the READ! By 4th campaign; it has committed to provide independent news coverage of the effort.

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