

Your Child's Love of Reading Begins with You

Jenny Bogoni 23 January 2018



Right now, two out of three Philadelphia school children enter the 4th grade unable to read at grade level, a critical milestone in the development of any child. Those failing to meet it are more likely to stay and even fall further behind in future grades, as classroom instruction shifts quickly from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn.

Low achievement. School dropout. Joblessness. Research shows clear correlations between all of these and failing to read by 4th.

We as a city must do better. And now there are clear signs

we are doing just that.

With Philadelphia's youngest readers posting standardized reading scores that outpace state gains for the first time, we're showing what's possible when we come together and embrace our collective responsibility to give *all* of our children their best shot at success.

The citywide Read by 4th coalition, convened and managed by the Free Library of Philadelphia, was founded on the principle of shared responsibility. Comprising more than ninety organizations, we are parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers, researchers, pediatricians, community organizers, faith leaders, overseers of parks and rec centers, neighborhood shop owners, nonprofit organizations, grocers, launderers, barbers, stylists, and countless others.

While our near-term goal is to more than double the number of entering 4th graders reading at grade level by 2020, our ultimate goal is give every Philadelphia child the same chance to succeed in school and life as strong readers. We know key levers for achieving this end goal are kindergarten readiness, regular attendance, quality instruction, and out-of-school enrichment. Using solid research on these levers and lessons learned from the field, we've carefully crafted strategies tied to bold ideas that encourage us to activate every available resource. But what's energizing the nation's largest early literacy initiative is not new policy and programs but the most

affordable and universal resource of all: the love shared between grownups and their children. There's nothing socially innovative about this type of love; indeed, it makes humanity possible. The innovation comes, however, in its targeted application to reading.



Since Read by 4th's launch, we've been telling grownups that "your child's love of reading begins with you," to emphasize the transformative role we each can play. This "we" can mean virtually anyone who cares about, and can connect with, children and their families. We know a family's love for their children can be transformed into the secret sauce for building their children's ability to read. And we know that without tapping into this magical resource, we could still make gains in school readiness, attendance, out-of-school enrichment, and quality instruction -- but reaching our ultimate goal would be

nearly, if not completely, impossible.

To tap into a family's love for their children, we share with parents how much spending time with their children counts, from infancy through schooling. (After all, our children spend more than 80 percent of their time outside of school.) And we remind them that it doesn't take extra money, time, special expertise, or even great reading skills on their part. In fact, research shows that when we make more room for teachable moments in our everyday interactions with the children we love, we help them achieve the developmental payoffs and leaps in reading that we seek.

Parents can now get free teachable-moment tips through Ready4K and Vroom (a texting service and app, respectively), which can help build reading skills from infancy onward. Later this year, we'll be encouraging parents and other loving grownups to make a "Reading Promise" to a child they love.

We're jump-starting good habits early by letting **kindergarten families** know every day counts, from start to finish, and giving **elementary school principals** tools to support school attendance. We've joined forces with **teachers** to help everyone understand their child's reading level and how to find books that are the right fit for their child. It's now easier than ever to find **summer programs** that include reading enrichment as part of their overall programming.

An ever-growing number of Philadelphians are helping to bring to life one of our core mottos: Reading Is Everywhere. Philadelphia is now home to nearly 400 “book nooks” in unexpected places, like **laundromats and corner stores**. Neighborhood **barbers** and **hair stylists** are offering discounted haircuts to any child who reads them a book while seated in their chair. **Faith groups** are proudly announcing to their entire congregations the names of families whose children are achieving in school.

Plans are underway to pilot reading adventures in popular **neighborhood groceries** that mix in conversation starters throughout their store signage -- right at kids' eye level.

We've made it central to our community organizing around reading that we applaud everyday **Reading Heroes** and identify, recruit, and support neighborhood **Reading Captains** and school-based **Attendance Ambassadors**.

The clarion **Read by 4th** call-to-action -- mobilizing public will and harnessing a family's love -- is happening at a time when our mayor has run on a platform promising to expand and improve early childhood education; school district leadership is investing heavily in the coaching and support of teachers to build a track record of steady academic improvement within our schools; and funders of all kinds are committing new resources to the cause.

Meanwhile, our network of nonprofit organizations is working to identify and implement the best practices from around the country in order to ensure that families in Philadelphia can access high quality early childhood education and out-of-school time programs that are integrating research-based literacy interventions.

All of this amounts to creating the kinds of experiences as a community that can significantly improve the reading skills of-- and hence lifelong opportunities for -- all children who grow up in Philadelphia.

Imagine settling for anything less.