



**Written testimony of Jenny Bogoni, Executive Director, Read by 4<sup>th</sup>, Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation, before the Pennsylvania House Appropriations and Education Committees  
Tuesday, October 24, 2023**

Chairman Harris, Chairman Grove, Chairman Schweyer, and Chairman Topper:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Jenny Bogoni, and I am the proud Executive Director of [Read by 4th](#) here in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> We are a citywide coalition of partners working together to protect every child’s right to read, to ensure children throughout our city are able to become strong readers and writers.

**Advancing Literacy Through Collective Impact**

Read by 4<sup>th</sup> is one of 350 regional campaigns affiliated with the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading and one of 7 grade level reading campaigns here in Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> Our partners include citywide systems like the School District of Philadelphia and the City of Philadelphia, over 100 nonprofit partners from throughout the city, and countless families and community members dedicated to supporting children’s literacy in homes and neighborhoods.

The challenge we’re working to solve is that currently, two-thirds of children in Philadelphia are not reading at grade level. This crisis is not unique to Philadelphia—raising proficient readers is a challenge that has plagued our country for decades. The problem was made worse by the recent COVID pandemic. The scale and severity of the literacy crisis mean it can’t be fixed in isolation, nor quickly remedied through traditional programmatic interventions alone. Changing our current literacy situation and raising future generations of strong readers requires intentional cross-sector collaboration.

What motivates Read by 4th partners is our shared belief that by working together we can dramatically improve literacy outcomes in our city. While the change we are working towards takes time, we have already seen exciting signs of progress.

For example, [our collective accomplishments](#) include:<sup>3</sup>

- We have increased access to books that reflect the diverse cultures and communities of Philadelphia.
- We have launched a corps of volunteer Reading Captains who share information, books, and other literacy resources with families in their neighborhoods.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.readby4th.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gradelevelreading.net/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://issuu.com/readby4th/docs/read\\_by\\_4th\\_impact\\_report\\_july\\_2022-march\\_2023](https://issuu.com/readby4th/docs/read_by_4th_impact_report_july_2022-march_2023)



- We created the Reading Promise messaging framework which has been shared with families by the Department of Public Health, messages on SEPTA transit, and in Reading Promise Week events for families that have taken place in 75% of Philadelphia zip codes.

We have also made progress in how our systems of teacher preparation and classroom practice align with the research on how children learn to read.

- Thanks to partners like the Pennsylvania Branch of the International Dyslexia Association (PBIDA), there are now ten teacher preparation and graduate programs in the Philadelphia area accredited by the IDA, meaning that their graduates will be prepared to implement structured literacy, with two more programs already in the pipeline.
- We've also seen exciting progress and momentum within the School District of Philadelphia. This began nearly nine years ago when they invested in a multi-year, full-system initiative to provide training and coaching to Kindergarten through 3rd grade teachers to support a shift in reading instruction toward the science of reading. Since that time we have seen the District's commitment to the science of reading grow. We are excited to see plans to provide new instructional resources districtwide in the 2024-2025 school year and closer collaboration with academic support partners, all while continuing their commitment to providing culturally relevant materials and instruction.

We know what it takes to grow strong readers; the research is clear. We can name the specific skills a child needs to master and the methods for building those skills. We know that children not only need to learn the alphabet, but need to learn that each letter represents a spoken sound, and that children need explicit instruction to learn this. We know that once a child knows how to decode words, he or she also needs to have the background knowledge to give those words meaning. We know that early language development is critical and that parents can have a dramatic effect on their children's literacy development by talking and reading to them.

That's why our approach includes strategies to engage families, mobilize communities, and shift systems in ways known to develop a child's early literacy skills and - *over time* - move the needle on grade-level reading. This research and these approaches have been the foundation of what Read by 4th has been doing for the past eight and a half years, with the School District of Philadelphia as a leading partner in the effort.

### **What's Needed: Support Implementation of Structured Literacy Statewide**

Going forward, it will be critical for the State to prioritize literacy, too. Reading is the foundational skill that opens the door to all other learning. Education is a known gateway to family sustaining wages. It won't be enough to simply put a bill in place that requires teachers to be effectively trained or require schools to implement a reading curriculum aligned to the science of reading. Change will require a set of aligned investments, in early childhood, K-12 and higher ed sectors, all of which need to be resourced and sustained over time. During this time, we recommend you establish a task force specifically focused on



increasing literacy outcomes for Pennsylvania's children. This task force should include representatives from all aspects of the education system who will develop recommendations to support implementation at all levels.

### **Support for Higher Eds:**

We applaud the passage of Chapter 49 and Act 55, which will help ensure that more teachers coming through our systems of higher education will be prepared to teach structured literacy. For those who might not be aware, structured literacy is a research based approach to teaching children to read that involves explicitly teaching students about the structure of the English language and is a critical component of the science of reading. Chapter 49's requirement that teachers in five certification areas (PreK-4, 4-8, Special Education, Reading Specialists & English Language Learners) receive training in structured literacy is a critical piece in a coordinated response to our literacy crisis.

Representatives of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) have attended communities of practice facilitated by the Pennsylvania Branch of the International Dyslexia Association (PBIDA) to support them in this transition to structured literacy instruction. PDE is working with a statewide community of practice focused on helping schools of education meet the new requirements for structured literacy teacher preparation. PDE can further support quality teacher preparation by ensuring that all aspects of the teacher certification process, including the licensing exam, is aligned with the science of reading. Several states have already revised their exams, which builds in accountability ensuring that all teachers of reading have the knowledge they need to be successful teaching students to read.

### **Support for School Districts:**

We also support the Literacy Achievement for All Pennsylvanians bills (HB 998 and SB 801), which will require schools to use practices and instructional materials aligned with the science of reading, use universal screenings to identify struggling readers, and design intervention plans to prevent children from falling behind. For these measures to have an impact, though, there will also need to be a concerted effort to support educators, including:

- Ongoing education and support for principals and administrators, so they are informed about effective literacy practices and are prepared to support teachers at the building level. Locally, we have seen small, pilot efforts led by AIM Institute of Learning and Research and the School District, to support principals which could provide models for communities of practice that the state could support and expand throughout the state.
- The state should also anticipate the need for extensive coaching and professional development for teachers, which could be provided by building on existing resources like PATTAN to scale up to meet increased demand, and/or, through partnerships with professional organizations like the AIM Institute for Learning and Research. We have learned over the last several years, the importance of this type of professional development and coaching being on-going if we want to affect sustainable change.



- We also support efforts to stabilize and strengthen the teaching profession as a whole. When districts face challenges recruiting and retaining teachers, the resulting turnover makes it difficult for teachers to grow in their practice over time. We commend partners like the Center for Black Educator Development and Teach Plus for their work to support teachers and to grow a stronger and more diverse teacher pipeline.

## **Laying the Foundation for Success**

### **Early Childhood:**

Our work to improve academic outcomes begins well before children start school. The ages of 0-5 are critically important times for brain development as children acquire the early language skills that are foundational for later reading success. For example, early phonological awareness skills like rhyming are an indicator of students' ability to decode written words later on, and early vocabulary development is a predictor of later reading comprehension as students make meaning of the words on the page.<sup>4</sup>

We need the state to:

- Address the staffing shortage in early childhood by subsidizing wage increases ranging from \$15/hour for positions requiring a HS diploma or GED, \$19/hour for an Associate Degree, and \$21/hour for a Bachelor's Degree or higher.<sup>5</sup>
- Expand the use of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funds to promising practices and expand the state home visiting funds to support other non-MIECHV evidence-based models that would broaden the reach of home visiting to more families of color and more families with home languages other than English.
- Increase enrollment in publicly funded, quality pre-K.

### **School Funding:**

Once children get to kindergarten, we must ensure that schools have the resources they need to be successful, which can only happen with increased support from the Commonwealth. We are heartened to see such statewide attention to early literacy, but managing these instructional changes is unavoidably more challenging in schools that have been chronically underfunded for decades.

We look forward to the General Assembly's plan to ensure that public education is equitably funded in Pennsylvania in accordance with the Commonwealth Court's decision this spring. As those funding targets are established, we urge you to fully fund critical needs beyond K-12 basic education spending.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/policy-politics-statistics/articles/early-literacy-policy-and-practice-preschool-years>

<sup>5</sup> <https://startstrongpa.org/research-tools>



- A growing body of evidence tells us that the condition of school facilities impact learning outcomes.<sup>6</sup> As long as children continue to attend schools that lack adequate temperature controls, have poor air quality, close sporadically due to asbestos or other maintenance needs, or are otherwise in disrepair - those learning environments will continue to undermine our efforts to improve academic performance. We urge you to create a robust plan for school facilities that provides all children the learning environments they deserve.
- We also ask for increased support for tutoring interventions. While evidence-based curriculum and instruction will ensure that more students will read on grade level over time, there are already many students who are far behind that will need additional help getting to grade level. High-dosage tutoring is one of the best tools at our disposal to help these students.<sup>7</sup> But in an attempt to reach students at scale, some regions have adopted online, drop-in tutoring which has largely been ineffective.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we should prioritize tutoring that is high-dosage (3 or more times per week), in which students build a consistent one-on-one relationship with a tutor who is trained and prepared to meet their needs. One model we strongly recommend looking into is the CUNY Reading Corps, which has the added benefit of strengthening the teacher pipeline by providing pre-service teachers with practical experience aligned with the science of reading.

Thank you for your attention to early literacy today and throughout the year. We are proud to have many pieces in place to accelerate the pace of change. But we also know that the changes in literacy outcomes we are seeking will take years to realize and require sustained support and resources from a number of different stakeholders. With your support crafting thoughtful policies, state supports to implement those policies, combined with meaningful funding increases, together, we can dramatically improve early literacy outcomes in Philadelphia and statewide.

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED470979>

<sup>7</sup> <https://studentsupportaccelerator.com/research/to-date>

<sup>8</sup> <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-schools-keep-buying-online-drop-in-tutoring-the-research-doesnt-support-it/>