

# Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Early Literacy

By Judy Weightman

*In our fifth and final issue profile to prepare readers for the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference, we provide an overview of early literacy in the greater Philadelphia region, how it is being addressed and how it is affecting our children and school system.*

## Introduction

The children in Philadelphia public schools perform significantly below their grade peers elsewhere in the nation. In testing done in 2011, only half as many fourth- and eighth-graders scored as proficient or above in math and reading as the national average, according to a report by Pew Charitable Trusts.

Though there has been improvement in school performance over the last decade, far too many adults in Philadelphia are illiterate — 20 percent lacked basic prose literacy skills in 2003, the last year statistics are available. There's also a well-established link between literacy and crime: over 60 percent of U.S. prisoners read at or below a fourth-grade level.

The seeds of low graduation rates and adult illiteracy are planted in early childhood, since the achievement gap widens cumulatively. The solution also begins in early childhood. For instance, the Abecedarian Project tracked adults who participated in high-quality early childhood education programs in the 1970s. At age 30, those adults had significantly more years of education and were four times more likely to have graduated from college (23 percent of participants, compared to 6 percent of the control group).

Investing in early childhood literacy is an investment in the future. In the short term, it leads to decreased grade repetition, decreased spending for special education, decreased costs for the juvenile justice system. In the long term, increased literacy results in both lower welfare and social-services costs as well as increased tax revenues.

The most effective time to tackle literacy is before third grade, while children are learning to read — waiting until fourth grade, when children begin to read to learn, is too late.

## Opportunities & Innovation

A few programs in the Philadelphia area focusing on K-3 reading skills.

### *Springboard Collaborative*

Children from low-income families experience huge reading losses over their summer vacations because they have limited access to books and their parents unsure how to help. They're expected to do most of their learning in a school environment where they only spend 40 percent of their time.

Founded in 2011, Springboard Collaborative tackles this problem with an incentivized five-week program. Students participate in classes of about 15, which are grouped by reading level rather than age or grade. Classes meet four hours a day, five days a week for the five weeks. Students set goals for themselves, those who meet those goals are eligible for awards, including books and laptop computers.

Caregivers attend weekly one-hour workshops in which they learn how to give their kids the help they need through appropriate ways of coaching. They also log their child's efforts at home, including amount of time reading and problems the child encounters. In 2013, 94 percent of the caretakers attended all five sessions.

The program partners with both public and charter schools, which pay the teachers (who are trained in the Springboard curriculum) and the per-student fees. In this way the cost — about \$500 per child — isn't passed on to the family. In 2013, almost 700 students participated, including more than 300 from public schools and more than 350 from charter schools. These students achieved, on average, a three-month reading gain.

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## *Children's Literacy Initiative*

CLI's banner project is called Modeling Exemplary Literacy Instruction (MELI). It develops K-3 teachers' instructional skills by providing the tools, training, and support that will help the teachers work effectively with children from low-income neighborhoods. In addition to about 50 hours of training for all teachers in the target grades, CLI provides about 100 hours of training to one model classroom teacher per grade. This person will serve as a resource for best practices to his or her colleagues on an ongoing basis.

MELI was chosen by the U.S. Department of Education for a five-year Investing in Innovation (i3) grant in fall 2010. The i3 grants are given to support and expand programs, like MELI, that have proven to improve student achievement. Over the course of the five years, MELI will be implemented in 39 randomly selected schools, including 10 in Philadelphia. (The others are in Camden and Newark, New Jersey, and in Chicago.) During the grant, they expect to work with 460 teachers, ultimately reaching 46,000 students.

## *West Philadelphia Alliance for Children*

The alliance provides volunteer staffing to support literacy learning in public schools. Their library program has opened and staffed school libraries in 11 schools, serving 3,000 students and circulating 2,500 books a month. The alliance also places literacy volunteers in K-2 classrooms. The volunteers generally commit to long-term placements in which they help in the same classroom for 1.5 – 2 hours a week throughout the school year.

*In addition to these classroom-based programs, other organizations are involved in advocacy and funding:*

## *Public Citizens for Children and Youth*

Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves primarily as an advocacy organization, focusing on raising awareness and resources for the needs of children and their families. One of their most important roles as advocate and watchdog is in their analysis of the impact of city, state, and school district budgets on the lives of children. For instance, they have determined that in addition to the budgetary problems faced by the School District of Philadelphia, suburban southeast Pennsylvania school districts received \$37 million less this year than they did three years ago due to cuts in state funding under the Corbett administration.

## *The William Penn Foundation*

The William Penn Foundation gives about \$80 million in grants each year. One of the three areas it funds is early childhood education and childcare, in order to help close the achievement gap. They have a particular interest in innovative programs that support students in public schools.

## *The Samuel S. Fels Fund*

The Samuel S. Fels Fund supports both programs providing direct services, such as Springboard Collaborative and Children's Literacy Initiative, and advocacy groups, such as Public Citizens for Children and Youth. They also support literacy groups for older kids such as Mighty Writers and Tree House Books.

For a deeper look at how this issue is evolving, attend the breakout session "Reading to Succeed: Laying the Groundwork for Academic Achievement through Early Literacy." Helping to ignite that conversation will be:

- Helen Cunningham, Samuel S. Fels Fund
- Donna Cooper, Public Citizens for Children & Youth
- David Younkin, Children's Literacy Initiative
- Alejandro Gas-Artiga, Springboard Collaborative

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## Further Reading

### *Philadelphia 2013: The State of the City, The Pew Charitable Trusts*

This report by Pew Charitable Trusts shows a decade of steady improvement on the annual standardized proficiency test, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). In 2002, 19.5 percent were considered proficient or advanced in math and 23.9 percent in English; that rose to 58.6 percent in math and 52.0 percent in reading in 2012.

Graduation rates have improved since 2005, when only 52 percent of students graduated from high school in four years (57 percent in five or six years). The class of 2012 saw a 64 percent four-year rate, which is however still significantly below the national four-year rate, which is 78 percent.

### *Kids Count 2013 Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being*

This report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation provides extensive demographic and economic statistics on the home situations of children, broken down by state, city, or region. The data for Philadelphia includes telling information about employment, housing, and family structure, in addition to education.

### *Shared Prosperity*

The Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) of Philadelphia has created Shared Prosperity Philadelphia, a plan to fight poverty. One of the five areas covered is learning preparedness.

### *"Bridging the Vocabulary Gap." Tanya Christ and X. Christine Wang*

The achievement gap begins in kindergarten, when children from low-income homes enter with a substantial vocabulary deficit, which affects their reading preparedness significantly. This report outlines techniques that teachers and caregivers can use to help children with vocabulary acquisition.