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Read by 4th campaign touts progress and looks ahead

by Darryl Murphy

Philadelphia's literacy initiative called Read by 4th is building momentum in its mission to have young students reading at grade level by 4th grade.

About 100 people gathered at City Hall on Thursday for a mayoral roundtable to provide an update on the campaign's progress and to discuss goals moving forward for improving early childhood literacy in the city.

Nearly 20 speakers including Mayor Kenney, Superintendent William Hite, and Jenny Bogoni, executive director of Read by 4th, attended the event. Otis Hackney, the Philadelphia's chief education officer, and Loraine Ballard Morrill, community affairs director for iHeartMedia, were the emcees.

"The challenge we're tasked with today is how we're going to make sure all of our children are reading at grade level by fourth grade," said Kenney. "There's no doubt that everyone in this room shares a commitment to Read by 4th's mission."

Read by 4th has partnered with many organizations throughout the city to bring literacy aid to local communities, including Philadelphia Youth Network, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia & Southern New Jersey.

They've also received millions in funding from the Knight Foundation, the Lenfest Foundation, PECO, Wells Fargo, and more, in addition to pledged support from Kenney, whose administration has made a strong push for early childhood education.

And Read by 4th's mission is right on time.

Research has shown that students who are unable to read at grade level by 4th grade are more vulnerable to learning difficulties, which leads to a higher risk of dropping out of school. It has been reported that only 33 percent of Philadelphia's young students are reading proficiently by 4th grade. Read by 4th has presented a multi-faceted plan to increase that number to 100 percent in 2020.

The campaign aims to assist parents teaching their children at home through mobile apps and text alerts; improve literacy instruction in schools; work to increase attendance — a strong indicator of reading proficiency — throughout the District; use leveled libraries in classrooms and at home to meet every student at their reading level; provide every child with free access to a tutor in their neighborhood; and designate a "reading hero" on every block to read to local children.

"I am feeling super excited about it," said Bogoni. "I think there were incredible ideas put forward. It was so heart-warming to see the number of civic leaders and community leaders who are committed to helping us turn those ideas to action."

How Philly plans to get more kids reading by fourth grade

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Fewer than half of Philadelphia fourth graders now read at grade level. But a citywide, multiagency, multimillion-dollar campaign aims to change that, doubling the number of children who hit that goal by 2020.

About 100 people gathered Thursday at City Hall to talk about the goals, progress, and promise of Read by 4th, an effort of the School District, the city, and the Free Library.

Mayor Kenney, who was honored as a “Reading Hero,” made it clear that the goal is “one of the most crucial priorities” of his administration. With a push from Kenney, the city has invested millions in pre-kindergarten programs and on community schools, which embed social services in school buildings to help eliminate barriers to academic success. A controversial tax on sugary beverages is to pay for the programs.

The Read by 4th campaign aims to boost early literacy by improving the quality of reading instruction in city schools, addressing barriers to student attendance, promoting summer reading to ward off learning loss, and working with parents to help strengthen students’ reading skills.

William R. Hite Jr. has made the goal a centerpiece of his superintendency. But a few years ago, getting 80 percent of fourth graders reading on target seemed “almost an impossible feat,” he said. “We had outdated materials in classrooms. There were about 30 children or more in classrooms who together represented 26 different reading levels. You didn’t know quite what to do as a reading instructor,” Hite said. The partnerships and the philanthropy have mattered, Hite said. The district pledged in 2015 that it would spend \$30 million on the effort, and the William Penn Foundation and the Lenfest Foundation have donated millions. An intensive summer program paid for by funders has given not just instruction in how to more effectively teach children to read, but also has promised reading specialists in every elementary school for at least two years. “It has made such a difference,” said Lynne Millard, principal of Crossan Elementary in the Northeast.

Brent Johnstone did not read well for years. “I’m the kid who sat in the classroom, scared. I’m the kid who sat in a classroom and had anxiety about learning. I’m the kid who thought he was dumb for 22 years because I couldn’t read. I couldn’t comprehend. I couldn’t write without making mistakes,” said Johnstone, now a parent, a published author, and a Read by 4th advocate.

“We know that if children are not reading on grade level by fourth grade, they will continue to fall behind,” said Jenny Bogoni, executive director of Read by 4th. The Thursday event was billed as a roundtable, and doubled as a pitch for organizations to continue to invest in the campaign. “We need more investments to reach more families,” Bogoni said. “We need you to help transform our bold ideas into action.”

Greg Redden, a Wells Fargo vice president, has committed his organization to provide tutors for struggling readers at Southwark Elementary School, a model he hopes will take off. Corporate partners are often willing to provide one-offs - employees to go into schools to read to students. What if they took it to the next level, Redden said, training tutors to help lift students up on a one-to-one basis? “We need an army of trained citizen volunteers,” Redden said.

Donna Cooper, executive director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth, challenged those in the room. “If we can’t galvanize on this momentum at this moment, shame on us,” Cooper said. “There has never been a time when there’s been this much unity and direction.”



Mayor Kenney, who was honored as a “Reading Hero,” made it clear: the goal is “one of the most crucial priorities” of his administration.

Commentary: Sharing a love of reading is a task for all Philadelphians

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Jim Kenney is the mayor of Philadelphia

Greg Redden is the region president of Wells Fargo Philadelphia

Whose job is it to teach our children to read?



Teachers with their students at Philadelphia's Spring Garden School.

Parents and teachers certainly have a big role to play, but they're not alone. Our neighbors, community groups, local businesses, and city government are all part of that village it takes to raise a child and instill the reading skills needed for a happy, fulfilled life. And thanks to Read by 4th, a citywide coalition of community members and groups tackling early childhood literacy, with the Free Library as the backbone organization, we have a clear path forward to making childhood literacy a reality for all of our city's children.

But there is still a lot of work to be done. Two out of three Philadelphia schoolchildren cannot read at grade level by the time they enter fourth grade. This is a critical juncture in children's lives. Students who are behind in reading entering fourth grade are more likely to drop out of school and face a range of hardships, including incarceration.

Across Philadelphia, we're already mobilizing and demanding a different destiny for our children. At City Hall, we're hard at work making sure more pre-K programs set our city's kids on a course to a lifelong love of reading and learning. We're creating community schools that remove the barriers that keep our children from succeeding academically. We're expanding educational opportunities beyond the classroom for more than 18,000 Philadelphia students who take part in our Out-of-School-Time Programs. Wells Fargo is actively encouraging employees to become reading champions and tutors and cheering on other local businesses to follow suit.

Last week, parents, partners, educational leaders, and funders came together for the first-ever Reading Is Everywhere Mayoral Roundtable to review Read by 4th's efforts to double the number of fourth graders reading at grade level by 2020 and identify key strategies that can accelerate the pace of change. Over the last year, Read by 4th and the coalition of 91 partners have accomplished much. We were inspired by the stories from parents and community leaders we heard during the roundtable. Our partnerships are strong and our progress significant. We left Thursday's session with a profound understanding of how far we have to go, coupled with a productive impatience to keep moving forward.

And we cannot do it without you.

To accomplish our goal, Read by 4th has established six bold ideas to maintain our momentum:

- Every Philadelphian embraces life's teachable moments with the children in their lives in a city full of learning landscapes.
- Every new teacher enters the classroom ready to teach reading.
- Every family makes perfect school attendance a weekly goal.
- Every child has a personal home library with the right books.
- Every child has access to free reading tutoring in his or her neighborhood.
- Every block has a Reading Hero - someone who champions reading for the neighborhood.

While Read by 4th tackles big-picture challenges, we're calling on the citizens of Philadelphia to start implementing these bold ideas in their communities and making a difference in the lives of individual children.

Start a book club for children on your block. Ensure the children in your neighborhood get to school every day, on time. Look for ways to turn everyday moments into teachable ones. Our children's love of reading begins now, with us.

For details on how you can help, visit www.readby4th.org.

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