

Pennsylvania Senate Bill 801 Testimony | Monday October 23, 2023

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Who Am I?

- Thank you for being here and for allowing me to speak; my name is Megan Gierka, and I represent troves of educators across this great Commonwealth and stand on the shoulders of mentors and colleagues who have advanced this work and mission.
- Elementary teacher, instructional coach, reading specialist, speech and debate coach
- Served the Kutztown area, the anthracite coal region, and Cumberland Valley SD
- Over a decade of experience as a public school educator
- I'm here because 95% of our kids can learn to read proficiently, and get used to me, I won't stop until we get there.
- Currently at the AIM Institute for Learning and Research as a content developer and teacher trainer
 - AIM has two parts: a PA school which helps over 400 students with language based learning differences and a research and training dissemination hub.
 - Co-author of recently released courses for Growing Proficient Readers and English Learners, partnered with top researchers in literacy

What is Literacy?

- Turning the squiggles on a page into meaning - *brain/pen demonstration*
- It's a process that human beings still are not evolved to do
- It can be broken down into a simple analogy. *Math analogy*

The Crisis

- *Count legislators.* 1 in 5 American adults struggle to read basic sentences. Are you one of the lucky ones?
- Over 43 million American adults are functionally illiterate denoting a severe lack in reading and writing skills to be operative members of their respective communities (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020; Rampey et al., 2016).

- Struggling to read their own mail, to fill out their tax forms, and to engage in their civic duties as a Pennsylvanian
 - If you think you're immune to this, you're not... (Barbara Bush Foundation released a county by county map of adult literacy rates in our community)
 - Now that you've heard this speech, you'll be looking...
 - Personal connections: Be My Eyes app
- Communities that are at-risk for unemployment and poor health outcomes are the same communities where low literacy rates are most prevalent
- Half of our country has been harmed by inadequate education systems, and we are plagued to be on the same path.
 - 66% of our current Pennsylvania fourth grade students are not reading at grade level, a number that has trended downhill since the early 90s.
 - The pandemic has exacerbated the problem. Students in the bottom 25% of readers have seen losses at 10 scaled points – what some researchers are calling a generational crisis
- Our students need us now more than ever to create conditions for success.

We Know What Works

- Literacy is the great equalizer that will empower our communities.
- Literacy is for ALL, and thankfully we can look to decades of cognitive science on how to achieve this goal.
- It is the moon landing of this generation! “Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the intellectual evolution of our species.” (Wolfe)
- Two decades ago, Congress convened a National Reading Panel that analyzed over 100,000 studies from every major discipline.
 - We know what works:
 - Science of reading: It is the consensus from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages. These studies have revealed a great deal about how we learn to

read, what goes wrong when students don't learn, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for the most students (Moats)

- Over 95% of our students can read proficiently by the end of first grade if provided with effective curricula and interventions (Torgeson, 2004).
- We know it works with ELs, one of the fastest growing demographics in our state, currently comprising about 5% of all students in Pennsylvania.

The Legislation: The Solution

- I'm not going to admire the problem and the research without a solution. I'm not that 'kind of doctor' but we can look to medical science to solve this epidemic in our communities. It starts with:
- Robust Training: Back to School
 - Robust teacher training model
 - Trained in a higher education institution that did not adequately prepare me to be a teacher of reading
 - Not alone: 74% of all teacher preparation programs in PA fail to explicitly cover all five components (NCTQ, May 2020)
 - Mississippi: Historically ranked last of the last – 49th ranked state in NAEP in 2013 to 21st in 2022. How? They instituted actionable policy focused on teacher training, curated curriculum lists, and robust instructional coaching
 - Their work began a decade ago... and it's STILL not done! In a week, I'll be heading back south to continue to build and scale their training.
- Great Tools: Infrastructure
 - First, to bolster literacy instruction to ensure high rates of achievement for ALL children. This bill requires the Department of Education to develop and maintain a list of evidence-based reading instruction curricula for students in kindergarten through grade three that is aligned with structured literacy principles, including explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and building content knowledge.
- Universal Screening: Blood work

- It outlines a process to identify struggling readers through a universal screening process. Early and frequent screening, beginning with 30 days of school, will ensure parents know where their child stands in relation to national peers, not just students within their class or background. If I have a third grade daughter reading 50 words per minute, I want to know if she is on track for reading success based on validated national benchmarks.
- Intervention: Prescription
 - Schools will use this information to design a reading intervention plan for those who fall behind. 80% of students who are struggling to read at the end of first grade continue to be struggling readers in fourth grade (Sparks et al., 2014)
 - Partnered with those entrusted with our students every day, we can begin to make sure students have the necessary support to read proficiently by the end of third grade.

Closing: We can do this!

- We know that 95% of students can attain grade-level literacy expectations if provided with effective curricula and interventions.
- We can achieve a literate society. It starts with effective policy to drive the change.
- I work across the country training educators. Red, blue, and purple states. From Rhode Island to Mississippi. From North Dakota to Louisiana. The states who are making this a priority, like Mississippi, Louisiana, are seeing the greatest gains. It's time for Pennsylvania to lead this charge and pass this legislation.
- I humbly thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of this legislature, and am open to your questions.