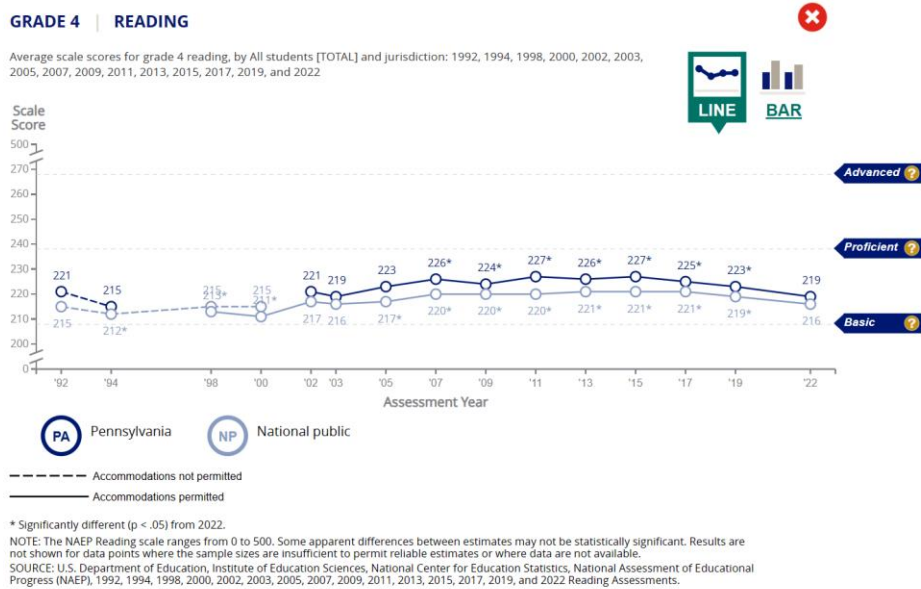


Testimony Presented
by Donna Cooper, Executive Director, Children First PA
to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Joint Hearing Education and Appropriations Committee
October 24, 2023

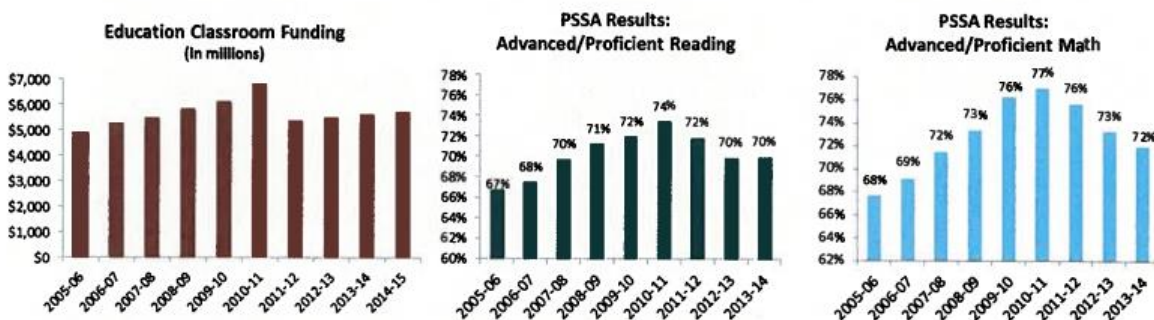
Currently, more than 50,000 third graders in the state are struggling with reading comprehension or basic writing skills or both, as evidenced by the 48% fail rate on the PSSA.

You might want to look at this through a different prism. How do our students compare with students across the nation? Turns out that 66% of Pennsylvania’s students are not proficient in 4th grade English, based on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Assessment. That sounds dismal, and it is, but on average Pennsylvania students are about three points above the average of all students in the U.S. Nevertheless, Pennsylvania and the nation as a whole is struggling to ensure every student enters fourth grade with strong literacy skills and wisely you are examining what to do about that today.



There has been only one prolonged period since the beginning of this century that our national reading assessment results rose consistently. Those were in the same years that the legislature substantially boosted funds for public schools. From 2005 to 2011 Pennsylvania’s national reading results rose significantly and those were the same years that schools had new funds to invest in proven early reading interventions, specifically, the provision of Pre-K and full day kindergarten, class size reduction, teacher training in instructional techniques and tutoring for students who were behind.

You also see the same trends when examining the state PSSA results for the same period, based on data produced by the Governor’s Budget Office in 2015.



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education

The data shows that the serious and bi-partisan plan to boost funds for low wealth districts and those districts showing the greatest achievement challenges produced very impressive results. The relationship between funds and funds well spent on early literacy are quite conclusive and we should have kept going on that trajectory. But as you know that isn’t what happened.

Focusing on the proven interventions, it makes sense to start with high quality Pre-K. Students who enter kindergarten with preferably two, but at least one year of high-quality Pre-K, have a more robust vocabulary, the foundational building block of literacy, and letter recognition skills which gives them a leg-up in learning to sound out words and begin to see how letters form words, compared to their peers without access to good Pre-K programs. We see this borne out

in data collected by school districts across the state like Philadelphia and Pottstown that studied the impact of Pre-K. Yet more than 57%, or 87,000, five-year-old children start school in Pennsylvania without at least one year of high-quality Pre-K. More investments in Pre-K counts will have positive impact on early literacy skill development.

Full day kindergarten is also proven to make a real impact. There are 13,000 children who start school without attending any kindergarten, since attendance is not mandatory. Of those children who do attend kindergarten, 20,000 are in half day programs. Notre Dame Department of Economics researcher Chloe Gibbs found that full-day kindergarten is also critical to building strong foundational literacy skills. In 2007, Indiana funded full-day kindergarten for all students. Gibbs compared literacy development among children who enrolled in full day K vs part-time K. The data illuminates the impact of full day K on literacy skill development as shown below. The data in red is the reading skills improvement of full-day K students by subgroup. Across the board every sort of student showed strong progress.

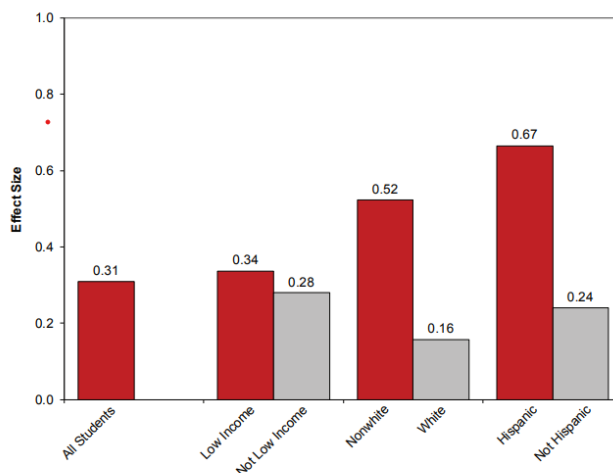


Figure 2. Literacy gains attributable to full-day kindergarten.

What's especially impressive is the gains made by low-income students, non-white students and Hispanic children who attended full-day K. Further, the full day Kindergarten program helped to close the literacy gap among students, very dramatically compared to half day Kindergarten, as shown below.

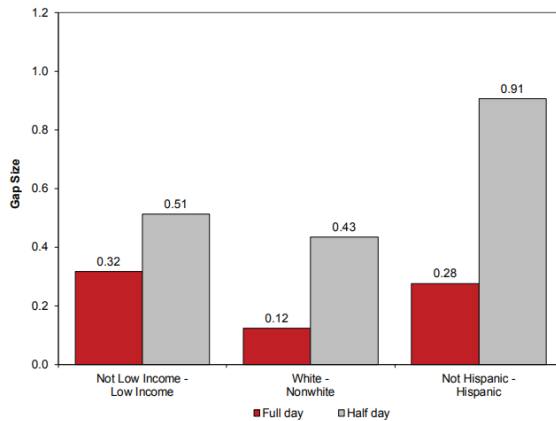


Figure 3. End-of-kindergarten achievement gaps in literacy skills.

In addition to Pre-K and full day K, tutoring is an essential ingredient in boosting early literacy skills since so many K-3rd grade students do not have grade level literacy skills. From 2004-2010, the state allocated \$66 million for tutoring to the schools with the largest number of students who failed at least one PSSA. These funds were in addition to the \$250 million Accountability Block Grant. The tutoring funds specifically provided up to 45 hours free tutoring services for K-3 students who scored at basic or below basic on one of the PSSAs.

The following research informed practices were used to define the parameters of how the tutoring programs were delivered:

1. Tutoring had to be in addition to class not instead of class and provided in the school setting.
2. Tutoring had to be delivered in small groups with a cap of 15 students or one-to-one.
3. Tutoring had to be conducted by a certified teacher or trained professional, not a volunteer.

Although students who scored “below basic” were given tutoring, the expected impact was greatest for students scoring at “basic” due to the resource limitations that capped state funding for tutoring to 45 hours per student per school year which isn’t enough for most students who are more than a year behind. Ideally the research says that students should receive about 30 minutes of tutoring three to five times a week.ⁱ Random control evaluations

find the desired literacy improvement at 77 to 105 hours of one-to-one tutoring. ⁱⁱ

Keep in mind that from 2003 to 2010 state funding for public school instruction increased by 62%. In 2003, 19% were far behind in English scoring at “below basic”, by 2010, the percentage of students far behind dropped to 11% in English. In just seven years, nearly 300,000 additional students were boosted to performing at grade level or beyond. That’s far more students than attend even the 30 largest school districts in the entire Commonwealth.

In those days, many Pennsylvanians saw the Philadelphia School District as a lost cause. In fact, new funding resulted in real gains there as well. From 2003 to 2010, with additional funds from the state, the district added 35,000 students to the ranks of those who could pass at least one state exam.

Additionally, the share of students performing at grade level or beyond also increased. By 2010 75% of students were testing on pace or above in math and 72% were on the mark or better with respect to reading.

In fact, after these investments, by 2008 Pennsylvania was the only state in the nation to make academic gains across the board on the National Assessment of Education Program (NAEP). Here again, the data showed broad based gains in student achievement rising in every subject tested, at all tested grade levels and for all ethnic, racial, and economic subgroups of students tested in that period. In 2002, Pa was tied for 6th place with several states for the share of students testing proficient in fourth-grade reading; by 2011, Pennsylvania increased its rank to tie for second place.

Teachers are THE key ingredient in a state strategy aimed at boosting early literacy skills. Since the early 2000’s early literacy tutoring programs were focused on phonics. The data was clear then that too many students could not learn to read based on what was called the “whole language” approach. Philadelphia followed suit in 2013 by pro-actively training all teachers on what is now called Structured Literacy. Other districts like Bethlehem were also early adopters.

Without question, retooling the teacher corps to be expert in structured literacy must be a priority and the legislature took a strong step forward on that front when it enacted (HB 2045) which requires all the teachers' colleges to align their curricula to imbed structured literacy skills in their teacher ed programs. A critical next step is to update the state's teacher certification exam for Pre-K to 4th grade so that parents and school administrators can have confidence in a new teacher's capacity to understand structure literacy techniques and their ability to impart basic literacy skills.

For the legacy teachers, the state should cover the cost of coaches to help teachers really get expert in this method of teaching and incentivize teachers to take extra PD in structured literacy so every Pre-K to 4th grade teacher in the state is rapidly retooled to teach and become expert in structured literacy methods and for districts to be able to afford great curricula that supports structured literacy instruction.

The last key proven strategy that you must attend to is measures to reduce class sizes in high poverty schools where parents are likely to not have completed high school or college. The data is clear that when students are in classes of no more than 17 students, those struggling to learn can get the support they need, and they catch up. You know that strategy is directly connected with responding to the court decision in the Fair Funding lawsuit. When you make that investment and tie it to the menu of strategies I just went through, significantly more students will enter 4th grade as strong readers and writers.

I want to close by saying that the whole language movement harmed students who needed phonetic instruction. Only the rare middle or high school will offer any support to students in reading remediation. We must embark on an ambitious reading recovery program that adds tutoring, student incentives and summer programs in grades 5-12 so that every Pennsylvania graduate can compete.

Kraft, M. A., & Falken, G. T. (2021). A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring and Mentoring Across Public Schools. AERA Open, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211042858>

ⁱⁱ [The Production of Human Capital in Developed Countries: Evidence from 196 Randomized Field Experiments \(nber.org\)](https://www.nber.org/papers/W28222)