

Dear Members of the House Appropriations Committee and the House Education Committee:

My name is Tracey Reed Armant. I am a founding member of Black Women for a Better Education, a Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors member, a Program Officer with the Grable Foundation, and a former education faculty member and high school English teacher.

I have had the privilege in these various roles to work with and on behalf of children in Pittsburgh and beyond, and I am grateful for an opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

As I scan the education landscape in our region, I am struck by some of the innovative and forward-thinking practices I see. A school district in our area is rethinking high school with students engaging in future-focused work opportunities where they can earn industry-specific certifications while completing their high school graduation requirements. These students work with adults incubating businesses and learn the skills necessary to recognize a challenge and ideate solutions. Students living in under-resourced communities earn college credits at three schools in one district via the same venues as their upper-income peers. These students, coming from schools where college attrition is uncommon, are accessing and graduating from post-secondary schools at rates many times greater than their peers.

There is innovation at the elementary and middle school levels. For example, a local district is rethinking classroom practice by piloting widespread use of individualized education plans (like those that children with exceptionalities get by law). These plans, informed by students, their teachers, and caregivers, ensure that students understand their strengths and use them to access content while receiving targeted support in the areas where they experience challenges. When many districts are pushing early elementary classroom practice into pre-k, a local elementary school is pushing play-based educational approaches up into the early elementary grades – helping teachers use play to teach fundamentals and bring joy into classrooms.

Innovation is happening in the out-of-school time (OST) space. A local OST program is fully immersed in school redesign efforts, working closely with students, faculty, and administrators and brokering partnerships with high-quality enrichment providers to change how students experience school. There are place-based consortia of OST providers who ensure that children have full access to the community institutions in their backyards. For example, every third-grade student in the neighborhood can regularly access and learn in the local science-based museum blocks from their homes.

These examples are transformative practices happening in communities that are not wealthy or necessarily well-resourced but where schools, districts, and OST programs are run by educators who understand and respect how children and adults learn. They must negotiate space, time, and resources to create new ways of educating students. This innovation must be recognized and encouraged.

We know intuitively that learning happens when people engage with ideas, concepts, physical objects, and the environment in ways that ignite and challenge them. We may not understand that it is neurobiologically impossible to think deeply about or remember content with which we have no emotional connection. Part of the work in education is ensuring that students have connections to content, their learning spaces, and their educators. This work takes time and resources.

Although considerable educational innovation exists in our region, it is the exception, not the rule. There are far too few opportunities for students of color, students in rural communities, and students from low-income communities to experience innovative educational practices.

There are lynchpin areas where if innovation is introduced, especially for children who are least likely to experience innovative practices, it will have a ripple effect throughout our communities:

We can start with early childhood education. We know that rapid brain development occurs in the first five years of a child's life. We must be diligent about getting children from birth to 5 years old access to high-quality, play-based learning opportunities that engage their caregivers. These early learning experiences lay the foundation for children's school lives. We also need to ensure that the play-based, experiential learning in the pre-K space continues into elementary school and beyond.

We must rethink caregiver engagement in ways that recognize that we all get born into a set of circumstances that are beyond our control, and most of us are doing the best we can with what we have. Engaging caregivers in meaningful, culturally affirming ways is necessary, assuming the best intentions. If caregivers can be meaningfully engaged, the stage will be set for continued engagement, which we know has a lasting impact on children's education.

We must create learning environments where every student feels they belong, and there are adults in the environment who know and care for them. This is a necessary precursor to productive, meaningful learning. Students who are disconnected and do not feel cared for will learn; however, they often do not learn the pro-social, productive lessons that lead to healthy adulthood.

Finally, mental health services in education spaces create healthy cultures, reduce violence, encourage attendance, and mitigate the negative impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences. A range of effective mental health services exist in education spaces in our region and across the country (and the globe). Some of these are physical spaces with mental health practitioners available for regular appointments and acute intervention. There are calming spaces that are available for young people to go to regroup. Some services are offered during in and out-of-school class time to teach healthy coping skills proactively. However high-quality mental health services are provided, the benefits are undeniable.

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