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Testimony: PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing “Read to Succeed: Early Childhood Education and its Effects on Childhood Literacy”

Good morning! My name is Donna Kilgore. I am a Pre-K Counts teacher at Bloom Early Education Center in Swoyersville, PA. This is my eighteenth year in the classroom. I am also an Early Childhood Education Senior Policy Fellow with Teach Plus PA.

I am here today on behalf of my students (past, present, and future), their families, and my professional colleagues to provide some insight into how the experiences that children have in the first five years of their lives set them up for either success or struggle in future literacy achievement.

Before I dive in, I think it is important to clear up one issue that plagues our profession. When the conversation centers around literacy, the common tendency is to discuss how we can incorporate reading and writing into Early Childhood Education and Care. While this is usually well-intentioned, it is developmentally inappropriate. Young children (within the first five years of their lives) are not cognitively ready to truly grasp the level of symbolism involved in traditional reading and writing. While many children by the age of five will show interest in these skills, and some may even begin the process of developing emerging literacy skills, most “literacy” demonstration within this age group is based on memorization and mimicking (or copying in the case of writing).

It is important to point out that ‘preschool’ means *before* school, not *more* school.

Our job as early childhood professionals is to provide a developmentally appropriate and enhancing extension of home, not an additional year or two of Kindergarten. We are not responsible for teaching young children to read and write early. Instead, we are responsible for teaching young children how to understand and use *language*. If children learn how to listen for understanding and speak for clarity and effectiveness in their first five years, they will be better equipped to read for understanding and write for clarity and effectiveness in their elementary years, resulting in higher literacy achievement.

So, why are Early Childhood Education and Care programs important? Don’t children learn how to use language at home? They do. However, there is an enormous discrepancy in the exposure to language for children in affluent households and children in poverty level households, both in the amount and the variety of words.

In the 1990's, Betty Hart and Todd Risley conducted research into children's language development early in life. They concluded (as stated in their book, "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children", 1995) that children living at or below the poverty level experience an average of 32 million fewer words spoken to or around them by adult caregivers in their first four years of life than their affluent peers.

While this study, commonly known as "The 30-Million Word Gap Study", has been criticized by some for being too small, being too focused on Euro-American (white) styles of communication, and possibly containing racial and socioeconomic biases, I and a vast majority of my professional colleagues have seen this same trend in our classrooms year after year. Children from households with higher income levels exhibit stronger receptive and expressive language skills including a wider vocabulary and more varied background experiences than children from households at or below the poverty level. Other more recent studies, including one from New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, have further backed this overarching idea, which is one of the reasons that states see a need for programs like Head Start and Pre-K Counts.

So let's examine the implications of the study for a moment... 32 million words in 4 years means almost 22,000 words a day, every single day, for four straight years. This is the equivalent of over 2 hours of non-stop talking, or more realistically 3-4 hours of conversation every single day for four years. Imagine with me, if you will, that you are hired for a new job. You don't really know much about the position or how to perform the duties, but you are willing to work hard. Your coworker has been studying the position and practicing the duties required for this job 3-4 hours a day, every single day, for the last 4 years. Oh, and your wages and ability to climb the promotion ladder will be merit-based. Do you think you could be competitive in this situation? Or do you feel like the odds are stacked so far against you that it isn't even worth trying? Now imagine that you are experiencing this level of defeat at five years old. This is what many Kindergarten students face when they have not had the opportunity to attend a high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care program. They enter Kindergarten and begin literacy instruction with a significantly smaller and weaker foundation in language development than their more affluent peers.

But how can ECEC programs help with a language gap that happens at home? Well, remember that our responsibility is to be an extension of home that provides developmentally appropriate and enhancing experiences for young children. While the only way to truly close this 30-million word gap is to fix the inequities that lead to the existence of poverty (something that is definitely beyond our scope as educators), high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care programs can help bridge this gap by providing young children experiences with language that are rich in both quantity and quality.

Early Childhood professionals use a variety of strategies in their classrooms to help their children develop strong language skills. We use *sophisticated vocabulary* regularly and in different contexts while incorporating the meanings of these words in the conversations. Sophisticated vocabulary does not mean content-specific words that may or may not have any meaning to young children, but rather a wide variety of words that can be used in everyday conversations such as ‘aroma’ instead of ‘smell’, ‘frustrated’ instead of ‘mad’, and ‘microscopic’ instead of ‘tiny’. We encourage young children to participate in *cognitively challenging conversations* using feedback loops. For example, we may use open-ended questions or prompts to encourage children to tell us about their process instead of simply offering empty praise for an artistic creation. We use a strategy called *dialogic reading* when we read books to children whether in a large group or one-on-one. This means that, not only do we read the text on the pages, but we also encourage children to examine the illustrations, predict what may happen next, infer how a character is feeling, and connect aspects of the book to their own background knowledge and experiences. All of these strategies are part of the immense intentionality that goes into promoting strong language development, in addition to pre-literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension for our young students.

Now, if you were to walk into my classroom on any given day, you probably would not immediately pick up on this intentionality. You would see my students and me singing songs and doing silly dances, painting, drawing, sculpting with playdough, building with blocks, cooking pretend meals, caring for pretend babies, putting together puzzles, sorting objects by various attributes, and so on. Most likely, you would think, “She’s spending her day just playing with children,” and you would be partially correct. I do spend my day playing with children, but the ‘just’ is misleading. While my students and I “just play”, I use intentional practices including the strategies mentioned before to help my students build a strong developmental foundation through experiences that are appropriate for their age and abilities. This foundation, when combined with the skills and concepts they will learn in their first few elementary years, is what will enable them to experience myriad successes including higher literacy achievement.

I’m reminded of a student who came into my classroom with a warning from his mother. “Good luck,” she said. Apparently this student had developed quite the reputation for not being interested in ‘learning activities’ and for only wanting to participate in ‘rough-and-tumble’ play. I’m sure all the educators in this room immediately recognize this as code for, “This child likes to cause trouble.” During our first couple of weeks together, he certainly kept me on my toes. However, as it turned out, no luck was needed. This student absolutely loved preschool. I can still hear him asking me to read to him in our classroom library center and then exclaiming, “Miss Donna, you do the goodest voices!” He became so involved when we would read together and he loved connecting what we read to experiences he had in his home life. He was also fascinated by how sounds worked together and particularly loved books with text that alliterated or rhymed.

By the end of our year together, he enjoyed “reading” to me by telling me all about what was happening in each illustration of a book. Sometimes he was even able to combine his knowledge of language used in our classroom with his emerging phonics knowledge to estimate some of the words on the pages. I will never forget the look of joy and pride on his face the first time he identified a word correctly. “D-d-delicious - She thinks the food is delicious,” he said, describing a book about a picnic. When I asked how he knew that, he said, “Because she is talking about the food and smiling like we do at lunchtime and that word starts with d.” Today, as a second grader, this student reads on a fourth grade level, he is in the academically gifted program in his district, and, perhaps most importantly, he still loves school. Not too bad for someone who, as I was warned, was seemingly not interested in learning.

The bottom line is that no one can become an excellent reader and writer without first knowing how to understand others and express themselves through language. Through neuroscience, we now know that language development is at its greatest potential in the first five years of life, and drops off sharply thereafter. High-quality early childhood programs offer a way for children to benefit from this period of potential that cannot be repeated or replaced in later years. Providing adequate funding for high-quality early childhood programs allows all children to have access to the care and education experiences they deserve regardless of their family’s socioeconomic status. Equitable access to strong language development experiences for young children leads to higher literacy achievement, and it benefits *everyone* in a society where language is ultimately the key to success.