

Read to Succeed: Early Childhood Education and its Effects on Childhood Literacy
Thursday, November 17, 2022 | 10:00 am

Good morning. My name is Laura Sosik and I am a second grade teacher in the Scranton School District and a Teach Plus PA Senior Policy Fellow. When Senator Flynn's office asked me to testify at today's hearing, I was a bit reluctant. I am not an early childhood educator and therefore, what useful information can I offer? After much consideration, though, it became clear: I am an educator. I teach children to read. And the foundational literacy skills on which my second graders build begin in infancy and are enriched and enhanced in quality Early Child Education programs.

Literacy is truly the foundation on which all future success rests. Some 34% of students are below basic reading level in the fourth grade, according to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Another 31% are below the proficient reading level. That means that 34% of 9 and 10 year olds do not have the skills to efficiently and effectively read and take meaning from a text. How is this possible? How can children receive four years of schooling, Kindergarten through 4th grade, and still not be able to read?

The answer is in the science. The basis of reading is *language*. Learning to understand, use and enjoy language is the first step in literacy, and the basis for learning to read and write. The best way to encourage a child's language development is to simply talk, and for that reason, some of the noisiest rooms I've ever been in are classrooms.

To learn to read, children must develop both language comprehension AND fluent word reading. Fluent word reading stems from underlying skills: phonological awareness, phonics and decoding, and automatic word recognition.

Phonological awareness, or the awareness of and ability to work with sounds in spoken language, sets the stage for decoding, blending, and, ultimately, word reading. Think of this as a ladder, with phonological awareness on the bottom rung and fluent word reading with comprehension at the top. Phonological awareness, the bottom rung, begins developing before the beginning of formal schooling.

Now imagine, if you will, a Kindergarten child. A sweet, curious 5 year old, probably with a runny nose and maybe even untied shoes, beginning Kindergarten for the very first time; This child's first experience with formal schooling. Now imagine this child lives in a home absent of rich language use; perhaps English was rarely spoken in this home. Or perhaps this child's parents have low literacy skills. This Kindergarten student is blissfully unaware that they are 72% more likely to be at a low reading level in school.

As Kindergarten progresses, this child will work hard to build the foundational skills necessary for future school success as well as future reading success. However, students who enter Kindergarten already behind typically make only one year's worth of progress at each grade level, keeping them behind their classmates throughout school. Without a sturdy foundation on which to build, this child begins to form a gap in their learning. Intensive intervention is needed when a child is lacking basic reading skills, *and many Pennsylvania districts are underfunded and unable to provide these interventions.*

Our Kindergarten friend becomes a first grader still struggling to master onset and rime, while their grade level peers begin to blend phonemes and fluently read words. Learners like our sample student who are not on the path to reading success by the end of first grade rarely catch up. If a child is off to a good start, they tend to like reading more; they tend to read more. And the more they read, the better they'll be at reading. But the opposite can also happen. Like our sample student who didn't get off to a good start, who finds reading confusing and frustrating. Our struggling first grader is now a frustrated learner and begins to display behaviors that distract from their learning.

Our frustrated first grader is now a second grader in need of intensive interventions and support, but their underfunded district cannot provide the necessary interventions as frequently as needed. Our second grader does not recognize rhyme, cannot count syllables, and is still on the bottom rung of that ladder, while the majority of their peers continue to climb to the top. Our sweet, hopeful Kindergartener is now a discouraged, dejected second grader whose anxieties present as unwanted behaviors. Our student is being suspended from school and missing critical instructional time. Our student is avoiding work by acting out in class and trying to distract their peers from the fact that they cannot read.

At the end of second grade, there is an intentional shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Third graders are expected to have mastered the skills needed to fluently read and decode unknown words and to instead focus their attention to using texts to learn about the world around them. Our sample student has now given up; Illiteracy has a profound effect on mental health; our student has chronic absenteeism and their behaviors have increased.

As this gap continues to widen, this student's inability to read may cause immeasurable damage to their emotional and intellectual development and may limit their ability to achieve a fulfilling and successful adult life. Students who are behind when they start

kindergarten make up the largest portion of school dropouts. These students have a less than 12% chance of attending college, according to the Children's Reading Foundation.

This is the story of so many of my students. This is the story of my sweet, loving, worthy students. This is the story of my non-readers, with whom my colleagues and I spend each day, diligently trying to close the gap that exists between illiteracy and future success.

This is the story of students in classrooms across our Commonwealth; across our country.

I don't have to tell you about the possible alternative scenarios had this child attended a quality preschool program; my friend and colleague has already shown that. I don't have to tell you because various studies of different groups of preschoolers find there to be great improvement in learning for economically disadvantaged children and dual language learners.

However I can sit before you, on behalf of my community, asking policy makers and decision makers at a local, state, and federal level to value and prioritize Early Childhood Education. For the children in this community. For my former students who deserved better and for my future students who can be better. For the future success of our nation and all its children.

Thank you.