

**Written testimony of Angela Marks, Founder and Executive Director of Reading Allowed
before the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission
Thursday, November 16, 2023, Harrisburg, PA**

Chairman Sturla, Chairwoman Phillips-Hill, and members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Angela Marks, and I'm the Founder and Executive Director of Reading Allowed, a nonprofit organization that provides structured literacy instruction regardless of financial circumstances across the Philadelphia area.

I served as a Reading Specialist in a middle school in an underserved neighborhood of Southwest Philadelphia and then worked in a private elementary school before founding Reading Allowed in September 2019. I'm also the parent of three adults who attended schools in a well-funded district in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

I founded Reading Allowed as a way to address the shocking inequity in access to high quality reading instruction across Philadelphia because I have seen professionally and personally the inequity of resources available to our students and how this affects their outcomes.

Reading Allowed serves more than 325 students across the Philadelphia area but we should not have to exist. We are a small band-aid on a large wound that I believe is cured by equitable funding. We work with students aged from five to adult. These are individuals who have been identified or have identified themselves as having fallen behind in their reading skills. We provide high-dosage structured literacy tutoring that is delivered by certified and experienced instructors. These students are being or have been failed by their underfunded system and are the least likely to have adequate access to additional support without direct school or district action.

Reading Allowed should not have to exist. An equitable and well-funded system would provide the most up-to-date reading instruction to all students, identify students at risk of reading failure, and provide support and interventions for these students before a gap develops. It would train professionals in practices best suited to accelerating the progress of readers who have fallen behind and provide individualized instruction for these below-grade level readers. This is achievable and is being achieved by districts that are well-funded.

My focus is on reading so I will speak today mostly from that lens.

85% of juveniles who interact with the juvenile court system are low literate and it's called the school-to-prison pipeline for a reason. There is no more stark example than that of Tyreek. Tyreek was a student at my underserved school in Southwest Philadelphia. He had been kicked out of a few schools before coming to us, his living situation was precarious and his mother and siblings had all spent time in jail. Tyreek's reading level was well below grade level. Tyreek was adopted by an educator and then attended a school in a well-funded district where he had access to interventions and resources that he had not previously had access to. Tyreek is an adult now.

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He lives independently, has a productive and fulfilling job and is a charming soul. Had Tyreek not had the good fortune of receiving access to the right resources in high school, I have no doubt that he would have ended up in jail.

More than 75% of the students who came to our underserved middle school in 5th grade were reading significantly below grade level. I was the only Reading Specialist, and classroom teachers were new to the profession and were inadequately trained to teach reading and address reading challenges. It was an insurmountable and desperately sad situation, and the stories of our students as they left us were very often not happy ones. I then worked in an independent school and saw student after student, including many struggling readers, blossom and move on to bright futures because they had had access to the resources they needed.

An Equitable Education System will have Equitable Resources and Opportunities,

I recently sat with a group of 8th graders served by Reading Allowed at a school in West Philadelphia. All four of these students are reading at a 2nd or 3rd grade reading level, and it will likely take a few years of intensive, specialized instruction to get these students up to grade level. These 8th graders are bright, resourceful, funny, engaging, and have so much potential and so many dreams but they are already frustrated and despondent. They reminded me so much of my own children at that age. My own children, with access to all the resources for success at school, are living fulfilling, productive lives and yet, as I sat with the group of 8th graders this week, I worried desperately for their futures and by extension for all our futures.

School districts in the wealthiest quintile spend \$6,200 more per pupil than the poorest school districts after adjusting for student need. Research for Action found that “Pennsylvania’s gaps in access to educational opportunity rank among the five worst nationwide in terms of both race and poverty.” These gaps were found across three indices: access to quality educators, access to advanced coursework, and access to positive school climate.

Let me bring this back to what I know best: reading.

In 2022, just 31% of 8th graders across Pennsylvania scored at the proficient level or above on the NAEP reading assessment.¹ Black students had an average score that was 26 points lower than that for White students, Hispanic students had an average score that was 24 points lower than that for White students, and students who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) had an average score that was 26 points lower than that for students who were not eligible. Additional analysis presented in the school funding trial made clear that these

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2022/pdf/2023010PA8.pdf>

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achievement gaps cannot be explained away by poverty or other out-of-school factors; low-income students do better academically in well-funded schools than they do in underfunded schools. In fact, we know that 95% of students can learn to read proficiently, regardless of their background, when given access to high-quality structured literacy instruction.²

I believe that the stark difference in experiences between my group of 8th grade students and my own children clearly reflects the outcomes we can expect from underfunded schools compared to well-funded schools.

My 8th grade students did not attend well funded pre-K that prepared them for Kindergarten. My own children did have that advantage and started Kindergarten meeting benchmark expectations.

My 8th grade students in an underserved district in Philadelphia were not screened in the early grades to identify potential struggles with reading. My own children were screened.

My 8th grade students did not receive early intervention to close a then-small gap in their reading skills. A large gap was allowed to develop.

My children did receive intervention in the early grades and were caught before they had a chance to fail.

My 8th graders did not have access to a Reading Specialist after 2nd grade to address their needs. The Reading Specialist they had access to until 2nd grade was the only one in the building serving many, many more students than she could reasonably expect to support.

My own children had access to a Reading Specialist who was responsible for a reasonable number of students.

We know that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement.³ My group of 8th graders spent their elementary years in overcrowded classrooms with underpaid, exhausted teachers who had very limited experience and who were not receiving sufficient professional development. Very often they had multiple teachers and substitutes over the course of a school year.

My own children had a smaller class size and were taught by well-paid, seasoned teachers who had been at the same school for years and who regularly engaged in professional development opportunities.

² <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2020/moats>

³ <https://www.educationnext.org/in-schools-teacher-quality-matters-most-coleman/>

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My group of 8th graders were taught using an outdated curriculum that was not aligned with the most up-to-date methods of reading instruction.

My own children were.

My group of 8th graders sat in overcrowded, depressing, run down classrooms that were cold in the winter and stifling in the warmer months.

My own children sat in modern, well-ventilated, bright and engaging classrooms.

Reading Allowed was founded to address the inequity in access to high-quality structured literacy instruction in Philadelphia. At the doctor's office, patients are screened for certain conditions and if your primary care doctor suspects you have a particular condition, they will very often send you to a specialist. The same applies to reading. Children in well-funded school districts receive instruction from well-trained teachers using an up-to-date curriculum. They are screened and are sent to a highly trained reading specialist for intervention if there is an indication that they are at risk of reading failure. This is done in Kindergarten and students are caught before they have a chance to fail. Older students who are reading below grade level receive intervention from well-trained specialists. Students in underfunded schools are taught by less experienced teachers who are using an outdated curriculum, they are not screened, don't receive extra support from a highly trained specialist and are left to fall further and further behind. It's the Matthew effect: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Once these students are older and are reading way below grade level, there are no supports in place to close that gap.

The Basic Education Funding Commission can rectify these inequities:

The commission must set adequacy targets which will set goals for funding levels for each district based on the spending levels of high-performing districts, adjusted based on measures of each district's student needs.

How can we move forward effectively if we don't know what we're aiming for? Let's set goals for each district based on the needs of the students and what we already know about successful well-funded school districts. Dr. Kelly's recently updated analysis, based on the General Assembly's own methodology and updated to include critical factors including special education and mandated costs, should serve as a starting point.

In addition, the commission must include resources for pre-K, special education, facilities, and transportation in its plan. Judge Jubelirer made clear in her ruling that low-wealth districts are shortchanged in all of these areas, and that they are each important factors in an adequate and equitable education.

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If all adults in our country were able to move up to the equivalent of a 6th grade reading level, the national benefit economically would be \$2.2 trillion annually. On day 1 on the first day of Kindergarten, many of our students are already well behind their peers from well-funded districts with options for Pre-K. We are playing catch-up before they're even out of the gate. We cannot separate K-12 funding from Pre-K funding. It just makes sense to invest in a robust, high-quality pre-K experience and get our students ready for Kindergarten. Prevention is much less costly, in all senses of the word, than intervention. 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 high-quality Pre-K programs.

We don't have days to waste. Each day that a student is not receiving an education funded equitably is a day closer to that student entering and not leaving the school-to-prison pipeline. It's that simple. The future does not look bright for my 8th graders and so many others like them. We need to be thoughtful and meticulous but we need to act with a desperate sense of urgency.

In order to ensure that 95% of students become proficient or better readers, our highest-need districts must have adequate funding:

- to provide training and continuing professional development to teachers in training and practicing teachers in the most up-to-date methods of reading instruction
- to adequately compensate teachers so that districts can hire and retain the best educators
- to provide the emotional and mental health supports that students need to enable them to successfully engage with their education
- to open more classrooms so that class sizes are ones that are manageable
- to invest in curricula that are aligned with the most up-to-date research
- to adequately screen our Kindergartners to identify those at risk of reading failure. Prevention is much, much cheaper than a cure
- to train and hire personnel to identify and provide additional supports for those at risk of reading failure

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- to train individuals in methods of literacy instruction best suited to closing the gap for below-level readers as quickly as possible
- to provide high-dosage tutoring⁴ delivered by appropriately trained personnel to close the gap for older students as quickly as possible.
- to provide access to pre-K so that our students are well prepared for Kindergarten.
- to ensure that our students needing special education services are identified, assessed and receive appropriate individualized reading instruction
- to invest in facilities that promote engaged learning and that send the message to our students that we value them. This means modern, bright, spacious, well-ventilated facilities that support teachers in doing the best job possible

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your commitment to Pennsylvania's children.

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⁴ <https://edresearchforaction.com/research-briefs/accelerating-student-learning-with-high-dosage-tutoring/>