

Testimony of the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit
Senate Majority Policy Committee
Hearing on Improving Reading Outcomes in Pennsylvania

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Chairman Argall, and members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee:

It is an honor to represent the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit (MCIU) on today's panel. My name is Dr. Donna Gaffney, and I am MCIU's Director of Organizational and Professional Learning. Pennsylvania's Intermediate Units are essential partners in improving literacy outcomes for our most vulnerable learners, from early childhood through graduation. We serve as the connective tissue between state policy and classroom practice, ensuring that evidence-based instruction reaches every student regardless of zip code. As we look to the implementation of Act 135 of 2024 to help improve the reading achievement for our most vital asset, our students, opportunities such as this to share and learn from one another are appreciated and essential to advancing reading outcomes across the commonwealth.

Reading is foundational to success across all disciplines and for life beyond school. When we talk about reading outcomes, it's important to remember that behind every data point is a student, and no student's literacy journey is the same. Long before they enter a K–12 classroom, emergent and early literacy skills must be developed. Yet, many students - particularly those with disabilities, English learners, and those impacted by poverty and trauma - struggle to meet the academic, social-emotional, physical, and behavioral milestones required for school readiness. Without the targeted support provided by MCIU's Early Intervention, HeadStart and Pre-K Counts Programs these gaps widen over time, yet there are so many more Pennsylvania children and families in need of pre-school services and experiences. If we are committed to reading growth

and long-term success, we must ensure that funding early learning remains at the forefront of our attention and Pennsylvania's investments.

When literacy instruction begins matters. **How** we approach literacy instruction is equally important.

The Science of Reading refers to a vast array of evolving research accumulated over decades that details how literacy proficiency develops and addresses why some students struggle to develop reading and writing skills. Structured Literacy is a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that includes both the instructional content as well as essential methods or principles of teaching needed in our classrooms. Act 135 calls for evidence-based reading curriculum materials and intervention approaches, reading universal screeners, and professional development training programs. There will always be students who require more than universal whole class instruction. Strong universal reading instruction, in conjunction with assessments that identify needs, diagnostics that pinpoint specific issues, targeted interventions to address those gaps, and ongoing monitoring to ensure progress are essential for success. This cycle, embedded in a research-based Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework prevents early reading struggles from becoming major barriers in later grades. Through this integrated approach, we reinforce our commitment to our students' literacy growth and achievement.

Intermediate Units are designed to be the scalable bridge that translates research into classroom practice - coherently, quickly, and equitably. We help districts implement what the research requires, and it goes far beyond training teachers to deliver explicit, systematic instruction in literacy. We build the capacity of reading coaches, Reading Specialists, professional learning communities, building principals, and curriculum leaders to support classroom teachers with implementing Structured Literacy and Science of Reading practices effectively.

Intermediate Units are also the one sustainable source of support our schools can count on, building the essential relationships for change and system development. Initiative

rollouts, one-time grant funds, and key personnel come and go, but IUs remain a steadfast partner to our districts. IU consultants hold historical knowledge of our district partners and, therefore, are able to provide the trusted system-wide consultation and technical assistance that supports their implementation and sustainability of MTSS literacy outcomes.

What the Commonwealth can do to accelerate this work:

1. Invest in IU-led professional development and reading coach development.

Leverage the expertise of credentialed IU-facilitators, IU literacy partners, and our regional infrastructure to deliver at scale and with cost efficiency. IUs have the ability to strategically use invested funds for contextualized, job-embedded support. This sustained, collaborative approach ensures educators receive the necessary instructional support through mentoring and coaching to strengthen both content knowledge and pedagogical skills.

2. Fund IUs to support the implementation of evidence-based MTSS frameworks across districts.

Ensure high-quality instruction and data-driven intervention design for all students through MTSS-aligned literacy support. By analyzing and integrating literacy data with other student performance indicators, targeted tiered interventions can be identified and reading outcomes can be improved for all.

3. Fully fund Early Intervention and expand access to HeadStart and Pre-K Counts.

Expanding access to high-quality preschool programs significantly boosts reading outcomes by building foundational literacy skills, leading to better later reading scores, reduced special education needs, and stronger academic trajectories, especially for disadvantaged children.

With targeted state support, Intermediate Units can ensure that Structured Literacy becomes the norm in every classroom, and that every child in Pennsylvania, regardless of their background, becomes a confident, proficient reader.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to literacy. I welcome your questions.