



**Testimony to the Senate Majority Policy Committee  
Hearing on Improving Reading Outcomes in Pennsylvania  
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*Dr. Katie Kennedy-Reilly  
Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Technology K-12*

Chairman Argall and members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on improving reading outcomes across the Commonwealth. I am Katie Kennedy-Reilly, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Technology for the Souderton Area School District.

Literacy is foundational to every subject and every future. In an era of rapidly advancing technology, we must humanize education - keeping the whole child at the center and supporting teachers with purposeful systems. Our responsibility is clear: meet every learner where they are, build strong systems, and ensure continuous growth.

Act 135 of 2024 provides an essential foundation for this work. It sets clear expectations for evidence-based instruction and early intervention. Our role as educators is to bring these commitments to life in classrooms and communities - so every child experiences strong teaching and timely support from the very start.

**Personal Perspective**

I speak to you as both a mother of four and as an educator. Each of my children faced unique challenges, many in reading and language. I know the worry a parent feels when a child struggles and I know it personally. As a child, my comprehension was strong but decoding and encoding were difficult. With targeted support, I learned to read.

That experience shaped my career. I earned degrees in elementary and special education, became a reading specialist, and pursued advanced certification in direct, explicit



instruction. Over the years, I have helped hundreds of learners, from young children to adults, break the code of reading. I have seen success at every age. It is never too late to learn to read. I used the same knowledge to partner with my own children's teachers and specialists.

### **Facing Today's Literacy Reality**

Souderton Area School District educates approximately 5,900 students across six municipalities in upper Montgomery County. Our students include multilingual learners, students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, and students receiving special education services. Their starting points vary widely.

This variability is true across Pennsylvania and the nation and the range has widened since the pandemic. Reading scores have declined nationally and in Pennsylvania. Inside school walls this is not abstract data; it is the lived reality of classrooms. We face it with urgency and precision. The entry point of skill has shifted for our youngest learners and that makes our charge clear. Build systems that respond quickly and precisely to student needs. This moment calls for sustained evidence-based action.

Children have always come to school with different experiences, skills, and strategies. Today that scope is wider than ever. This reality calls for two commitments.

- Meet students where they are and ensure continuous growth, even when projections still fall short of grade level expectations.
- Invest in expert teaching so educators have the knowledge, coaching, and tools to provide reading instruction with precision and responsiveness.

This is not lowering expectations; it is facing reality with rigor. We use structured literacy and data-informed interventions to accelerate growth while keeping the whole child and long-term reading confidence at the forefront.



## **Creating a Culture of Reading Everywhere**

Reading is more than a school outcome. It is a shared community practice. We can make literacy visible and accessible in every space where families live, learn, and connect.

- Start early. Embed literacy into pediatric care and early childhood programs so families receive books and guidance at child well visits.
- Meet families where they are. Create literacy hubs and story corners in grocery stores, laundromats, and local businesses.
- Build strong partnerships. Collaborate with libraries, WIC clinics, and health systems to expand book access and family literacy coaching.
- Model the joy of reading. Host community reading hours and workplace reading challenges so children regularly see adults reading for pleasure.

In Souderton, a visitor to kindergarten will see children playing with sounds, linking letters to phonemes, reading decodable texts, and talking about books. In first grade students blend, read, and write words with accuracy and automaticity, then apply learning in connected text. In grades two and three students read increasingly complex texts, build vocabulary and knowledge, and use comprehension strategies that make thinking visible. Teachers speak about students with confidence because they have the tools and time to teach well.

## **WHAT SCHOOLS ARE DOING AND HOW**

### **Universal screening and early intervention**

We screen all students for phonological awareness, decoding, oral language, vocabulary, and fluency. Results inform immediate placement into targeted supports, with progress monitoring every few weeks.

### **Structured literacy for all**

Instruction is systematic, explicit, cumulative, and aligned to the essential components of



reading. Phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary and oral language, and text comprehension.

### **Our English Language Arts program**

Standards-aligned and grounded in research that identifies what matters and what works to develop competent, confident readers and writers. Instruction combines explicit, systematic, intensive, responsive, and multimodal approaches, fostering a lifelong passion for literacy.

### **Professional learning beyond minimum credits**

Teachers engage in ongoing coaching cycles. Literacy leaders model lessons, co-teach, and provide feedback. New teachers have mentors with reading expertise. We focus on translating the science of reading into daily practice.

### **Humanizing data use**

Data is the story of a child. We use it to respond, not to label. Practical dashboards point to the next day's instructional moves.

### **Tiered supports inside the school day**

Multi-tiered systems of support provide daily, skill-based small groups. Interventionists and classroom teachers plan together, so students receive help without missing core instruction.

### **High quality materials and protected time**

We protect an uninterrupted literacy block and provide decodable texts, rich literature, and diverse classroom libraries. Students read and write in every subject.

### **Multiliteracy and media literacy**

Students learn to navigate print and digital texts, evaluate sources, and communicate clearly. This strengthens comprehension, critical thinking, and citizenship.

### **School-led family partnerships and Pre-K alignment**

We host literacy nights and summer book blasts. We partner with libraries and



organizations. With local Pre-K providers, we align early screening, progress monitoring, and foundational instruction for a seamless transition to kindergarten.

### **Specialization and Tier 1 Instruction**

Today's teachers are expected to be experts in reading, math, behavior, fine motor development, relationship building, and more. These demands are immense and growing. While we deeply value and rely on our reading specialists and other experts, many needs occur in Tier 1 instruction, the core classroom experience. We cannot intervene our way out of a Tier 1 gap.

We should explore specialized licensure pathways and classroom models that allow teachers to focus on content delivery in their area of strength, such as early literacy or mathematics, while maintaining strong collaboration across disciplines. This shift may mean our youngest learners experience more than one teacher during the school day. Any model we design must balance instructional expertise with relational continuity, so children feel known, supported, and connected. The ultimate goal remains the same - develop competent, confident readers and writers who carry a lifelong passion for literacy.

### **Remediation and Continuous Growth**

I have worked with hundreds of learners who had not mastered decoding and encoding. With direct, explicit instruction, and consistent practice, they learned they could read and it changed their trajectory. Remediation is possible at any age. The message matters. Reading growth does not stop at any single grade level. What matters most is building systems that meet students where they are and ensuring continuous progress toward literacy mastery.

### **Policy & Possibility: Scaling Literacy Together**

To sustain and scale this work, schools need supportive policies that turn research into reality. The following actions align with Act 135 and could strengthen statewide implementation:



## **1. Invest in coaching-centered professional learning**

Fund job-embedded coaching cycles so teachers translate reading science into daily instruction with fidelity.

## **2. Strengthen teacher licensure and micro-credentials**

Require demonstrated knowledge of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, with structured literacy and coaching endorsements.

## **3. Provide a vetted toolkit**

Publish curated, evidence-aligned materials and universal screeners that meet Act 135 and support MTSS (universal screening, diagnostics, tiered intervention, progress monitoring).

## **4. Seed community literacy grants**

Support birth through Pre-K book programs, pediatric well visit book distributions, grocery store reading kiosks, and library-district partnerships to make reading visible everywhere.

## **Closing Commitment**

Schools are proud to lead the path to better reading outcomes with universal screening, structured literacy, coaching, humanized data, tiered supports, high quality materials, multiliteracy integration, and family partnership. When we do these things consistently, and pair them with community-wide literacy efforts, we build systems that help every child grow as a reader and writer.

Your support and funding make it possible to sustain these efforts, scale what works, and ensure that every child in Pennsylvania has access to expert teaching and strong systems from the start. Together, we can create a future where literacy opens doors to opportunity, confidence, and joy.

Thank you for your time and for supporting the actions that help schools deliver for children.