

THE DROP OUT CRISIS IN PHILADELPHIA

Center for Literacy: Testimony

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On behalf of the Center for Literacy, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the needs of youth at risk of dropping out of school or those who have already dropped out because of low literacy levels. During the 2005-2006 fiscal year, CFL worked with over 1000 young people, age 16-21. These were high school drop outs, both male and female, representing all races. These young people came to CFL with goals – wanting a high school diploma or GED. As one so aptly stated, “There’s somebody I want to be.”

Who are these youth? They are under 21, and seventy seven percent (77%) were reading below a sixth grade level and eighty seven and one half percent (87.5%) had math skills below the sixth grade level. Some were in special education, while others were low achievers. Many have adult responsibilities as parents and workers and need support as they search for housing and strive to overcome barriers. In many instances, their case worker or parent calls CFL or the School District to find out about the opportunities available to them.

The Center for Literacy’s citywide programs are open to these youth in the neighborhood centers, in community programs, and in family literacy programs. Some of the classes are designed particularly with youth in mind; in others, the youth are integrated with adult learners of all ages. Starting in July 2005, literacy coaching was available in the E3 (Education, Employment, and Empowerment) Centers.

At the same time, the Center for Literacy was developing a Toolkit for Serving Out-of-School Youth with Low Literacy Levels as part of the City of Philadelphia’s response to the challenge of working with struggling youth using funding from the Youth Transition Funders Group collaborative. The research and professional literature were analyzed for this project, and it can be summarized as follows:

Serving the literacy needs of OSY, particularly those reading below the sixth grade level, is a complex task. Adolescence is a time for upheaval for the vast majority of people, and it is made more difficult by the kinds of situations that require youth to leave school early and require further literacy training. However, if teachers serving the OSY population come to better understand how adolescents develop, how they are different from adults, and how to provide quality reading instruction to meet their needs, these learners will be better served regardless of the educational setting.

The toolkit contains a Literature Review including research as well as reflections of the evaluator and several teachers, a professional development plan, standards and indicators of a quality program, and sample lesson plans. Examples of the standards/indicators of critical importance to a quality

educational program for low-literate youth include: “Direct reading instruction is systematic and structured” (Standard #6), which must work hand in hand with Standard #7, “Instructional methods capture the learner’s attention and actively engage him/her in the learning process” and “Class size is kept small (Standard #12). Quality staff development is critical to the literacy skills development of these youth.

In implementing this toolkit, what have we found out? First of all, in order for students to be successful in diploma granting programs they must first be equipped with the necessary skill base. Without these foundational skills, they are likely to once again become disengaged. Second, to enable these youth to continue in the program, they require a system of providing caring adult guidance. The under-funded adult education system does not enable the small class size or the supportive case management that these youth require. The School District needs to both a) welcome them back and b) provide options (or what is being called multiple pathways). The E3 Centers and other special OSY programs including a literacy hub model and a bridge program offer great promise in getting into place the critical elements that lead to success for these youth.

There is great deal of work ahead for all of us if we are to provide hope to the thousands of youth who need our help. We believe that collaborative partnerships are essential in creating, implementing and bringing to scale the educational options being discussed. We implore the leadership of Philadelphia to reflect on the impact low literacy has on our region’s economic health and the power of literacy in helping youth contribute to the future of our great city. We know that a high school graduate will earn, on the average over \$7,800 more per year than a dropout. We know what it takes to provide quality services that will enable these students, who have made a conscious decision to return to an educational program to improve their skills and be successful, but we need your support.

Today, I specifically thank you for holding this hearing and ask you to 1) increase public awareness about the dropout crises by continuing to address this issue by tracking progress; and 2) create high-quality workplace internships for Philadelphia youth including the overaged and undercredentialed. The \$3.5 million invested in these internships have the potential to improve academic achievement while increasing access to adult mentoring and job readiness.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.