



**Testimony for the Governor's Education Reform Commission on Student Achievement and
Family Engagement
Submitted by Helene Kramer, Chair
United Partners for Public Education in Buffalo**

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My name is Helene Kramer. I'm a former president of the Buffalo Board of Education and current Chair of United Partners for Public Education in Buffalo, a relatively new (founded June 2011), informal coalition of approximately forty organizations and individuals committed to ensuring a world-class education for Buffalo's public school children.

In a group exercise over the past several months, United Partners (UP) identified *literacy* as the systemic issue on which we would work because it would have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Literacy is the very foundation of academic success. Yet over 40% of Buffalo's children start Kindergarten in Buffalo without the foundational skills they need for reading. And by third grade, when children are supposed to have mastered reading, only 28% of 4th graders are proficient according to 2009-10 ELA scores. Educators tell us that children must 'learn to read' by third grade so they can 'read to learn' after that. It should come as no surprise that as children move through higher grades in school, those that are not reading well are more likely to *act out* thus adding to suspension rates, *stay out* adding to low rates of student attendance, and ultimately *drop out* of school. Students who don't read well are more likely to be incarcerated, live in poverty and less likely to be employed with enough money to sustain a family. Low literacy is a serious issue directly related to improving students' life chances.

In Buffalo we have had the good fortune of having Early Reading First funds (2007-2011) from the U.S. Department of Education to develop, in partnership with five Bethel Head Starts, an intensive program of literacy interventions to prepare approximately 300 three- and four-year olds per year for Kindergarten. This program, going into its sixth year this Fall, has allowed the lead agency and a UP partner, Read to Succeed Buffalo, to provide external and embedded professional development with Bethel's supervisory and teaching staff (teachers, teacher assistants and teacher aides). With permission from the Superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools, Read to Succeed has been tracking children's progress in reading from the time they entered Bethel Head Start as three-year olds through third grade in Buffalo Public Schools.

Although there was a gap of one year and three months for three-year olds when the program started in 2007 at Bethel Head Start, the children ended the year one month ahead of national norms for Kindergarten readiness. Yet while the children were assessed as "ready" for Kindergarten when they first entered, Buffalo's data shows a decline in reading performance from Kindergarten through third grade, even among those children who were assessed as 'ready.' Nationally labeled as "first grade fade-out," this phenomenon is acute in Buffalo, with 72% of Kindergarteners reading above benchmark and then dropping to approximately 28% proficiency district-wide in ELA performance in 3rd grade (2009-10). This drop-off may be attributed, at least in part, to dramatic differences between **parent involvement, classroom organization and teaching style in early care and education programs and in elementary schools**. The lack of a continuum of practice illustrates the case for increased professionally embedded literacy supports through a birth to age eight continuum of practice and assessment.

Pre-literacy interventions that have helped preschool children in Bethel Head Start include a literacy-rich environment (access to books and writing materials, dramatic play and reading aloud, offering classroom strategies that build vocabulary, asking questions to determine whether children comprehend

what they're reading, etc.). Also critical to children's success in reading is professional development for the teaching staff related to language and literacy development in young children, strategies to use in the classroom, embedded coaching, frequent assessments with data that identify children's progress and shortfalls, strategic plans to differentiate instruction for each child based on the data in reaching age- and developmentally-appropriate benchmarks, and parent engagement to reinforce the learning at home.

Resources Required

Resources required to address low literacy in the early grades would require a continuation of these interventions through the creation and placement of an early childhood literacy specialist in each of the 33 elementary schools in the district serving pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade. The early childhood literacy specialist's focus would be to support teachers with the development and implementation of assessments and the conversion of the district to DIBELS Next and Common Core State Standards. School year 2012-13 would be a perfect time to implement this type of support because of the State's implementation of the Common Core and the district's move to DIBELS Next.

The cost of each 10-month position would be approximately \$75,000 including supervision and support. UP would suggest starting in pre-Kindergarten, supporting the teacher and students in that grade level and then move with the cohort through to the third grade. By 2016, this position would serve as a maintenance support in the early grades, coaching teachers and supporting formative assessment and progress monitoring as new children enter their classroom and supporting students throughout the early childhood continuum. The Early Childhood Literacy Specialist would also support the creation of student assessment information for parents that would support their child's specific learning needs at

home. We believe that by the 2015-16 school year, third grade reading scores will show a measurable increase.

Children will benefit from implementation of early childhood literacy engagement specialists in pre-Kindergarten through third grade in three ways: 1) children who are coming out of high quality child care or Head Start Programs will benefit because there will be more continuity of support and appropriate interactions in their transition from preschool to Kindergarten, 2) parents will continue to be supported and informed of their child's individual progress through the sharing of the benchmark, mid-year and year-end literacy assessments and DIBLES Next data, 3) children's individual learning needs will be supported with data driven strategies based on their individual strengths and weaknesses that will enable every student to improve their literacy skills.

The early childhood literacy specialist would provide the professional development and assessment supports teachers are currently lacking and critical to building on the gains made in preschool, supporting the children in the classroom and at home.

This is exactly the type of student-centered support that Title 1 and SES funding should already be supporting.

United Partners believes that investing in literacy for young children up-front will save millions of dollars in remediation and loss of self-esteem in children, while giving them the foundation they need for school success and a higher quality of life. As a group, United Partners is ready to work with community *and schools* to strengthen literacy skills for our most vulnerable children. United Partners strongly urges Governor Cuomo and the NYS Education Reform Committee, to assist Buffalo's children by addressing what we believe is the most important systemic challenge toward closing the achievement gap.