

4

Emily Dexter, Ed.D.
9 Fenno Street, Cambridge 02138
617-460-1597
Public Comment
Cambridge City Council Meeting
February 10, 2014

Good evening. My name is Emily Dexter, 9 Fenno Street in Cambridge. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I'd speaking about item 5 on the City Manager's Agenda related to an Early Education Services Task Force. First, I am glad that on the list of Task Force participants there are four professionals who work directly with young children, but the other 11 participants are either K-12 educators or city administrators. This seems very unbalanced, and I encourage you, in addition to early childhood practitioners and program directors, to seek out a Ph.D. level expert in early childhood development.

In addition, I want to highlight the research that shows that the positive effects of early childhood education on low-income children will fade over time if the children do not then enroll in a high-quality elementary program. While I believe that our elementary schools are good and our elementary school teachers very good, in my opinion our resources in the Kindergarten through 3rd grade are inadequate for the task of teaching all low-income children to read on grade level by the end of 3rd grade. The evidence for this is that while 82% of our Paid Lunch students scored proficient on the 3rd grade MCAS Reading exam last year, only 37% of low-income students scored Proficient. This gap of more than 40 percentage points is roughly the same as the gap 12 years ago. While I do not believe that MCAS tests give us very useful information about individual students, teachers, or schools, I do believe they can give us a useful picture of achievement gaps between groups and overall district-wide achievement.

In terms of our K-3 resources, our kindergarten classrooms range in size from 15-20 students, and the lucky ones are in those in smaller classes. First and second grade classes also range widely from 12-22 students. Our demographic profile suggests that in a classroom of 20 students, 13 will be children of color, almost half will be low income or poor, five will speak a language other than English at home, and four will be identified as having a disability. And this describes only demographic information. It is likely that many of these children live in a single-parent homes, perhaps have had one or more traumatic experiences as a young child, have a parent who suffers depression, or a parent who is unemployed. There are children who have one or two of these risk factors, and children who have many of these risk factors. Many of these children will be very smart, but will not have had a chance to learn the pre-literacy, socioemotional, or behavioral skills necessary to learn to read in school.

Whatever we have been offering students in these grades for the past dozen years has not helped close the gap. While there is little solid evidence that a longer school day raises the achievement of elementary school children, there is research showing that class sizes of 15-7 children, and early intervention services provided by reading specialists does increase achievement for low-income children. In addition, there is evidence that foreign language study contributes to literacy learning because students learn the metalinguistic skills necessary to read and discuss words.

I will note, as an example of overly thin resources, the fact that each of our schools has only one Reading Recovery teacher, whether that is a small school like the Haggerty with only 245 students, or a large school like King Open with 350 students. When more than half of our students are not reading proficiently at the end of third grade, it is clear that we need to do much more to provide these students with individualized and small group attention that one teacher cannot provide in a classroom of 20 students.

I encourage you, in considering the size of the school budget this year, to consider what resources would be required to teach all low-income children to read by the end of third grade, and whether Cambridge is willing or able to provide those resources. We have obviously made very little progress on closing the 3rd grade gap in reading skills over the past decade, despite many excellent early education programs and home-based programs.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Perle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and "P".