

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

## Children and literacy

This month's Take Charge of Your Health Today spotlight is on children and literacy. That includes how important it is for Black children to reach a reading milestone at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when students shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Early literacy is tied to long-term school success, graduation rates, and future job opportunities. We asked Carlos Carter, head of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, about how literacy skills help to empower Black children and families and promote education equity.

**Q: In this month's series, University of Pittsburgh's Dr. Moye talks about a divide in the reading levels between white students and Black students and how social determinants of health — such as access to housing, food, and educational resources — play a part in this performance gap. Can you expand on this?**

**Carlos:** Social determinants of health shape the overall environment in which children grow and learn. For example, frequent moves and housing instability can disrupt a child's education. Access to nutritious food is vital for cognitive development and concentration in school. Lack of educational resources, such as quality learning materials, widens the divide between white children and Black children.

The Urban League is addressing these barriers in our daily work. One of them is the lack of books for children. To make up for that, we're providing gateway books, such as comics, that feature familiar childhood characters from movies and television to children at our Family Support Centers in Northview Heights, Duquesne, and East Hills. Through our work, we aim to help children have access to reading material, so they have a better chance of being successful in school.

**Q: In addition to a shortage of Black people and characters presented in school learning materials, there's also a lack of Black teachers and administrative staff. Why is it so important to change that disparity, so it's more equal?**

**Carlos:** Because representation matters! It fosters a sense of belonging and validates the students' experiences and identities.

Increasing the number of Black teachers can provide role models for Black students. Diverse books in the curriculum are equally important as they reflect the students' backgrounds and experiences, promote engagement, and create a deeper connection to learning. The books also help to combat stereotypes and broaden all students' understanding of different cultures and perspectives.

The Urban League advocates for more diverse hiring practices within schools and supports programs that focus on recruiting and retaining Black teachers. It's important for our children to see themselves represented in their schools' positions of authority. When they don't, it adds to their disenfranchisement in the education process. It also increases the cultural divide between administrators and teachers and their students. Many of their teachers, especially those from entirely different backgrounds, don't understand the challenges our children face daily as they live in "survival mode," which doesn't allow them to prioritize learning.

We applaud efforts to work with schools to diversify their curriculum by introducing books and materials that reflect the rich diversity of our communities. Programs like the 3Rs (Reading, Racial Equity, and Relationships) are key to providing racially affirming books that counteract the negative narratives in traditional educational resources.

**Q: Along those lines, the Urban League also offers programs to help minority scholars in Pittsburgh during their academic journeys. Tell us about them.**

**Carlos:** We offer several programs that support minority scholars throughout their academic careers. The programs aim to bridge the academic divide and provide the necessary tools for success. For example, in addition to our Family Support Centers, our Center of Economic Self-Reliance runs our Black Male Leadership Development Institute and Black Female Development Institute (BMLDI and BFLDI) which connects 9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade young adults with each other and trusted community mentors.

Through these comprehensive programs, the Urban League helps Black and other minority scholars overcome barriers and achieve their educational goals, contributing to a more equitable and just region.



CARLOS T. CARTER

## 3Rs program empowers Black children through gift of reading

One of the greatest and most transformative gifts we can give Black children is a love of reading.

Reading promotes language and thinking skills and leads to academic achievement. It sparks creativity. It helps kids develop empathy and understanding. It improves concentration and discipline.

For kids, reading well by the end of third grade is not only an educational milestone, but also key to lifelong health. This critical life skill helps them with all other learning. It's so important that if children reach it, they're four times more likely to graduate from high school.

According to a 2022 study, 12% of Pennsylvania's Black fourth graders scored at or above goal on national reading tests. Their White counterparts scored 51%. This gap is, in part, the result of structural racism like inequitable school funding and lack of culturally relevant teacher training, as well as unequal access to educational resources, housing, health care, and employment.

These complex structural issues demand solutions focused on dismantling the white-centric nature of our education system.

One solution got its start in 2018. At the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, as part of the Early School-Age Scientific Committee, a literacy intervention began to take shape for Black students in Allegheny County in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Called the 3Rs, the intervention is part of The Pittsburgh Study and stands for Reading, Racial Equity, and Relationships. It's based on research about what increases a child's literacy development. That includes high-quality literacy experiences, racial literacy, and adults who are involved with children's literacy at all stages of their development and in all places, not just in the classroom.

Founded on this research, the catalyst for creating the

3Rs relied on community input. "For too long, Black children haven't reached grade-level reading milestones," notes Dr. Shallegra Moye, Associate Director for Equity, Justice, & Strategic Initiatives at the Office of Child Development and 3Rs Co-Lead. "To create an effective strategy to change that, we had to have input from Black community members."

During the planning stage of the 3Rs, former Program Director Sharon Geibel listened to educators, parents, taxpayers, clergy, and literacy organizations in the community. "They helped us develop a program with joy and depth — one that our county's Black children and families deserve," explains Dr. Moye.

To foster a child's love of reading, the 3Rs team works with students' families, classroom teachers, community organizations, and local leaders. "Everything we do is in lockstep with the community," says Dr. Moye. "Literacy doesn't develop in a single setting, like a classroom, but in the child's ecosystem."

At the center of 3Rs are high-quality, racially affirming picture books that promote student, teacher, and parent learning and counter the anti-Blackness narratives of our country's educational policies, procedures, resources, and practices.

For students, the books are identity-affirming. They feature Black children, families, and communities in warm, joyful, and genuine situations. They focus on topics like history, justice, and action. They help students develop a strong sense of self and an understanding of the world they live in, including the complexities of race.

"In these books, Black children discover Black characters who are doing amazing things," says Dr. Moye. "Readers share the characters' hopes, dreams, and desires. Each book's identity-affirming message counteracts the negative messages Black children implicitly and explic-



DR. SHALLEGRA MOYE

itly receive about their world and their place in it."

Educators — 95% of whom are White in Allegheny County — receive the books at no cost. The stories help teachers and staff uncover, question, and understand their own feelings about race, including their biases, beliefs, and positions on justice and equity.

"In our 3Rs professional learning, educators become more comfortable discussing race among themselves, so they can talk effectively about it with students, parents, and caregivers," explains Dr. Moye. "When this happens, meaningful relationships form between teachers, students, and families. Everyone can work together to nurture a love of reading." She continues, "The 3Rs are interdependent. You can't have one without the others."

In addition to educators, parents also receive picture books, as do community-based, literacy organizations. Some of the books are gifted to families at community events.

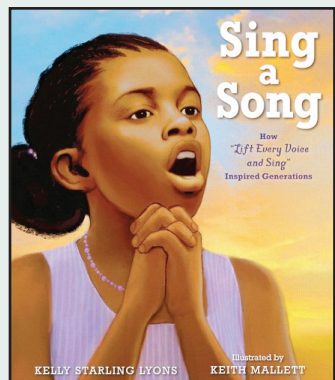
"Parents are of primary importance to the 3Rs team," says Dr. Moye. "Our goal is to help parents and caregivers learn about what is happening within schools, in support of their and their children's school reading experiences."

Dr. Moye notes that 3Rs book distribution is also a way to flood our region with high quality racially-affirming picture books that help all readers see Black children and families with agency. "Racism is a pollution we ALL

breathe in. These books are a filtration system," she says.

In 2023, 375 hours of 3R professional learning took place in seven Pittsburgh schools within 4 districts. About 4,300 students received picture books. For the upcoming school year, the 3Rs will "graduate" some of its current schools to engage other districts that are interested.

Dr. Moye encourages parents and caregivers to find out if their child's school is a 3Rs partner. "Talk to your child's teacher or principal.



Ask questions during family night and at other events," she says. "You are your child's best advocate."

Also important is reading with children regularly outside of school. This simple, but profound act deepens relationships with children, builds language skills, and sends a message that reading is fun and worthwhile.

Reading together also creates conversations about what the child is seeing and feeling about the story. (As an aid to parents and caregivers, the 3Rs team has put together a YouTube video titled the 9 Tips for Reading to Children.)

"Reading is truly the gift that keeps on giving long into adulthood and the 3Rs is not just for Black children," says Dr. Moye. "When any child reads books that affirm their identity, the identities of those around them, and their lived experiences, we ALL benefit through the power of collective action."

## Parents' personal experience inspires creation of Young Dreamers' Bookstore

In 2016, as the parents of two active boys, Dr. Nosakhare Griffin-EL (pictured left) and Dr. Eliada Griffin-EL (right) searched diligently to find fiction and non-fiction books with Black main characters.

Nosakhare and Eliada wanted the books to promote diverse heroes, creativity, and imaginative thinking, as well as innovative problem solving and social and emotional wellness. Realizing this was a challenge many parents faced, the couple sprung into action.

Determined to find unique stories that had the power to inspire their sons to dream, Nosakhare and Eliada turned their frustration into motivation and began searching.

Their efforts led them to find great authors and illustrators who create unique

stories that stimulate young minds.

In 2022, they founded the Young Dreamers' Bookstore, a mobile book retail startup for young children and their families.

The Young Dreamers' Bookstore offers a large collection of children books with characters of African descent from throughout the world that are written by talented and culturally diverse authors.

Books are chosen to normalize cultural inclusion and spark children's imaginations and self-confidence. Everyone who works at The Young Dreamers' Bookstore recognizes the power of books throughout a child's life and is committed to bringing children meaningful, inclusive stories that help shape how they see themselves and the world.



The Young Dreamers' Bookstore is a spin-off of the Dreamocracy Learning Lab, which is an early childhood literacy social enterprise that provides innovative learning experiences that are book-enabled and dream-centered.

The bookstore also draws inspiration for book content from the global community of more than 1000 passion-

ate members in its private Facebook group called The Young Dreamers Book Club.

Visit the bookstore's website at [www.youngdreamersbookstore.com](http://www.youngdreamersbookstore.com) for more information about learning labs, book fairs, booklists and recommendations, events — and to shop an amazing selection of books for your young dreamer.

## Project SEEKS SES supports students' social and emotional health

SEEKS SES stands for *Supporting Expansion and Enhancement of K-12 School-Based Social, Emotional Supports*. It's a grant-funded partnership between the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU).

With input from its partner organizations, SEEKS SES supports the social and emotional health of students in 10 Allegheny County school districts, including behavior and mental health issues and trauma that have grown

more challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEEKS SES also assists three higher education institutions — Chatham University, Duquesne University, and Pitt — to make sure Allegheny county has a strong pipeline of professionals who work in social-emotional, behavior, and student wellness health fields. This includes teachers, social workers, school psychologists, and others.

One example of this assistance is taking place at Chatham. With SEEKS SES support, Chatham is offering 40

scholarships to students who are interested in obtaining their *Social, Emotional and Wellness for Individuals Serving Youth Certificate*.

Since SEEKS SES started, the partnership and its participants, under the leadership of **Shannon Fagan**, Project Coordinator, have:

Outlined participating school districts' strengths, needs, and areas for improvement, and helped to support wellness initiatives that focus on chronic absenteeism, violence intervention, wellness methods and spaces, student

fitness rooms, and more.

Mapped a plan for pre-professional placements in areas like social work, psychology, and counseling.

SEEKS SES' goal is twofold: Help schools put into action a sustainable, evidence-based, and promising practice programming that addresses the growing needs of vulnerable students in the aftermath of COVID-19. Ensure there are professionals in place to help improve and sustain students' overall wellness now and into the future.