Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to speak here today on the literacy crisis in Houston… and what the Houston Independent School District is doing about it.

It is, indeed, a crisis.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, one in five adults in our city is functionally illiterate.

One in five!

(Pause)
That has worrisome implications for Houston.

Ours is the largest school district in the state.

It’s the seventh largest in the nation.

We have more than 200,000 students, 80 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged.

Reaching all of them, and connecting them with the resources they need to improve academically, is a huge task.

HISD is determined to end the literacy crisis in Houston, but it will take all of us – both individually and together as a community – to accomplish that goal.

That’s why the school district has a holistic plan to engage students, parents, teachers and community members… to ensure that all students are reading at or above grade level.

It’s called Literacy by 3.

Its mission is to have every child reading and writing with fluency by the end of third grade.

But it also reaches our students at every level who are struggling with reading.

Under this plan, each HISD campus has a trained literacy leader, to assist the neediest students, and to help ensure we have uniform standards and strict accountability district-wide.

Literacy by 3 includes phonics-based instruction, screening of students’ reading level and growth, and real-world projects for students, such as how to write a letter to an elected official.

Students will also benefit from improved technology:

HISD’s movement to a digital curriculum will mean teachers can personalize students’ instruction, addressing their individual needs.

We also recently extended our partnership with “myON,” a reading website that gives students access to thousands of enhanced digital books and literacy tools, for free.

But they’re not the only ones learning something new.

We’re also teaching the teachers!

The district is providing specialized training for teachers, showing them a variety of techniques to help them engage and inspire their students.

For example, on a recent Saturday, HISD sponsored a pre-K through fifth grade literacy summit for 850 of our teachers.

They heard not only from nationally recognized experts on literacy, but also from fellow HISD teachers who shared their experiences and expertise with their colleagues.

The bottom line: in the fight to improve literacy, the earlier you start, the better,

even *before* students can read and write.

Early childhood education is key.

It’s much more cost effective to invest in our children up-front, than to offer remediation later.

That’s why the HISD has called on the state to fund full-day pre-K for every student.

And that’s why we have a school-readiness program that brings instructors to the homes of preschoolers, to help parents work with their children.

Parents are their child’s first teacher.

We must partner with them early-on to teach children the importance of reading.

We must lead by example, and make reading a priority.

A good place to start is with our Read Houston Read program.

I encourage each of you to volunteer your time to this program, and take a half hour or an hour each week to mentor a child.

The HISD has identified nearly 300 first-grade classes at more than 50 schools where children are in desperate need of an adult mentor.

You read to them, and listen to *them* read to *you*.

You can do this in person or over the internet.

Or maybe you can read or speak to a class, or sponsor a school activity.

Lead a drive for book donations.

It’s such a small commitment of time, but it can have a huge impact on their self-esteem, their ability to learn, and their ultimate success in life.

And *their* success is *our* success.

(Pause)

I am a native Houstonian.

I have five children.

I am the mother and grandmother of students in HISD.

So I have a very personal stake in the success of our plans and programs.

But whether you’re a parent, or not, you also have a lot at stake.

These children represent our city’s future work force.

They will influence Houston’s economic health… and our quality of life.

They will become the leaders of our city, state, and nation.

They have to read to succeed.

Improving these students’ literacy is not just in the hands of our teachers.

We must each step up, as parents and members of the community, to guide the next generation.

We hope that you, as members of the Houston Economy Council and the Greater Houston Partnership, will partner with *us…* and join in HISD’s efforts to improve Houston’s literacy.

Read to your kids.

Support more state funding for early childhood education.

Get involved.

Volunteer, and spread the word.

Thank you.