



# LITERACY

# IS FREEDOM

*A report by Parent Shield Fort Worth*







## About Parent Shield Fort Worth

Parent Shield Fort Worth is a movement by and for Fort Worth parents who demand excellence in Fort Worth ISD schools. Led by Trenace Dorsey-Hollins, a fifth-generation Fort Worth resident, and proud public school parent, Parent Shield believes every child deserves an excellent education with a mission to make a high-quality education reality for every child in Tarrant County. The foundation of this work is rooted in advocacy, awareness, and providing tools to Black and Brown families to disrupt systemic inequities that fuel generational trauma.

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## Gratitude & Acknowledgements

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Thank you for your partnership and for rolling up your sleeves for the parents and students of Fort Worth.



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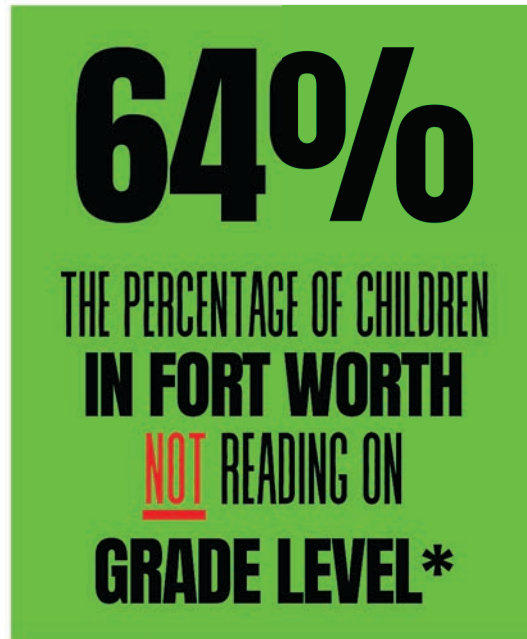
PARENT SHIELD'S RECOMMENDATIONS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents and caretakers are either given an inaccurate report of their child's performance or information related to their children's grade levels is provided in a confusing format. Meanwhile, children continue to fall behind.

Parent Shield Fort Worth prides itself on meeting parents where they are. This means staff spends much of their time knocking on doors, speaking to parents at schools, libraries, and community events. From this grassroots approach to building relationships, Parent Shield hears directly from parents in Fort Worth's most marginalized communities about their dreams and challenges.

After listening to dozens of parents, Parent Shield's leader Trenace Dorsey-Hollins, believed that an independent literacy assessment would be necessary and a powerful data point in the hands of parents. If parents get real time, honest feedback from certified teachers about their children's skill level, it would motivate them to equip themselves to support their children and advocate for others.



Dorsey-Hollins also gleaned from the information collected, that parents are unaware of their children's reading level and discovered problems with truth-in-reporting. The latter stems from report cards offering an inaccurate account of a child's true skill level. To wit, A's and B's do not equate to fully literate students. To address these challenges, in July 2023, Parent Shield leaders decided to take a comprehensive approach to tackle Fort Worth's literacy crisis, a one-stop shop. Additionally, the campaign would include an intergenerational component, educating parents while children are assessed.

In channeling the biblical verse **"the truth will set you free,"** Parent Shield's Freedom July campaign to address the literacy crisis in Tarrant County was successful from start to finish.

\*According to the 2022-23 STAAR Results



# LITERACY: FREEDOM'S BARGAINING CHIP

Throughout American history, literacy has often been wielded as a potent bargaining chip for freedom, empowerment, and societal advancement. The ability to read and write has frequently served as a gateway to liberation from oppression, a means of asserting one's rights and agency, and a tool for fostering social progress.

Denying access to literacy has been a deliberate and systematic tool used as an oppressive practice rooted in the recognition that education and literacy could empower marginalized groups, potentially leading to a greater understanding of their rights, identity, and a means of resistance against their oppressors. Even more specifically, enslaved Black people in the 19th century understood that acquiring literacy was a step towards self-liberation, allowing marginalized groups to demand their rightful place in society, transcending the boundaries that had previously confined them. Despite these restrictions, some enslaved individuals risked severe punishments to attain literacy. They recognized that literacy could be a source of empowerment, allowing the enslaved to communicate covertly, plan escapes, and document their experiences.

Even after the abolition of slavery, efforts to deny access to education persisted through discriminatory policies such as segregated schools and limited resources for Black communities. The Jim Crow era further entrenched educational inequalities, denying Black individuals the same educational opportunities as their white counterparts. Literacy was required as a prerequisite for voting, yet the same society often withheld access to education and deliberately denied Black people the opportunity to learn to read. This continued with a system of segregated schools that were severely underfunded and under-resourced, continuing to play literacy as a bargaining chip to freedom.





In the face of such adversity, the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century emerged as a response to these injustices. The struggle for equal education and literacy was intertwined with the fight for broader civil rights. Additionally, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as waves of immigrants from various countries, including Mexico and other Latin American nations, arrived in the United States, they also encountered continued discrimination and marginalization. Many of these immigrants faced language barriers and were often relegated to low-paying jobs and segregated neighborhoods. In many cases, schools did not accommodate Spanish-speaking students, and as a result, educational opportunities were limited. The lack of access to education and English-language instruction hindered Latino immigrants from acquiring the literacy skills necessary to fully participate in society.

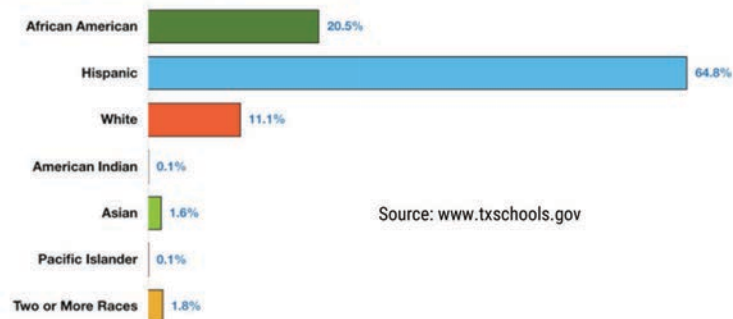
Across black and brown communities nationwide, literacy continues to be a persistent challenge rooted in historical inequities and contemporary socio-economic disparities. Decades of systemic discrimination, unequal access to quality education, lack of proper training and curriculum and limited resources have contributed to lower literacy rates. In essence, denying access to literacy has been and continues to be a strategy employed to maintain power dynamics and control. It underscores the deeply entrenched nature of racism in American history and emphasizes the transformative potential of education and literacy as tools of freedom and liberation for marginalized communities. This report examines the system and state of literacy in one such community in Fort Worth, Texas.

# THE STATE OF LITERACY IN FORT WORTH

The City of Fort Worth is home to a diverse educational landscape, comprising schools from 12 distinct independent school districts and 12 public charter networks. This educational network collectively serves a student population exceeding 160,000 within the city's geographical confines. Notably, Fort Worth ISD accommodates around 76,000 students, while the remaining 75,000 students are enrolled in other public school districts. Additionally, approximately 13,000 students are part of public charter schools, contributing to the dynamic and multifaceted educational environment in the city.

Fort Worth ISD being a large, urban district, it enjoys a racially and socioeconomically diverse enrollment of nearly 75,000 students. Over 80 percent of the students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and 10 percent are special education students.

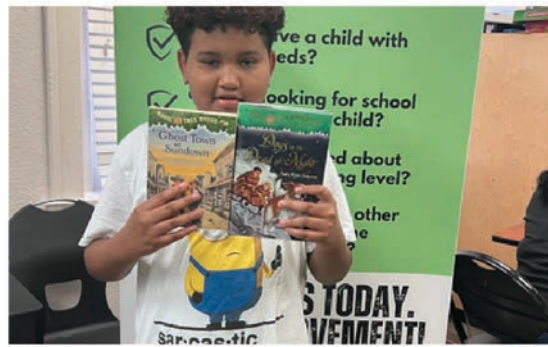
Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



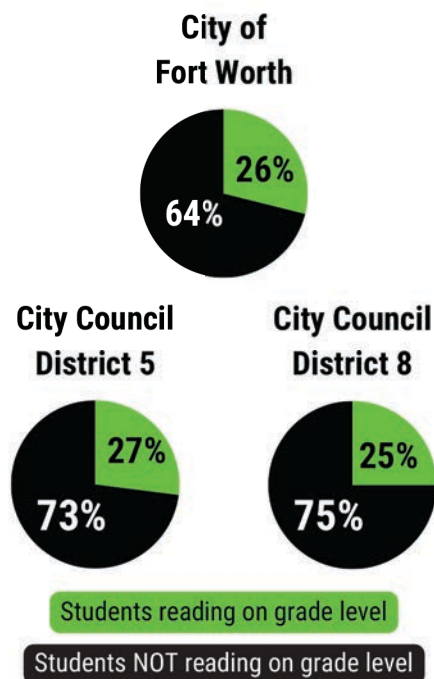
In 2016, a collaborative effort between Fort Worth ISD's leadership and the city introduced an ambitious objective: to ensure that all third-grade students achieve grade-level reading proficiency by the year 2025. However, after seven years, including the challenges posed by a pandemic, the 2022 STAAR results revealed that only 38 percent of third-grade students in Fort Worth ISD were reading on par with their grade level. This figure marked a marginal increase from 34 percent in 2017, indicating a persistent gap between the initial goal and the current reality.







The school district has attempted to make significant strides to address low performance across grade levels and the ever-widening gaps among racial groups. However, the most recent STAAR results show a decrease in students reading at and above grade level, specifically in two City Council districts.

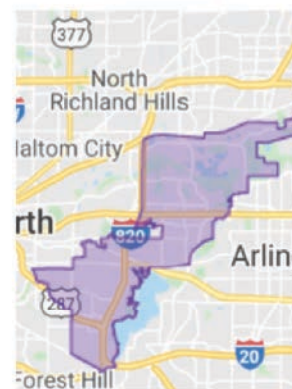


### Current Community Efforts

There are and have been reading efforts that have been deployed to address the literacy crisis in Tarrant County. A quick Google search and discussions with community leaders lead to Read Fort Worth, 1000 Books Before Kindergarten, and the Mayor’s Summer Reading Challenge. While all are worthy efforts to amplify the importance of reading, none address parents’ concerns about their children reading on grade level and truth-in-reporting. Most importantly, no organization offers one-to-one consultations about how best to support their child’s reading journey.

## DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

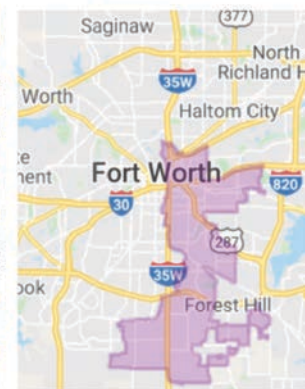
### City Council District 5



**City Council Member**  
Gyna Bivens

District 5 covers a wide section of East Fort Worth. There are 23 public schools that are part of Council District 5, serving over 10,000 students. (2021 Data)

### City Council District 8



**City Council Member**  
Chris Nettles

District 8 covers a predominately Southeast Fort Worth. There are 34 public schools that are part of Council District 8, serving nearly 20,000 students. (2021 Data)

# FREEDOM JULY INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, Parent Shield parents sat down with Fort Worth Mayor Mattie Parker to discuss the city's literacy challenges. During that conversation, Parent Shield Powerful Parent, Melony Watson, broke down into tears talking about her third grader who consistently received the A-B honor roll when she saw her struggling to read. She questioned, *"I just started crying because I had A-B honor roll certificates for my baby that couldn't read. How is my child on the A-B honor roll when she can't read?"* Since that conversation with the Mayor, Parent Shield had conversations with dozens of parents, many who are 100 percent sure their child is on grade-level, and many others who do not know or have a hunch that something is wrong. In any case, Parent Shield set out on a mission to dig deeper and uncover the truth.

In July 2023, Parent Shield decided to produce a triage setting for parents and children and take it on the road. During the month of July, nine literacy clinics were located strategically throughout Fort Worth City Council Districts 5 and 8, the districts with the lowest literacy levels in the city. The clinics were open to students in Kindergarten to sixth grade (K-6).

Parent Shield designed the clinical approach, known as the Literacy Check-Up, with the intention of replicating the experience of visiting a doctor for a comprehensive health assessment. This format was chosen to provide individuals with a familiar framework, where they could undergo a "check-up" focused on literacy, much like a medical examination. Just as a doctor provides a diagnosis and a prescription for improving health, the goal was to empower parents and caregivers to bring their children in for a literacy "check-up." This would allow them to receive an accurate assessment of their child's reading level, equivalent to understanding a medical diagnosis, and receive a tailored plan of action, much like a prescription, to enhance their child's literacy skills.







Parent Shield aimed to bridge the gap between the current educational system's reporting methods and the reality of children's literacy skills. According to the intake survey Parent Shield administered to all of the parents who participated with their children, nearly 70 percent of parents rely on report cards to gauge their child's academic progress, but these assessments might not accurately reflect their reading abilities. The hypothesis underlying this approach was that by providing parents with straightforward and accurate information about their child's reading level, they would gain a deeper understanding of the critical importance of advocating for improved literacy for their children and others. Parent Shield recognized that many parents might not fully realize the gap between perceived and actual reading abilities. The hope was that this transparent and accessible approach would empower parents to take proactive steps in supporting their children's literacy development and, by extension, contribute to a broader push for better literacy education overall.

### LITERACY CLINIC PROCESS

- 1 Parent and child come to scheduled literacy clinic appointment and complete intake process
- 2 Child gets taken to a certified tester and check-up happens and parent simultaneously attends an action-based Parent Workshop
- 3 Tester consults parents and provides a 'post check-up results sheet' and any other insights and observations
- 4 Parent receives a toolkit with results & resources and child gets to choose multiple age-appropriate books to take home
- 5 (In Progress) Parent Shield team members follow up with actionable next steps

According to the intake survey  
Parent Shield administered:



of parents rely on report cards to gauge their child's academic progress.



### PARENT EXPERIENCE INSIGHT

Parent stated, "to tell you the truth, I can't read myself, so I never sit down with my children to make them read. I really hope they catch on at school because I don't want them to struggle like I do." Parent needed help to complete their children's intake paperwork.



# FREEDOM JULY THE SETUP

To begin, a crucial step was the identification of suitable clinic locations within the community that were familiar, centralized, and safe. In a strategic move, Parent Shield opted for Council District 5 and Council District 8, recognizing their status as the districts with the lowest performance on the previous year's STAAR test. The significance of these districts was heightened by the fact that Parent Shield's leader, Dorsey-Hollins is a lifelong resident of City Council District 8, and a considerable number of Parent Shield families reside in City Council District 5.

Following this, the task of selecting a reading assessment aligned with the Science of Reading was undertaken. This endeavor unexpectedly encountered challenges, as companies were hesitant to provide licenses to individuals or organizations unaffiliated with school districts or learning institutions. Nonetheless, insights from conversations with numerous certified teachers, both active and retired, along with education professionals, pointed to DIBELS as one of the most recommended assessments available.

## ASSESSMENT SPOTLIGHT



*"DIBELS® (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) is a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of literacy skills. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures that can be used to regularly detect risk and monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills in kindergarten through eighth grade. When implemented as recommended, DIBELS results can be used to evaluate individual student development as well as provide grade-level feedback toward validated instructional objectives." (https://dibels.uoregon.edu/)*







Parent Shield leadership took proactive steps to engage certified teachers (the testers) before the clinics. The objective was to elucidate the precise parental concern being addressed and explain that the process was designed exclusively to educate and empower parents. A fundamental facet of the process's integrity rested on the teachers' alignment with the mission and objectives. Teachers were encouraged to be available for inquiries and discussions with parents after the check-up. Each teacher brought their unique approach, displaying remarkable kindness and assistance to every family they interacted with.

An encompassing community organizing and outreach strategy was devised by Parent Shield to underscore the value of obtaining this critical information. Despite facing record-high temperatures in Fort Worth at the time, the Parent Shield team persevered, engaging with the community through door-to-door efforts, participation in community events, collaboration with community centers, and coordination with public libraries to enroll parents for the literacy clinics.

### PARENT EXPERIENCE INSIGHT

*Parent said the school has never directly told them what grade level their daughter was on, and they have been looking to get this information.  
(Child is 1.5 grades below level)*

# FREEDOM JULY THE CLINICS

The clinics themselves were a structured affair. Upon arrival, parents and children were greeted by a Parent Shield staff member who verified their registration and guided the parent through the intake paperwork. Personalized folders, bearing the child's name and a unique ID, were provided to testers. Children were offered a snack and drink before being introduced to the tester. Parents were guided to a designated area, where they engaged in a mini parent workshop while their children were being assessed. After the check-up, children were directed to a book table where testers often aided them in selecting grade-appropriate books, details of which were shared with parents on results sheets. Testers then held individual discussions with parents to explain the results before directing them to a resource table. Here, a Parent Shield staff member equipped parents with a resource folder, explaining its contents.

Simultaneously, while the child underwent assessment, parents attended a mini workshop where Parent Shield informed them about the organization and the objectives of Freedom July. The workshop delved into the significance of literacy in children's futures, discussed the current literacy landscape in Fort Worth, and contrasted traditional methods of teaching reading with the proven Science of Reading approach. Parents were equipped with insights into what their children were experiencing, emphasizing the power of this information in shaping educational strategies for the upcoming year.








As families concluded their clinic visit, Parent Shield ensured children left with 2-3 books, distributing a total of over 350 books; even younger siblings received age-appropriate readers. Parents departed with resource kits containing homework and tutoring information, conversation starter cards for teachers, literacy component details, planning tools, literacy checklists, literacy mastery insights, community resources, and more. Furthermore, parents were encouraged to consider various actions, such as presenting results to their child's school, seeking intervention through tutoring, exploring new public school choices, and/or joining and leading within Parent Shield's literacy campaign aimed at improving literacy policies across Fort Worth.

At the beginning of the 2023-23 school year, Parent Shield plans to contact every family that attended the clinics to see what steps parents have taken to address their child's literacy needs.

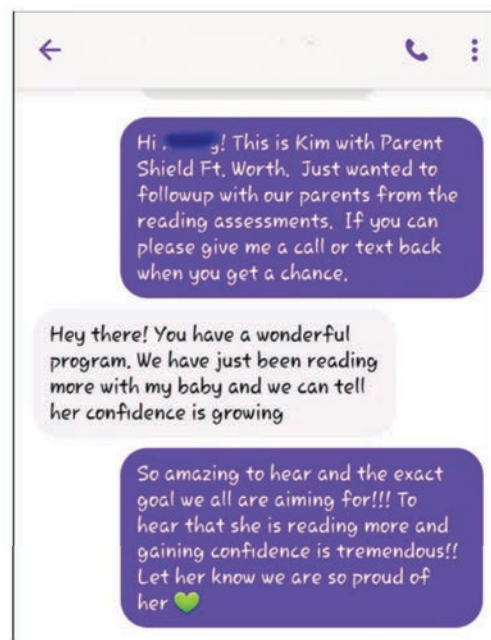
Parent Shield Fort Worth is always available to support parents' journey to ensure their childrens' success.



**PARENT EXPERIENCE INSIGHT**

*Parent asked staff to assist them in reading the questions on the parent intake survey and said they did not do much reading at home.  
(Child is 1 grade below level)*

### FOLLOW-UP TEXT CONVERSATION WITH PARENT

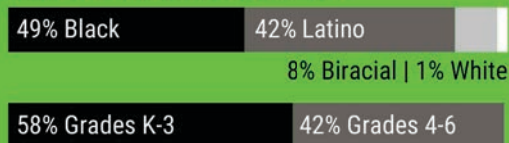


# KEY LEARNINGS

1

Parent Shield's Freedom July results **match** the city's overall literacy scores.

Total # of students tested: 104



Freedom July Assessment Results



3

Available assessment results (STAAR or MAP) are not being used by parents to gauge their child's literacy.

Even though the state, district and schools provide standardized assessment results on child progress in the classroom, only **33% of parents that participated said that they rely on STAAR or MAP results to determine how their child is reading.**

2

Parents trust the system, but are shocked once they find out the truth.

Everything a parent currently knows about their child's reading level is from data or accounts they receive from the school.



**Two-thirds** of parents surveyed said they relied on either report cards and/or parent teacher conferences to determine how their child is reading

One parent said that they know their son has dyslexia, but the parent too has dyslexia and struggles to read. They were **nearly in tears** with the results when they found out their child is 3.5 grade levels behind their current grade.

4

**Nearly 70% of the parents walked in thinking their child was on grade-level or did not know.**

Everyday, Parent Shield has conversations with parents who proudly state that their child isn't one of the majority of kids behind at school. To that end, during Freedom July, we found even deeper proof that a vast majority of parents who were surveyed, prior to getting their child tested, **were confident their child was on grade level or did not know.**





5

**Parents were split in half when asked if they had ever thought their child was behind.**

As mentioned earlier, most parents walked in thinking their child was on grade level or they did not know. But when asked whether they had thought their child was behind, **only 50% of parents said they've had that thought.** Parents put their trust in educational authorities and systems to teach their children how to read.

6

**Many parents suspect their child may have a reading deficiency or learning disability but children are not assessed early enough.**

One of the parents whose K-3 child is almost two grade levels behind, pulled Dorsey-Hollins, leader of Parent Shield, to the side to say that she knew something was wrong with her daughter and that she has been trying to get her tested for nearly 2 years. She said the school finally told her in April (**1 month before school was out**) that they suspected dyslexia.

7

**K-3 students have smaller gaps that widen in grades 4-6 when no intervention occurs.**

In the results, a significant portion of K-3 students are only half a grade level to 1.5 grade levels behind, but the gap widens as students get into grades 4-6. Several kindergarten parents gave credit to their children attending Pre-K to being on or near grade level. This shows that even though kids are behind at a seemingly recoverable grade level early on, the gap widens and gets worse as they get older **if no intervention occurs.**

8

**100% of parents that participated believe every child has the right to learn to read.**



Every parent answered YES when asked, "Do you believe every child has the right to learn to read?"

# PARENT SHIELD'S RECOMMENDATIONS

## #1 - Data Transparency: Parents need strong, actionable data which includes reports that parents can understand

Parents need strong parent-facing literacy level reports that equips them with actionable data that offers a comprehensive understanding of their child's literacy journey. By presenting detailed insights into reading proficiency, strengths, and areas needing attention, these reports would empower parents to actively engage in their child's learning. Between what parents get through STAAR, MAP, from the district and school, it gets to be a lot of jargon that in many cases stunts a parents ability to act.



## #2 - Early Screening: A stronger push to detect and screen for learning disabilities that relate to reading as early as kindergarten

Implementing screening protocols for identifying signs of reading deficiencies or dyslexia as early as kindergarten is a crucial step towards ensuring equitable and effective education for all students. Early intervention holds the key to addressing these challenges proactively and such early detection and intervention prevents long-term academic struggles.



## #3 - Quicker Implementation & Higher Standards: Train teachers and adapt curriculum more swiftly and act more urgently to achieve the district goals

In 2019, the passage of House Bill 3 by the Texas State Legislature established the requirement that all teacher candidates who teach students in grades Pre-K-6 demonstrate proficiency in the Science of Reading. Parent Shield is closely monitoring the implementation of Science of Reading within FWISD and will continue to demand that the district do more to achieve its urgent goal of 100% of 3rd graders on grade level by 2025.







#### **# 4 - Strong Intervention: Access to and usage of free, quality high-dosage intervention by qualified specialists**

Intervention for students that are not on grade-level must be met with support beyond tutoring or more help during the school day. Parents want high-dosage intervention that is going to act strongly and more immediately to address their child's literacy challenges. Fort Worth needs more quality literacy interventionists whose services are paid for by public and philanthropic funds so kids can catch up fast without more of their education falling through the cracks.

#### **#5 - Collective Action: Fort Worth needs to unite to address our city's literacy emergency**

City, community and district leaders have tried time and time again to address our city's literacy crisis. Parents are tired of bureaucratic approaches to improving literacy which in turn impacts their child's educational, financial and personal futures. All stakeholders and systems need to join parents by rolling up their sleeves and bringing their expertise, urgency and purpose to solve this emergency.



**TESTER EXPERIENCE INSIGHT**

*Kids need help understanding that letter combinations make sounds, and that word calling was different than comprehension.*



Join our Literacy is Freedom campaign to demand policies to improve literacy across Fort Worth.  
Call (682) 302-2928 or visit [www.parentshield.org](http://www.parentshield.org)

### **Parent Shield's Vision**

All children in Fort Worth will receive a high quality education, inclusive of all students; which develops their potential and prepares them to be successful adults.

### **Parent Shield's Mission**

To educate and unite powerful parents to demand a high quality education for all children.

