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'Build universal Pre-K on a strong early-care foundation,' says national advocate

"We can't invest in universal prekindergarten programs at the expense of the early-care programs currently in place," cautioned Helen Blank, a national advocate for early care and education and the director of leadership and public policy at the National Women's Law Center in Washington D.C.

Invited by Ready to Learn Providence, Blank addressed members of the R2LP community on Feb. 27 and the board of directors of its parent program, The Providence Plan, on Feb. 28. At both events, Blank commended Rhode Island for many of its early-care policies.

"Rhode Island is in many ways an inspiration to the rest of the nation," she noted. That system, which early-care advocates and educators spent

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Helen Blank, a national advocate for early care and education, speaks to Providence Plan board members. At right is Richard Spies, chairman of the ProvPlan board.

ERF students develop literacy skills – and a fuller understanding of their neighborhoods – with maps



Children at the Genesis Center place photographs on a map of the Roger Williams Park Zoo.

"Here's a photograph of the penguins we saw at the zoo. Can you find where they go on the map?" a teacher asked her students at the Genesis Center, an Early Reading First site.

Looking at a large map of the Roger Williams Park Zoo drawn on a piece of vinyl, the children debated enthusiastically over the proper location,

recreating the route they had taken on their recent visit.

In another mapping project, students walked around the immediate neighborhood of their schools, noting various landmarks (the library, stores, schools, etc.) and street names. Back in the classroom, on a large floor map outlining the streets, they recreated this neighborhood with blocks, toy cars and photographs of places and signs.

These were just a couple of activities designed to introduce maps to youngsters at ERF2 sites. All of the centers also received large Google aerial-view maps of their neighborhoods, allowing children to find and identify some of the streets and buildings in their immediate vicinity.

"Maps can integrate a child's familiar environment into his or her learning in a very meaningful way," notes ERF Early Literacy Coach Jane Myers. "They heighten children's awareness of the print all around us and the way it gives us information."

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As some of you may already know, I have decided to step down in June of this year from my position as director of Ready to Learn Providence. For the past five years I have had the privilege of building this organization and working with you on behalf of children and families. It has been one of the most gratifying experiences of my nearly four decades in the field of early care and education.

Over the next few months, I hope to have the chance to thank many of you personally for your support. I am grateful to the leadership of The Providence Plan for providing such a fine home for Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP) and for helping to nurture its growth.

As you know, our work has benefited greatly from the thoughtful leaders who came together and offered us their advice when R2LP was more an idea than a reality. Thousands of people now pass in and out of our doors each year, each one committed to the vision that all children in Providence will enter school healthy and ready to learn. Of course, much of this has been possible through the strong support of foundations and funders that have entrusted us with vital resources to fuel this good work.

While I have had the good fortune to lead this initiative, it is really our extraordinary

staff, R2LP AmeriCorps members, and partners who – putting their hearts and souls into their work – have helped us achieve so much on behalf of the children of Providence.

Our accomplishments would not be possible without the support of the early-care and education community that welcomes us into their centers and family child-care homes and eagerly attends the many classes we are now able to offer. Our colleagues at the library, the school department, in city and state government, and at the colleges have opened their doors to us and enabled us to grow and expand. Hundreds of committee members have helped us thoughtfully craft our agenda. Most importantly, families have entrusted us to work with their children and measure the direct impact of our efforts.

Thus far, R2LP has succeeded because we have held fast to our vision. We have honored our collective

wisdom, welcomed the insight of others, and have been accountable for the change we are seeking. As I prepare for my departure, I am confident that the next director will inherit one of the best jobs in early care and education in the country.

My plan is to love the last few months I spend in this role. We have an excellent transition team in place at R2LP. The Providence Plan will lead a hiring process that includes the voices of the R2LP community. While I am not certain what I will do next in my professional life, I will always be a member of the Ready to Learn Providence community as we move forward in our work on behalf of children and families.

My thanks to all of you for making my tenure here at R2LP such a joy.

Joyce Butler
Director

Blank

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nearly two decades putting in place, provides multiple options and forms of support for working families and providers, she said.

“The first order of business is to protect what you have,” Blank told providers, early-care advocates, state officials

and board members at the two meetings. “Universal prekindergarten is not a substitute for child care; it’s an add-on. You want to build a Pre-K system on a strong foundation.”

Most working parents, Blank noted, work full days – often at night – year-round. Pre-K programs that run two to six hours a day through-

out the school year seldom meet their child-care needs. Research shows that families forced to fill the remainder of their work day with less reliable care often become stressed and are far more vulnerable to losing their jobs.

“Supporting children and families is a complex task,”

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R2LP investigates the impact of cuts to state-subsidized child care

Ready to Learn Providence is currently conducting a statewide study investigating the impact of the child-care subsidy cuts that went into effect last fall.

The study will focus on Providence and six other communities in the state, but child-care providers and families in over 40 R.I. communities will be contacted. Phone surveys conducted in both English and Spanish will be administered to center-based directors, family-care providers and parents to identify the impact the cuts have had on their programs, businesses, staff, children and families.

Some 500 randomly selected providers and a minimum of 250 families will participate in the study. The interviews are being conducted by R2LP staff and AmeriCorps members, all of whom received training in the administration of

survey instruments. The Care for Kids Coalition, including Prevent Child Abuse R.I. and The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, has provided additional support.

The study – titled “An Investigation into the Impact of Revised Eligibility Requirements for the Child-Care Assistance Program” – received Institutional Review Board approval from Simmons College in Boston in February. Reports on the findings of this study will be available by late May.

The 2007-2008 state budget restricted eligibility for child-care subsidies to families falling below 180 percent of the federal poverty level – down from the previous threshold of 225 percent. The new eligibility requirements disqualified about 1,900 children statewide.

R2LP assists CCRI in new certificate program

Partnering with Ready to Learn Providence, the Community College of Rhode Island has introduced a new certificate program in early childhood education. This program is designed for early-care providers and educators who might not otherwise participate in higher education but who want to build their professional skills and credentials.

R2LP is providing – and in one case developing – three of the courses offered in this program. The certificate requires the successful completion of six 3-credit courses.

Courses offered through R2LP include *HeadsUp! Reading*, *Mind in the Making*, and *Early Literacy Curriculum*, a course R2LP developed in-house. Although all of the R2LP classes are offered in both Spanish and English, Spanish-speaking participants in the certificate program are encouraged to take advantage of ESL training.

“The new certificate program supports the work R2LP is doing and is helping

to prepare people for the new standards,” explains Jerry Hatfield, chair of the CCRI Department of Human Services. It is anticipated, he says, that the State of Rhode Island will increase the educational licensing requirements for early childhood programs within the next year.

The contract with R2LP, Hatfield says, gives CCRI access to cutting-edge curriculum. “It also ensures that we are establishing relationships with all the people who we as a community college should be reaching,” he adds.

All courses taken in the certificate program automatically transfer directly into the college’s Associate in Arts Degree in Early Childhood Education for those who wish to continue their studies after receiving the certificate.

This semester some 150 providers and educators are participating in R2LP’s Early Literacy Curriculum course through the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development grant.

RI Foundation grant helps R2LP meet a growing need among Latino providers

Some 77 percent of all family-care providers in Providence are Latino, many of them serving low-income children in linguistically isolated neighborhoods. But while the percentage of Spanish-speaking providers has been growing steadily over the past decade, the professional development opportunities available to them have not kept pace.

Ready to Learn Providence has long sought to fill this growing need. Since 2004, it has offered Spanish-speaking sessions of its popular *HeadsUp! Reading*, a course on early-literacy skills. R2LP was also one of the first in the country to offer Spanish-speaking sessions of *Mind in the Making*, a program that focuses on the social and emotional development of young children. And in January 2008, R2LP launched its 15-week course on early-literacy curriculum, with three of nine sections offered in Spanish. All three courses are eligible for college credit through the Community College of Rhode Island.

To continue these and other efforts, R2LP has received \$35,000 from the Rhode Island Foundation. These funds will help support not only the Spanish-speaking academic courses offered at R2LP, but also the operations of an R2LP club called El Club de Proveedoras Infantil de RI (The Children’s Provider Club of Rhode Island). The Spanish-speaking providers who participate in this club, all graduates of *HeadsUp! Reading*, are professionals who are emerging as leaders in the community.

Since 2004, more than 400 providers have participated in one or more of the college-level courses offered through R2LP in Spanish.

Data and evaluations demonstrate the concrete accomplishments of R2LP's 2nd AmeriCorps team

Ready to Learn Providence's 30 AmeriCorps members gave 47,760 hours of service to 17 partner sites during the second year of the program. Data gathered for an end-of-year report highlight some impressive accomplishments.

In the libraries, over the course of the 2006/2007 year:

- Eight AmeriCorps members serving library branches visited more than 70 child-care providers, visiting each home or center an average of nine times. During those visits, members presented over 631 activities to the more than 700 children these providers serve.
- Spanish-speaking members contributed significantly to the successful outreach of Latino providers and families in targeted neighborhoods. Members distributed over 2,000 bilingual flyers describing library programs to child-care centers, community centers, local businesses and families.
- Efforts by AmeriCorps members led to 22 family-care providers and 12 child-care centers registering for library cards.
- Family-care providers made greater use of literacy and reading kits available at the Providence Public Library (PPL). To encourage this use, members often brought these kits to providers who had difficulty picking them up during library hours.
- Attendance of family-care providers in early-childhood programs at PPL increased markedly, thanks in part to the work of AmeriCorps members. In 2004-2005 (the year prior to the first R2LP AmeriCorps program) seven providers participated in these programs. Last year, that number grew to 26. Two programs for parents and educators saw a 100 percent increase between 2006 and 2007.
- During the first year of the R2LP AmeriCorps program, the overall attendance of early childhood programs at the PPL increased by 76 percent. In



Members of the 2006/2007 AmeriCorps team enjoy an evening at McCoy Stadium during AmeriCorps Week last spring. Hundreds of children, providers and families in Providence benefit each year from the hard work of R2LP's AmeriCorps members. The program is now in its third year.

2006/2007 attendance remained at that level, with AmeriCorps members presenting or assisting with over 250 programs at the library branches.

At the child-care partner sites:

- The 13 members assigned to child-care centers provided 593 literacy activities between September 2006 and June 2007, with an average of 54 activities at each site. They worked directly with 694 children.
- In final evaluations of the members assigned to them, supervisors noted their initiative, rapport with students, creativity, resourcefulness, and ability to form relationships with parents, children and co-workers. Supervisors also noted that bilingual members were particularly helpful in teacher conferences with Spanish-speaking parents.

As valuable as the work is that AmeriCorps members do during their year of service, what they take from the experience and continue to do in the community are equally important.

Of the 26 members who graduated last June, two are now working full-time at R2LP and 11 chose to continue for a second year in the program. Many others are pursuing careers in the early-care and education field, working in libraries, child-care centers and after-school programs. One member is writing instructional books for educators.

R2LP has begun accepting applications for its 2008/2009 AmeriCorps program. Go to www.r2lp.org or call Nazly Guzman at (401) 490-9960 for more information.

R2LP looks to Reggio Emilia for inspiration in a citywide project

Imagine a citywide project that would increase the visibility of our youngest children – and their talents – and also engage the entire community.

Having visited Reggio Emilia and met with representatives from that city’s renowned early-care program, Mayor David Cicilline has asked Ready to Learn Providence to develop proposals for projects that would focus on the city’s youngest residents and their capabilities.

R2LP eagerly accepted the challenge. It will soon convene a working group comprising diverse representatives of the community – educators, pediatricians, local business people, community leaders and others – to create a list of Reggio Emilia-inspired projects that would work in Providence.

For more than 40 years, Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy comparable

in size to Providence, has been recognized for its commitment to its youngest citizens. Children there are highly visible and are viewed as important, competent, resourceful members of the community. Everything that happens in its early-care program reflects these values.

In the spring of 2007, a small group from R2LP traveled to Reggio Emilia to study this innovative approach to early care and education. Mayor Cicilline, who was in Italy at the time, joined the R2LP group for a day to observe classrooms, meet with the city’s mayor, and talk with educators. He described what he saw there as “nothing less than extraordinary.”

A citywide project in Providence could be the start of an informal collaboration between the two cities. R2LP hopes to send another delegation to Reggio Emilia in the spring of 2009 and, through Whee-



Reggio Emilia

lock College, will continue to host visiting scholars from that city. Representatives from Reggio Emilia say that with a recent influx in immigration there is much they can learn from Providence on educating children with diverse backgrounds.

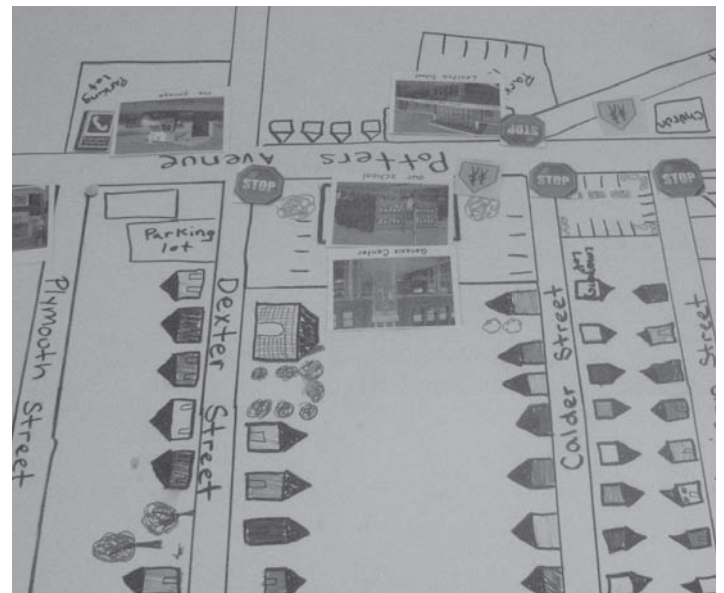
Let’s map it out

Increase your preschooler’s awareness of his environment and develop important early literacy skills with some fun mapping activities.

Walk around your block and identify some landmarks that have some meaning to your child: a friend’s house, a church, a store, etc. (If you have a camera, take pictures of them.) Point out street signs. What letter does it start with? There’s a “stop” sign; that word rhymes with “top.” We live on Potters Avenue. What words start like “Potters”? These are all valuable early reading skills.

Back home, take a large sheet of paper and draw the streets you walked. (Keep the map large and simple.) What street do we live on? (Write the street name on the map.) Let’s put a picture of our house on that street. Where’s the store (Bobby’s house, church, etc.)? Is it on the same side of the street as us or do we have to cross the street when we go there? Is it around the corner? Do we turn left or right? Use small toy cars and blocks to make your map more dimensional and to keep the activity fun.

If you have access to a computer and the Internet, go to googlemaps.com. Type in your address (street, city and state), and you’ll get a street map of your neighborhood. Hit “satellite” and you’ll get an aerial-view of the neighborhood. Help your child find his street, house and other nearby landmarks.



Students at the Genesis Center filled in a floor map of the school’s neighborhood after taking a walk and noting some landmarks.

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By becoming more aware of street names and signs in their neighborhood, children also develop recognition of letters and symbols.

The mapping skills introduced at the ERF sites this fall will be incorporated throughout the year in various aspects of the curriculum focusing on the neighborhood, notes Jane.



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Blank

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Blank said. "We have no paid leave in this country and many mothers must return to work within weeks of giving birth. The needs of those children begin as soon as they are born, especially when they are low-income." If children do not receive high-quality child care until the age of four, she noted, "the work of the Pre-K teacher will be that much harder."

"Universal Pre-K does have promise," Blank said. "If it's good, prekindergarten is a way to build more quality into early care." But, she stressed, it should be offered within a diverse delivery system that includes existing child-care settings if we want to meet the needs of working families and to take advantage of the many trained professionals already in the field.

Providers, center directors and early-care advocates gathered at R2LP Feb. 27 for a conversation with Helen Blank.

Prior to her current position at the National Women's Law Center, Blank served 24 years as the director of the Child Care and Development Division at the Children's Defense Fund. She played an instrumental role in the passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and also developed a comprehensive guide for the implementation of that landmark legislation.

Blank recently co-authored a publication titled "A Center Piece of the PreK Puzzle: Providing State Prekindergarten in Child Care Centers," which can be accessed at www.r2lp.org.

