

With help from R2LP, the RI Early Childhood Conference broadens its reach

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As a partner in the 2006 Rhode Island Early Childhood Conference, Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP) helped to expand the conference's reach to the Spanish-speaking provider community by recruiting Spanish-speaking and bilingual presenters, providing translation services, publicizing the event throughout the R2LP community, and recruiting Spanish-speaking and bilingual volunteers for the day of the conference. Thanks to these efforts, the conference on April 8 reached out to a far more diverse audience than in years past.

"Based on what I heard at the conference, people were really pleased with these services," says Leslie Sevey, chair of the R.I. Early Childhood Conference. "Having Spanish-speaking volunteers



Yuberka Jimenez, an R2LP AmeriCorps member, gives the victory sign after presenting her workshop, one of nine offered in Spanish. Celebrating with her is R2LP AmeriCorps member Julissa Lugo, who served as a bilingual volunteer at the conference.

R2LP translated the registration and day-of-conference brochures, as well as the keynote address, which was given by William H. Strader, Ed.D. This was the first year that the keynote speech was translated.

Eleven of the 60 workshops at the conference
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Maria Fajardo, right, a family-care provider, was a first-time presenter at the conference. With her is Tania Quezada, R2LP's coordinator of community learning, who helped Maria prepare for her workshop.

available to answer individual questions and help with translations was especially appreciated. We'll be looking to see how we can increase our collaboration with R2LP in the future."

With presenters recruited by R2LP's Alba Medina, this year's conference offered nine workshops in Spanish, up from the three offered last year. Alba also recruited bilingual volunteers for the daylong event, served as a liaison for the Spanish-speaking workshop presenters, and was the conference contact person for anyone who needed help registering for the event.



R2LP AmeriCorps members Chontell Nelson Washington and Jose Means worked as volunteers throughout the day-long conference.



READY TO
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From the Director

In recent months we started to count the number of people who are part of the Ready to Learn Providence community. We were surprised – and of course pleased – to see that the community has grown ten-fold since our founding in 2002. We now have an active community that includes more than 1,200 members who share our vision that all children in Providence will enter school healthy and ready to learn. The relationships we've forged within this community are both deep and substantive.

In the past year, R2LP's AmeriCorps members have become a central part of this community and all of us were shaken and deeply saddened by the unexpected death in May of a much loved member of that team. Rosa Benzant's kindness, humor and generosity will be remembered by everyone who was lucky enough to know her. Please see pages 6 and 7 for our tribute to this remarkable woman.

Our thoughts are also with R2LP AmeriCorps Director Nancy Worthen, whose daughter Maggie suffered a serious stroke last month just weeks before she was to graduate from Smith College. Friends of Nancy can find updates on Maggie's condition at <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/margaretworthen>.

As they mark the end of their year in service this month, some of our AmeriCorps members will be moving on to other pursuits, many of them in the early-care field. While it won't be easy to say goodbye, we share their enthusiasm for their future endeavors and wish them the best of luck. Happily, we anticipate that at least 10 of this initial group will be returning for a second year of service. Few AmeriCorps programs see this kind of retention rate and it's a

real tribute to the fine work of Nancy and Assistant Director Nazly Guzman-Singletary.

One of R2LP's oldest and most important partners is, of course, the Providence Public Library (PPL). Because the PPL and its branches play such a central role in R2LP's work and vision, I felt R2LP needed to respond to the current debate on the future of the neighborhood branches. We believe it is critical that library services remain available to all children and families who want to use them. To read our full statement on this issue, please go to the homepage of our website, www.r2lp.org.

As our community and programs continue to grow, so too does the behind-the-scenes work securing the funds that keep everything going. In the past few months, we at R2LP have devoted a great deal of time to writing and submitting a wide range of grant applications. We were particularly pleased to learn that we have been selected by the U.S. Department of Education as a finalist in another Early Reading First (ERF) grant. Winning this grant would allow us to partner with four additional early-care centers to create centers of educational excellence.

This spring R2LP hosted a

Mind in the Making institute, marking the program's debut in Rhode Island. This fascinating program clearly demonstrates how the social and emotional development of a young child is inextricably linked to his or her cognitive growth. In the six-day sessions, participants make this connection in a way that is very personal.

Unlike most workshops where the trainer is viewed as the person who holds all the knowledge and information, Mind in the Making asks everyone in the room to grapple with the current science and research collectively. The program is intended to transform the way we think about children and I believe it really succeeds in doing that.

We have many exciting programs and events planned for the fall so be sure to look for our next newsletter (or check our website) for updates. In the meantime, have a safe and happy summer.

Joyce Butler, Director

First-year evaluation data indicate increases in program quality and school readiness at ERF sites

Preliminary first-year evaluation results of Ready to Learn Providence's Early Reading First (ERF) program indicate substantial increases in the overall quality of classrooms to support early language and literacy development as measured by the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation. In addition, teachers reported they had become more aware of research-based strategies for teaching reading and literacy, were integrating these strategies and activities into their curriculum and classrooms, and were providing more individualized attention to children.

Preliminary first-year analyses also indicate significant differences in children's scores as measured by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-PreK). On the print and word awareness subtest, scores increased by an average of 20 percentage points over a six-month implementation period.

The primary goal of ERF is to promote early language and literacy development through intensive, scientifically-based professional development and with ongoing assistance to improve classroom environments and instruction. The three-year project is funded with a \$2.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which was awarded to R2LP in 2004. R2LP teamed up with four centers in Providence – all with different needs and challenges – to create centers of educational excellence.

The Education Alliance at Brown University, contracted to evaluate the ERF program, conducted the secondary analysis of the data collected since the program entered its first full academic year in September 2005. R2LP seeks to prove that with a sound curriculum, strong teaching skills and a rich classroom environment, children can thrive in a diverse array of settings.



WANTED 30 AMERICORPS MEMBERS

To help Ready to Learn Providence
realize the vision that
*all children in Providence
will enter school healthy and ready to learn*

If you like working with children, are creative, enthusiastic, dependable, and 18 or older, come join our team!
Bilingual candidates are encouraged to apply.

Members serve at Providence library branches, at Providence early-care settings, and at the Ready to Learn Providence offices.

Benefits:

A living allowance of \$10,600
Child-care allowance and health insurance
Training and leadership experience
Three weeks vacation

An education award of \$4,725 upon completion of 1,700 hours of service



Applications are available online at www.americorps.org, or send a resume and cover letter to:

Nancy Worthen at
Ready to Learn Providence
945 Westminster St.
Providence, RI 02903

For further information, call (401) 490-9960
Deadline for applications: June 30, 2006



Course developed by R2LP translates data into action

Ready to Learn Providence's 30 AmeriCorps members recently completed a 45-hour course analyzing the well-being of Providence's youngest children through a set of indicators. These indicators, which represent essential components of school readiness, were the basis of a 75-page data-driven report titled *How Ready Is Providence?*, which R2LP released in 2005.

The 15-week course, developed by R2LP and also titled *How Ready Is Providence*, "supports one of R2LP's core strategies – that data should inform our work," explains Joyce Butler, director of R2LP. It was led by Katie Murray, R2LP's coordinator of data and evaluation, and Nazly Guzman-Singletary, assistant director of R2LP's AmeriCorps program.

"We took the data collected for the report and made it both tangible and action-oriented," says Katie. A second source of data came from *Benchmarks for Progress*, a special report on school readiness developed by Rhode Island Kids Count.

"The course was about getting to know your community, not just through highly detailed information, but also through the compelling personal stories of

people who are working on the ground," notes Nazly. The course featured nearly a dozen guest speakers who work in area agencies that address the issues raised in the course.

In the final half of the course, participants worked in groups to study a particular indicator – such as childhood poverty or children of incarcerated parents – in depth. They wrote a report on this issue, made a presentation to the class, and then

"The discussions were rooted in the data but were also deeply personal and reflective."

developed and implemented a community action of their choice that they believed would alleviate the problem in some way.

The indicators covered in the course – and in the R2LP report – fall into one of three categories: readiness of parents, caregivers and teachers; child development and well-being; and a child's environment. Armed with data not only for the city of Providence but also for individual neighborhoods, participants examined how factors such as poverty, abuse and neglect, inadequate medical care, or unqualified child-care providers affect a child's readiness for school. "The level of engagement of the participants was something I couldn't have anticipated," says Nazly.

"The discussions were rooted in the data but were also deeply personal and reflective," Joyce adds. Many of the participants in the class have themselves experienced the impact of poverty, incar-



AmeriCorps members Jessica Johns and Alex Stewart.

cerated parents, and other issues examined in the class. "The collective consciousness that our community, colleagues, families, friends and neighbors are 'the data' fuels both our passion and our actions in pursuit of the vision of R2LP," Joyce notes. "Ultimately we hope to secure funding so that we can offer this course to the broader R2LP community."

Guest speakers in this spring's course included: Reeva Sullivan Murphy, Department of Human Services; Leslie Gell, CCRI Division for Lifelong Learning; John Prince and Ron Fortes, R.I. Family Life Center; Hlee Thao, R.I. Urban League; Sharon Terreault, Meeting Street Center; Tina LaPrade, Children's Friend and Service; Patricia Flanagan, Hasbro Children's Hospital Department of Pediatrics; and several R2LP staff members.



AmeriCorps members Melissa Walsh and Hoy Loper conduct a presentation on the history of child-care subsidies in Rhode Island.

The text used for this course, *How Ready Is Providence?*, can be downloaded as a PDF on the Ready to Learn Providence website, www.r2lp.org.

org.

Mind in the Making participants discover for themselves how children learn best



"Mind in the Making is a spiritual, in-depth and very powerful tool."

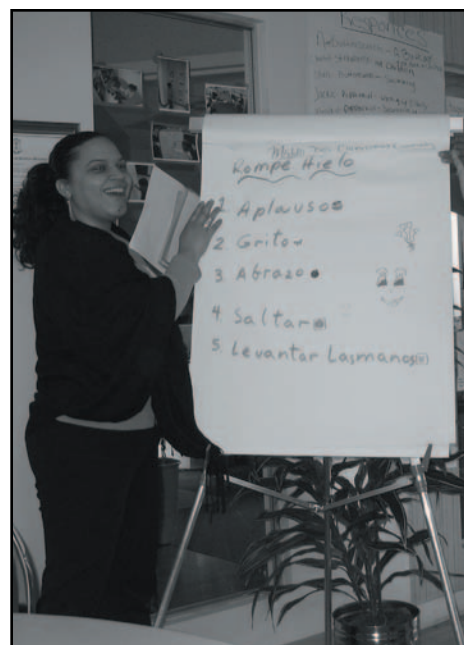
—a participant



"Mind in the Making is helping me to connect myself with the world of children." – a participant



Mind in the Making, a facilitated learning process that bridges the gap between research and teaching practice, made its Rhode Island debut in April and May at Ready to Learn Providence. Nina Sazer O'Donnell of the Families and Work Institute (the national organization that developed the program) led 33 participants through the program's 12 modules by engaging them in activities and a process of self-discovery designed to personalize and underscore the current science on early learning and childhood development. The participants – representing various members of the R2LP community – have agreed to facilitate at least two sessions for early-care providers and parents in the next few years. R2LP provided Spanish translation for several of the participants, the first time this service was available in a Mind in the Making institute for learning facilitators.



HUR evaluation shows improved quality

Spanish-speaking family-care providers who participated in R2LP's enhanced HeadsUp! Reading (HUR) program improved the quality of their home environments as well as the quality of their own practices to support children's early literacy development, according to a recent evaluation.

An analysis of participant-providers' scores indicated significant changes as measured by the Family Child Care Literacy Profile (FCCLP), a tool developed by The Manchester Early Learning Opportunities Project (MELO). This tool includes research-based indicators of quality and is also used for continuous improvement. Post-test scores of the 73 participants roughly doubled, on average, when compared with the pretest scores by the end of the 15-week program period.

HUR, a 45-hour course that targets early-care providers, focuses on the development and promotion of children's early-literacy skills. Since R2LP began offering the course, more than 300 of Providence's family-care and center-based providers have completed it. R2LP currently maintains a waiting list of providers seeking to participate.

The Education Alliance at Brown University conducted the analysis of secondary data collected in 2005. Of the Spanish-speaking providers who participated that year, 86 percent had perfect attendance and the remaining 14 percent had only slightly lower rates.

Responses to interview questions and evaluation forms provided feedback from participants on their perspectives on the impact and value of the program. Family-care providers overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with HUR and other R2LP activities, and indicated they had made changes as a result of their participation. Providers most commonly reported that the primary lesson learned in the program is the importance of spending more time teaching and reading to children.

In memory of Rosa Benzant

It was with enormous sorrow that we learned on May 10 of the death of a much loved and widely respected member of Ready to Learn Providence's AmeriCorps team. Rosa Benzant, who had been serving at the Beautiful Beginnings Child Care Center since September, died of a heart attack while on a trip to her native Dominican Republic. A resident of Providence, Rosa leaves a husband, Tommy Benzant, and two young children – 7-month-old Jemuel and 3-year-old Jeshua.

"She gave too much in too little time," says one of her AmeriCorps teammates. "She was passionate about everything she did."

Despite medical issues in the past few months, Rosa insisted on fulfilling all of her obligations to family, work and friends. Her colleagues say she was generous to a fault – lending money when she had little to spare and always finding the energy to offer a helping hand. Her Latino teammates say she would gently chastise them if they appeared self-conscious or nervous when using their new language. "Never be ashamed of your accent or who you are," she would tell them. "If you respect yourself, others will too."

Rosa, who loved her work as a mother and an early-care provider, held equally high expectations for children. When an AmeriCorps member suggested that young children wouldn't be able to do an activity she had suggested, Rosa retorted, "You're not going to know what a child can do unless you let them try."

This was Rosa's second year in the AmeriCorps. Previously she spent a year with the Children's Crusade, doing her service at the Charles Fortes Elementary School. Her friends at the



Crusade say she was never afraid to ask for help or to give it. She saw AmeriCorps as a stepping stone for other Latino women and helped to recruit many women into the program.

"Rosa was a very caring individual who always lent an ear to her fellow AmeriCorps members," says Nazly Guzman-Singletary, assistant director of the R2LP AmeriCorps program. "She was very resourceful in tackling any problem. She was also a dedicated person with a deep sense of commitment and responsibility."

Rosa earned a bachelor's degree in computer science from the O&M University in the Dominican Republic; a theology teaching degree from the School of Ministry, also in the Dominican Republic; and was currently pursuing a degree in education from the Community College of Rhode Island.

Ready to Learn Providence is collecting donations for her family. Checks payable to "The Providence Plan in honor of Rosa Benzant" can be mailed to Stan Kuziel, Ready to Learn Providence, 945 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903.

Twenty graduates of HeadsUp! Reading (HUR) have begun working on the organization of the R2LP Club, which will build on the learning and camaraderie enjoyed in HUR. To learn more about this club, call Tania Quezada at (401) 490-9960.

Noticias de Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP)

En memoria de Rosa Benzant

Con inmenso pesar nos enteramos del fallecimiento de uno de nuestros apreciados y respetados miembros de AmeriCorps. Rosa Benzant, quien estuvo haciendo su año de servicio voluntario en el centro de cuidados infantiles Beautiful Beginnings desde el pasado mes de septiembre, falleció el pasado 10 de mayo de un ataque cardiaco mientras se encontraba de viajes a su nativa República Dominicana. Rosa, quien residía en la ciudad de Providence, deja atrás a su esposo, Tommy Benzant y dos hermosos niños uno de 7 meses llamado Jemuel y a su hermanito Jeshua de 3 años de edad.

“Ella dió tanto en tan poco tiempo” dijo uno de sus compañeros del equipo de AmeriCorps. “Ella era apasionada absolutamente en todo lo que hacia.”

A pesar de los problemas médicos que la embargaron en los pasados meses, Rosa insistió siempre en cumplir con todas sus obligaciones familiares, de trabajo, como también con lo concerniente a sus amistades. Sus colegas comentaron que incluso fue tan generosa como para ayudar monetariamente en algunas ocasiones, aunque ella no tenía mucho de sobra para repartir, encontrando siempre la energía para brindar una mano al que lo necesitara. Sus compañeros Latinos mencionaron que incluso en momentos en que los notaba inseguros o nerviosos al utilizar la segunda lengua

del inglés, siempre tomaba tiempo para aconsejarlos diciéndoles, “Si te respetas, otros te respetarán.”

Rosa, quien amó su trabajo como mamá y proveedora de cuidados infantiles, tuvo equitativamente grandes esperanzas por el futuro de los niños. En alguna ocasión, uno de los miembros de AmeriCorps sugirió que tal vez uno de los niños no pudiese realizar alguna actividad que ella hubiese sugerido, ella respondió “nunca podrás estar totalmente seguro, a menos de que dejes que lo intente.”

Este fue el segundo año en el que Rosa fue parte activa de un grupo de AmeriCorps. Anteriormente ella fue miembro de Children’s Crusade, cumpliendo su servicio en la escuela elemental Charles Fortes. Sus amigos en el Crusade dijeron que Rosa nunca tuvo miedo de pedir ayuda o de brindarla. Ella vio a AmeriCorps como un escalón para la mujer Latina e incluso usó su experiencia, reclutando mas Latinas para el programa.

“Rosa fue un ser humano compasivo y cariñoso, quien siempre escuchó y tuvo una palabra de aliento, ayudando en muchas ocasiones a resolver de manera sencilla situaciones conflictivas” dijo Nazly Guzmán Singletary, subdirectora del programa de AmeriCorps. “Ella fue siempre una persona dedicada y con un profundo sentido de responsabilidad y compromiso.”



Rosa y su esposo Tommy en una fiesta para su inminente bebe organizada por sus compañeros de AmeriCorps.

Rosa era poseedora de un título universitario en Ciencias de Computación, obtenido en la Universidad de O&M en la República Dominicana y de un título en enseñanza de teología también obtenido en la República Dominicana. En la actualidad estaba estudiando en el Colegio Comunitario de Rhode Island, con el fin de obtener un título en Educación.

Ready to Learn Providence está recolectando donaciones para su familia. Los cheques deberán ser hechos a nombre de “Providence Plan en honor de Rosa Benzant” y pueden ser enviados a Stan Kuziel, Ready to Learn Providence, 945 Westminster Street, Providence, RI 02903.

Conferencia de educación temprana de Rhode Island

Como socio de la conferencia de educación temprana del año 2006, Ready to Learn Providence [R2LP] ayudo a expandir el alcance de la conferencia hacia la comunidad de proveedores de cuidado infantil de habla hispana. Ready to Learn Providence reclutó presentadores de habla hispana para los talleres de la conferencia, proporciono traducción simultanea,

publicó el evento a través de la comunidad de R2LP y reclutó voluntarios bilingües para la misma. Gracias a estos esfuerzos, la conferencia que se realizó el 8 de abril pudo alcanzar una audiencia mucho mas diversa que en años anteriores.

Evaluación de HUR

De acuerdo a una reciente evaluación, los proveedores de cuidado infantil de habla hispana que participaron en el

programa de HeadsUp! Reading [HUR] mejoraron la calidad ambiental de sus propios hogares, así como sus prácticas para apoyar el desarrollo de la alfabetización temprana de los niños. Al final de las 15 semanas que dura el programa y al compararse con las marcas obtenidas al comenzar el programa, las calificaciones de los 73 participantes llegaron aproximadamente al doble de lo que habían sido.



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*R2LP is a program of
The Providence Plan*

Funding for R2LP has been provided by:

- US Department of Health & Human Services, Child Care Bureau
- US Department of Education
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Rhode Island Service Alliance
- Brown Rudnick Charitable Foundation
- The Ocean State Job Lot Charitable Foundation
- RI Department of Health
- United Way of RI
- Corporation for National Service

Funding for production of this newsletter was provided by a federal ELOA grant from USDHHS. The contents of this newsletter are solely the responsibility of R2LP and do not represent the official views of USDHHS or other funders, nor does this publication in any way constitute an endorsement by the funding agencies.

R2LP efforts help expand reach of Early Childhood Conference

Continued from page 1

were led by R2LP staff and AmeriCorps members, many of them serving as presenters for the first time. R2LP supplied these presenters with any materials or coaching they needed. R2LP also offered

“Having Spanish-speaking volunteers available to answer individual questions and help with translations was especially appreciated.”

\$25 scholarships to providers in Providence who wanted to attend the conference and who had participated in one of R2LP’s programs or committees.



Michelle Winston, a former Early Reading First mentor, presented a workshop titled “Why Diddle, Diddle,” which offered a new twist to classic nursery rhymes in the development of early literacy skills.