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Providence Talks: Making a difference for our youth

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Education is inextricably linked to economic development. And in an urban setting, where the challenges of poverty and language and cultural differences exist, we have to work harder to give our children a level playing field with a first-class education.

The ability to read on grade level is one of the greatest predictors of a student's future success. Up until third grade, children are learning to read. After third grade, they are reading to learn. With that in mind, we launched Providence Reads last fall - an initiative in partnership with more than a dozen businesses and organizations to increase grade-level reading, promote school readiness, improve school attendance and support summer learning in Providence. GTECH and Walgreens are the lead sponsors of Providence Reads, and today, 160 volunteers are serving as mentors and helping students learn to read in Providence's schools.

It takes an entire community to transform public education. We are working closely with the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet, a diverse team of 130 community leaders helping to guide the future of education in our city. Through the baseline data they have collected, we have been able to create metrics to measure our children's success from cradle to career.

We also know that children born into low-income households hear 30 million fewer words than their middle- and high-income peers, by the time they reach their fourth birthday. To deal with that difference, we devised a plan to increase the number of words our Providence children hear. Our proposal was selected by Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge as one of 20 finalists, in a \$5 million grant competition, up against more than 300 submissions nationwide.

Providence's innovative idea is to employ new technology and partnerships with the State of Rhode Island's home visitation programs, to give families in our city the technology and coaching they need to measure and rapidly improve their child's household-auditory environment. We have been reaching out to others to help bring Providence Talks to fruition, and if you visit http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/19/vote-mayors-challenge-fan_n_2716857.html#slide=2124393 you will learn more about our proposal and even have a chance to cast your vote to make Providence the Mayors Challenge Fan Favorite.

And while the Fan Favorite award will not influence the outcome of the Bloomberg Philanthropies competition, the city that earns the most votes will receive funding from IBM and other promotional opportunities with The Huffington Post. Winners of the Mayors Challenge and the Fan Favorite competition will be announced this spring.

In Providence, our fingers are crossed. Together, we can make a lasting difference for Providence's young people and the economy of this city, state and region.

Angel Taveras is the mayor of Providence.