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Transforming public education in Providence

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When deciding where to locate a company, education and schools are a top priority for business leaders, site selectors and developers. As mayor of Providence, I share this commitment to our children.

My commitment to transforming public education in Providence and urban school districts across our nation is rooted in my own journey from Head Start to Harvard through Providence's public schools. Like many urban cities, Providence's schools face challenges. Forty six percent of third graders in Providence's schools are reading on grade level. Research shows that students who haven't learned to read by third grade are significantly more likely to struggle academically and drop out of school in future years. We have set an ambitious goal in Providence to have 70% of our students reading on grade level as they begin fourth grade.

We have enlisted our entire community in the effort to transform public education in Providence. The city of Providence is working closely with the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet - over 150 community leaders who are helping to guide the future of education in our city.

Last October, Providence's Children and Youth Cabinet was among 31 organizations from across the nation recognized as a Together for Tomorrow Challenge winner for our efforts to turn around low-performing schools and raise student achievement in every public school. Together for Tomorrow is a joint initiative of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships together with the U.S. Department of Education and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

At the beginning of the last school year we launched Providence Reads - an initiative in partnership with businesses and organizations across our city to increase grade-level reading, promote school readiness, improve school attendance and support summer learning in Providence.

And in March, Providence was selected from among 305 cities across the nation as the \$5 million grand prize winner of the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge. Our innovative initiative, Providence Talks, employs new technology and partners with home visitation programs to give families in our city the tools they need to measure and increase the number of words spoken in their households.

Children need to hear approximately 21,000 words every day for their vocabularies to develop at an appropriate pace. But research has shown that children growing up in less affluent homes hear many fewer words each day than their peers in middle and high-income households.

This word gap adds up dramatically. By the time children growing up in low-income households reach their fourth birthday, they will have heard 30 million fewer words than their peers in middle and high-income households.

Providence Talks - a free, confidential and completely voluntary early intervention program - is our plan to solve this national challenge right here in Providence. By improving their vocabularies before

they even begin kindergarten, we believe "Providence Talks" will put low-income children on a path toward success in the classroom and lifelong achievement.

Education transformed my life. Education is the path out of poverty for our children. We believe that cities across America will one day look to Providence Talks as a game-changing model to level the playing field for children of all backgrounds.

Angel Taveras is the mayor of Providence.

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