

Bridging the Education Gap with Kids Bridge



The official start of kindergarten was still three weeks away, but on a steamy day in early August, the kids inside a Providence elementary school were getting a jump start to the school year.

“Let’s see if he can find the letter ‘B’ and circle it,” said Pat Conti, a first-grade teacher during the year, who was taking up temporary residence in a kindergarten room on the first floor of the Young/Woods Elementary School in South Providence.

Conti and her class are there for a summer program called Kids Bridge, run by Inspiring Minds, a non-profit education support organization for the Providence School Department. Inspiring Minds trains hundreds of volunteer tutors who help throughout the academic year.

The summer classes - a joint program between Inspiring Minds and the School Department - began five years ago with one school. It now enrolls 180 children spread across five elementary schools in the city. The program runs in the morning for four weeks and focuses on children who have not had the benefit of preschool.

“The purpose of it is to catch them up and get them onto the track of where they’re supposed to be by the time they go to kindergarten,” said Terri Adelman, executive director of Inspiring Minds. “That’s the whole goal.”

Adelman says the program costs \$500 per child, with about 80 percent of the funding coming from the School Department, and Inspiring Minds picking up the remainder.

This year, they also began a pilot program in the afternoon at Messer Elementary with four partners: The Providence Children’s Museum, The Boys and Girls Club of Providence, The Providence YMCA and Providence Community Libraries, each of which donated time and resources, either coming to Messer or taking the kids on weekly field trips.

While academics are important, the program provides socialization opportunities that some of these kids have never had, like sitting still, getting along with others and listening to what the teacher says. And there are things we take for granted, like getting used to using scissors.

Regina Richards is in her third year as a kindergarten teacher at Young/Woods Elementary. She says the results of the summer program speak for themselves, as all of the kids are tested before and after the four weeks of Kids Bridge. The stats show a marked improvement across the board. But it’s the intangibles, Richards says, that are equally important.

“Being empathetic to one another, learning to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to one another, being polite to one another, some children don’t know that and we’re teaching that in the program as well,” Richards said.

Another key to the program’s success is the number of volunteers to help corral and focus children who have differing abilities and attention spans.

“We’re very flexible, but something we’re not flexible in is when we bring an adult in, he or she cannot work with more than three or four people; preferably one or two, but not more than three of four, because after that, the impact gets diluted,” Adelman said.

Darnell Tutt said his daughter couldn’t wait to go to school every day, even though it was summertime, and told him all about it every night. “She sings the songs, she’ll do the motions, she’ll tell me what she did, what friends we made, what the friend’s name is. She’s very excited. She loves it.”

At the end of the four weeks, Inspiring Minds held a graduation. For the first time, this summer all five schools came together at the Providence Career and Technical Academy. Hundreds of parents, friends and family members turned out for the ceremony.

“If you’re a 5-year-old and you walk into a room and you see 500 people sitting there and you’re the one who’s being showcased, you have your little hat on, you’ve done something special, that sends a very large message to the little kids. And their parents came,” Adelman said.

And there’s a message, she says, for the parents of this high school class of 2026. “Education is very, very important. You have done a wonderful job in getting your children started with this education and now you need to do 12 more years of this.”

Adelman is trying to get the Providence School Department to fund an expanded program next summer. “And lo and behold, every year the kids walk into school and they have 30 percent more skills than the kids who didn’t have this. This is such an inexpensive and successful way to fill a gap that exists that nobody else is filling.”

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