

# **The Rhode Island READS Experience**

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## **Executive Summary**

In a state where only 13% of fourth grade students meet minimal standards on writing assessments, score an average of 54% on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, and an estimated 56,000 children read below their grade level, an America Reads Challenge project appeared to be part of the solution to the problem.

The reading ability of children and adults in Rhode Island has been an issue of continuous concern over the past decade. Under the leadership of Lt. Governor Jackvony, the Rhode Island READS initiative creates a major statewide collaborative to address literacy issues, and by so doing, responds to the President's Challenge. The Lt. Governor has appointed a statewide steering committee to provide input, resources, and expertise to the development of the project. They join with the collaborative members in adopting the following goals for the Rhode Island READS project:

1. To increase the literacy and reading skills of children, with special emphasis on pre-school through 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
2. To create an opportunity for the citizens of Rhode Island to actively participate in the educational and decision-making process in preparing our children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
3. To promote, stimulate and support literacy programs throughout the state.
4. To establish a continuous structure of training, technical assistance and additional resources for early childhood programs, Head Start programs, child care providers, and parent involvement projects.

In the eight months since it was initiated, Rhode Island READS has achieved some significant successes. Among those is the creation of a statewide collaborative, which includes 34 of the 35 communities. Tutors, mentors, and volunteers are screened, trained, and placed at community sites. In addition, the Lt. Governor, Bernard A. Jackvony, has taken a personal interest in the project by forming a powerful steering committee, which has actively taken on

the responsibility of providing expertise, information, and resources to the project.

The acquisition of over \$400,000.00 in funds for implementation has provided human and financial resources dedicated for project planning and operation. However, the road to the initial successes of the project has been a study in strategizing, political maneuvering, and creating an organization which is almost totally ensconced in collaborative agreements and partnerships.

Rhode Island READS has a conceptual basis of creating projects, which service and integrate the efforts of literacy programs and reading programs with programs operating during the day, after school and on weekends. It seeks to provide safe sites for program activities, parent involvement projects and family literacy initiatives.

The human resources to operationalize the project bring together senior citizens, school personnel, parents, literacy projects directors, citizens, and the business/industry community plus college and high school students. The roles and responsibilities of each volunteer are defined by agreement between the Rhode Island READS project and the local site. Their activities range from providing tutoring sessions with children to supervising after school homework clubs.

One must only review and comprehend the magnitude of Rhode Island's reading and literacy problems to understand why we have engaged in this ambitious project. The primary factor, which makes Rhode Island READS unique and noteworthy is the comprehensiveness of the initiative. In addition to our commitment to students, kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, our model addresses the entire literacy movement: early childhood, adult literacy, and family involvement. Partners collaborate to link and share their resources to deliver the maximum quality services for those with reading and literacy deficits.

Rhode Island READS has created a project to address these issues at many levels with one basic philosophy and several assumptions:

1. We believe we cannot ultimately be successful unless literacy becomes a concern to all citizens, and each person assumes a personal responsibility to solve the problem.
2. Family literacy is a cornerstone of our project and provides a template for assistance to the learning community at large. We intend to help each child reach her or his full potential in life, and family literacy is a key contributor to this program.
3. No single form of service or intervention can solve the problem. However, each one of the projects we have proposed will contribute to the solution of the problem. We will continue to utilize all the credible resources available.
4. All tutoring and assistance does not have to be in specific, structured reading and literacy instruction. Creating a shopping list for the supermarket, or solving math story problems are practical hands-on contributions to a child's literacy progress.
5. President Clinton's America Reads Challenge contends that every citizen can contribute to the goals of the project. In reviewing the literature and programs from across the country, it is clear that exciting and well-structured reading/literacy experiences have a positive effect on a child's literacy progress. Some people will contribute by reading a book to a child, or listening to a group of children read. It goes without saying that these activities must be well organized and manned by volunteers trained to do the job. But it is important that we grow to appreciate *all* the ways in which individuals can contribute to Rhode Island READS.

Rhode Island READS is dedicated to attacking the state's literacy and reading issues with all the resources we can mobilize. We are extremely sensitive to the issues of "Best Practices" and positive interventions. However, we are watching, right now, another group of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students move up to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, without the appropriate reading and literacy skills. Rhode Island READS must move forward to meet the challenge, we must help these children now!

## Introduction

Reading is the process by which we contemplate the world we live in through another's eyes and words. It is a vital intellectual and social experience for each of us, since the impact of what we read helps shape our thoughts and actions. Often we share these perceptions with others, and through this exchange find even more new meaning and relevance in the world around us. Rhode Island Lt. Governor Bernard A. Jackvony describes reading as "the key hole through which we view the world. The more we read, the greater our understanding and perspective grows."

To describe the America Reads Challenge as a way of waging a war to save our way of life is not far from the truth. President Clinton recognized that reading and literacy deficits of our citizens had short and long-term negative consequences on our economic, social and political structure. His call for a million volunteers to assist in this effort to reinvigorate literacy and reading throughout the nation brought sharp focus to a problem which has escalated over the past 10 years.

It was with a clear understanding of the significant reading and literacy problems in our state, that a small group formed the initial collaboration to explore ways to remedy the situation. That effort grew into the project we are now implementing; Rhode Island READS.

## Theoretical Framework

From the beginning, members of the Rhode Island READS project understood that to create a sustained and continued effort to improve literacy and reading skills, each community would need to clearly recognize the critical nature of the problem and build a structure of cooperation and collaboration which would stand the test of time.

A concept grew from the initial work which was titled a Community Assets Based Collaborative. Simply put, each community has assets through a variety of human and financial resources, which could be brought to impact on the reading and literacy issue. Once

these collaborative efforts were established and became integral working partnerships, they could be used to identify and resolve issues or problems arising in the future. This concept has won support in many quarters, and is reflected in the project literature.

Kretzman and McKnight<sup>1</sup> have presented the concept of “Building Communities from the Inside Out”, a process of identifying and mobilizing individual, group, and community resources. This concept provides a crucial model for the rebirth of large cities and urban areas, which now have problems with drug use, crime, low educational levels, teen unemployment, dysfunctional families and many other social issues. It is clear that these same problems have spread to suburban and rural communities, in many cases creating seemingly insurmountable problems for the agencies and organizations traditionally serving these sectors.

Kretzman and McKnight<sup>2</sup> suggest community service and collaboration as ways and means of enrolling our citizens in the struggle to address these issues. Each offers the opportunity to develop personal skills and attributes, which can contribute to the renaissance of a whole community, over time, and the promise of future generations. In addition, the skills learned through service work increase an individual’s personal sense of worth, and increase his or her opportunities for new employment, thereby potentially improving his or her life.

These factors are important elements in homes where children will, it is hoped, learn (from positive adult models) about appropriate behaviors, such as getting to work on time, sharing their time with others who are in need, or just belonging to a group of peers who are making a contribution to their community. In maintaining a successful volunteer position, an individual gains confidence in his or her abilities...while giving of himself to the community. In turn, the community benefits from volunteer services, which provide, at least in part, solutions and answers to social issues, improvements in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Building Communities from the Inside Out “ - Kretzman and McKnight, ACTA Publications, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

community, and, as a result, additional cash flow for local businesses and industries.

An important part of this process is the development of a means and mechanism to organize and put to work the energies of our citizens, organizations, industry and government. Community service from each of these sectors is essential to the development of any community revitalization program or project. The example of a volunteer initiative by private business and government agencies could create a model of service, and should motivate thousands of citizens all across the state to become involved these programs.

The initial goal is to assist the local community to become as independent and resourceful in solving its own internal issues as possible. Locating, enlisting, and focusing human potential, skills and capacities on a specific issue or problem is the first step in this effort. This may require external technical support and assistance, at first. However, the ultimate goal is for the community to be self-sufficient.

Jeremy Rifkin<sup>3</sup> (The End of Work, 1995) suggests that the “third sector” (community service or volunteerism) has “been of historical significance in the making of the nation and now offers the distinct possibility of helping to reshape” the economic and social structure for individuals and communities. Although Rifkin notes that in recent years “the importance of this entity has slipped, it offers the best potential” for the re-emergence of independent communities.

Rifkin perceives our societies as entering into a “Third Industrial Revolution” the cornerstones of which are technology and the computer. If the pattern of downsizing by companies and corporations continues, more and more of our citizens will be forced into new or alternate forms of employment.<sup>4</sup> The economics and business of communities will increasingly become more community centered, relying on local that individuals and businesses to respond to the work needs of the community. A larger and more glaring separation of communities and cities from the federal government

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<sup>3</sup> The End of Work – Rifkin, Jeremy, G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1995

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

will occur. There are substantial indicators that this social phenomenon has already begun.

The nature of work and employment are changing at a rapid pace. In addition, there is great speculation and concern about exactly what skills and experience will be needed to procure a job in the next decade, and beyond. It is our contention that reading and literacy will remain an important qualification in this market. Those without these skills may be left without the means for a meaningful and productive life.

Clearly, there is continued concern about the inability of our children to read which has led to much controversy and frustration. It is a genuine concern based in part on the test results our children achieved on both state and national assessments. The improvement of these skills through a statewide, community assets based collaborative effort should resolve many issues and conflicts. It would be of particular significance if this issue were primarily, or at least in part, resolved through the efforts of individuals and collaboratives from the community.

Kretzman, McKnight, and Rifkin offer suggestions for the development of a model by which the community can improve the literacy and reading skills of its citizens, and maintain an ongoing capacity to resolve future problems and issues. We believe our children can overcome present literacy skill problems, and be prepared for full-potential employment in the next decade.

### Problem Statement

It is estimated that 56,000 students lack basic educational skills in reading and math in Rhode Island. This represents nearly 40% of our total school enrollment. Fourth grade students scored in the 54th percentile in reading on last year's administration of the Metropolitan Achievement Test. Literacy and reading issues have continued to be identified as a tremendous deficit for our children, and handicap them as adults when they enter the workforce.

This problem is complicated by the growing diversity of the population. The 1998 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook reports

that the number of African American children under age five has increased by nearly 50%, the number of Hispanic children has increased nearly three folds and the number of Asian children has doubled. The trend toward a more diverse Rhode Island will continue into the next century. Projections are

1. The Hispanic child population will increase by 51%, from the current 22,800 to nearly 35,000; the Asian and Pacific Island child population will increase by more than 61%, from 7500 to 12,100.
2. The Native American child population will increase by 62% from 1,300 to 2,100.
3. The African American child population will increase by more than 18%.
4. The white, non-Hispanic, child population will decrease by at least 7%.

Rhode Island is a densely populated state of 990,225 (1996 census). In the past 10 years, it is the only New England state to show an overall decline in population. However, it has experienced a tremendous increase in the population of Asians and Latin Americans.

School enrollment data noted for last fall that 36% of all Rhode Island students live in the state's six urban centers and 68% of poor children live in those same core areas. KIDS COUNT (1998) shows that almost one third of all Rhode Island families with children earn less than \$25,000 a year and 77% of Rhode Island's poor children live in single parent families. Rhode Island's "food insecurity rate" (households that experience anxiety about the availability of food) is the 16<sup>th</sup> highest in the country.

According to estimates of 'years of school completed' for adults in Rhode Island (1993 update), Rhode Island has over 240,000 persons who have not completed 12 years of education. This represents nearly 39% of the "25 year and older" population. In fact,

over 76,000 Rhode Islanders are reported to have completed less than seven years of schooling.

### The Rhode Island READS Initiative

The reading ability of children and adults in Rhode Island has been an issue of continuous concern over the past decade. Under the leadership of Lt. Governor Jackvony, the Rhode Island READS initiative creates a major statewide collaborative to address literacy issues, and by so doing, responds to the President's Challenge. The Lt. Governor has appointed a steering committee to provide input, resources, and expertise to the development of the project. They join with the collaborative members in adopting the following goals for the Rhode Island READS project:

1. To increase the literacy and reading skills of children, with special emphasis on pre-school through 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
2. To create an opportunity for the citizens of Rhode Island to actively participate in the educational and decision-making process of preparing our children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
3. To promote, stimulate and support literacy programs throughout the state.
4. To establish a continuous structure of training, technical assistance and additional resources for early childhood programs, Head Start programs, child care providers, and parent involvement projects.

### Program Implementation Models

Two types of program models have emerged which have proven to be successful in accomplishing these goals. In some communities, little or no organizational structure existed for reading and literacy programming, in or out of school. In these communities, the project staff established organizational structures and partnerships to assist in the implementation of a program to meet the identified need.

We strive to build from the “grass-roots” level, meeting with professionals, parents, principals and many other individuals, to gather facts about the literacy and reading needs of the community. We have learned to create a literacy-based program, which is customer friendly, and proved to be effective. We identified reading/literacy programs or curriculums, which addressed the needs, identified by the local service agency, and provided the technical assistance necessary to implement the programs. In most cases, we helped develop advisory groups, identified resources, and/or created linkages to recruit volunteers. In other cases, we assisted a program to increase its scope or implement new project initiatives.

The second model augmented already existing local or state programs, which were currently operating literacy and/or reading projects. In some instances, we added volunteers from another population (such as high school students with college work-study students.) In others, we helped the programs increase their scope of new projects as they developed. A primary contribution was assisting these communities through schools and literacy programs to develop action plans to move forward with their projects.

#### Why create such a comprehensive project?

One must only review and comprehend the magnitude of Rhode Island’s reading and literacy problems to understand why we have engaged in this ambitious project. The primary factor, which makes Rhode Island READS unique and noteworthy is the comprehensiveness of the initiative. In addition to our commitment to students, kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, our model addresses the entire literacy movement: early childhood, adult literacy, and family involvement. Partners collaborate to link and share their resources to deliver the maximum quality services for those with reading and literacy deficits.

We are very familiar with the inadequate reading and literacy levels of children and adults in Rhode Island. We also know that many agencies and organizations are working feverishly to improve the economic conditions in Rhode Island, today, and in the future.

Improved reading and literacy skills in the population are the sine qua non of such progress.

Rhode Island READS has created a project to address these issues at many levels with one basic philosophy and several assumptions:

1. We believe we cannot ultimately be successful unless literacy becomes a concern to all citizens, and each person assumes a personal responsibility to solve the problem.
2. Family literacy is a cornerstone of our project and provides a template for assistance to the learning community at large. We intend to help each child reach her or his full potential in life, and family literacy is a key contributor to this program.
3. No single form of service or intervention can solve the problem. However, each one of the projects we have proposed will contribute to the solution of the problem. Cross age tutoring, one to one mentoring or simply a child reading a book to an adult, will benefit both the volunteer and the child involved in the activity. After school homework programs also serve an important function in the overall process. We will continue to utilize all the credible resources available.
4. All tutoring and assistance does not have to be in specific, structured reading and literacy instruction. Creating a shopping list for the supermarket, or solving math story problems are practical hands-on contributions to a child's literacy progress.
5. President Clinton's America Reads Challenge contends that every citizen can contribute to the goals of the project. In reviewing the literature and programs from across the country, it is clear that exciting and well-structured reading/literacy experiences have a positive effect on a child's literacy progress. Some people will contribute by reading a book to a child, or listening to a group of children read. Others will work as tutors in a classroom, or after

school, in programs at safe sites. It goes without saying that these activities must be well organized and manned by volunteers trained to do the job. But it is important that we grow to appreciate *all* the ways in which individuals can contribute to Rhode Island READS.

6. We are dedicated to attacking the problem with all the resources we can mobilize. We are extremely sensitive to the issues of “Best Practices” and positive interventions. However, we are watching, right now, another group of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students move up to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, without the appropriate reading and literacy skills. Rhode Island READS must move forward to meet the challenge, we must help these children now!

### What are the critical issues for Rhode Island READS at this point?

We recognize the areas of critical need in the implementation of our programs. As you continue to read, you will find we have addressed some important issues but are still now in the process of planning for others. Rhode Island READS has reached a critical stage in its development. We have many communities on board, interested in receiving assistance in starting, maintaining, or broadening programs. The most important areas of need are:

1. Recruiting, screening, training, placing, and monitoring volunteers.
2. Delivering effective training programs, which qualify tutors for schools and projects, plus training local personnel to deliver this training in the future.
3. Creating a statewide advertising campaign.
4. Providing supervision and coordination for programs and volunteers.
5. Recruiting new project partners and collaborators.
6. Developing local and state partnerships.
7. Procuring financial resources for the project.

What has Rhode Island Reads accomplished to this point?

A. Financial Planning and Working Capital

1. \$375,000.00 - AmeriCorps\*VISTA Grant - 30 VISTAS
2. \$31,000.00 - Professional development activities, training programs, and a communications center.
3. \$47,000.00 - Public Library Summer VISTA Reading Program

B. Steering committee and work groups

As previously noted, Lt. Governor Jackvony established has established a statewide steering committee, which has brought together work groups to accomplish specific tasks and activities. Their work is proceeding, but they have been presented with a tremendous challenge. Additional members from many sectors of the community have been added to these work groups to assist in these efforts.

C. Service delivery model

Rhode Island READS is a large and diverse collaborative; members are experienced in the delivery of productive, effective reading and literacy programs. Their expertise and documented service delivery systems have provided RI READS with the opportunity to create a dynamic model, and respond to the identified needs of programs and children.

Although our partners may have come to the project with differing philosophical views or approaches to reading and literacy problems, we all have a common goal. We have created a model of cooperation many national organizations and entities would envy.

#### D. Training committee/consortium

The consortium members are highly qualified training organizations with the capacity to deliver a set of training programs, services and materials to potential volunteers and professionals in reading/literacy programs. The following are being created or have been developed:

1. A basic tutor-training template modified for a number of audiences (college students, senior citizens, etc.)
2. A mentoring training program
3. A Volunteer Director handbook
4. The Rhode Island READS resource library
5. A cross-age tutoring program
6. Technical assistance capabilities
7. A web site
8. A communications center
9. A 1-800 number for volunteers and training

#### E. Advertising/public relations work group

There is agreement that the members of the work group need to develop a detailed, thoughtful, comprehensive plan. Their challenge is significant, since few financial resources are available for this activity.

#### F. Literacy work group

The literacy work group is adding new members. In particular, they will be examining adult literacy, family literacy, and parent involvement models. Specifically they are:

1. Reviewing the RI Literacy and Dropout Prevention Act.
2. Examining GED, ABE and existing adult and family literacy programs.
3. Developing a working relationship with Even Start.
4. Establishing liaison with RI Head Start.

## 5. Reviewing new and emergent literacy programs

### G. Work Space.

Rhode Island READS headquarters are in the RI Department of Education (RIDE) offices on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Shepard Building in Providence. This office space is being provided as an in kind contribution to the project by RIDE.

### H. New collaborative partners

The University of Rhode Island Membership's in national programs/organizations:

1. The President's Coalition for the America Reads Challenge.
2. A Read\*Write\*NOW!, Ready\*Set\*Read! pilot site.
3. An America Reads pilot site.

### I. Rhode Island Department of Education

Rhode Island READS has made a commitment to the educational strategic plan process initiated by Peter McWalters, RI Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. Specifically, Dr. David Morton is a member of the Article 31 implementation committee. This group is developing a process to help local school departments conduct strategic planning for implementation of Article 31 which stipulates that each school and district create a plan to overcome the gaps, which now exist between actual student achievement and established standards for reading, writing, and literacy.

Staff members from the RI Department of Education's Early Childhood, Literacy, and Adult Education programs have created a team with Rhode Island READS personnel. They submitted a proposal in response to a federal grant request for literacy funding through Even Start. Department members are working on the literacy work group. In addition, we are working with RIDE's AmeriCorps Learn and Serve personnel

to develop collaborative initiatives with higher education and RI READS for school based programs.

## J. Programs and Projects

RI READS pilot projects have been extremely successful. We have used a “customer service” model, in which the program or school makes the decision about the type of programs to be initiated. Four guidelines support this model:

1. Programs are developed with working staff members and their supervisors.
2. Ongoing communication and feedback must identify and respond to local needs and issues
3. Resources from different streams of service or individuals will be utilized.
4. Coordinators will be designated to oversee activities.

The following projects are examples but don't include all projects implemented in the first year.

### Newport READS

Nineteen volunteers in an after-school reading and literacy program serve 22 children. Seven tutors in classrooms work one on one or in small groups conducting reading and literacy activities.

### East Providence READS

Thirty two Retired and Senior Volunteers (RSVP) work with two elementary schools in the classrooms, one-on-one, and in small groups helping with reading and literacy activities. Twenty-six children are involved.

## Scituate READS

Twice every month, 29 students go to the Head Start program in Cranston, RI. They read stories, play literacy games, and engage in other types of learning activities with 22 children.

Once a month, Cranston Head Start brings 25 children to Scituate High School, where they engage activities such as reading, baking, and playing learning games and painting.

Five students go to the Scituate Early Learning Center to read to children twice a month.

Each Friday, five students go to N. Scituate Elementary School to work with one class on their "Good Deeds Journal", a reading and writing activity.

Sixteen high school students correspond with 19 third grade pen pals. The children send and receive letters, which the teacher uses in reading and writing exercises. Once a month the students go to the elementary school to visit the children and discuss their letters.

Six students meet with selected elementary students once a week as mentors. They engaged in special projects on a one-to-one basis.

## Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI)

CCRI has an extensive and proven model for service delivery. Much of the CCRI model has been utilized in developing the Rhode Island READS service delivery system. CCRI sends college work-study students, and volunteers from courses to the West Warwick School Department at Providence Street Elementary School and Horgan Elementary School to work in reading and literacy programs. In addition VISTA members supervise programs in Woonsocket at the Citizens Memorial Elementary School and Francis Varieur Elementary School in Pawtucket. A total of 12 work-study students and 55 volunteers provide one to one, and small group literacy and reading activities, in classrooms and after school programs.

## Providence Public Library/Office of State Library Services

Summer Reading Program - 21 VISTA members worked at 22 libraries across Rhode Island in the "Riding the Reading Waves" state program. Read \*Write \*Now!, a tutoring system provided by the United States Office of Education, was implemented at 20 library sites. This curriculum, which has shown significant success throughout the country, provided libraries with the first opportunity to engage in one-on-one tutoring services for children.

Creating Readers - a VISTA member is helping to develop a program for parent information and training workshops to support early childhood literacy.

Cradle to Crayons - a VISTA member is assisting in a family literacy project with pre-school students and parents. 135 families participated this year.

Computer literacy - two VISTA members are teaching computer skills to adults.

## Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA)

Literacy Volunteers of America-Rhode Island (LVA-RI), an affiliate of the Literacy Volunteers of America, provides leadership and services to eight LVA programs across the state. These projects give individual and small group tutoring to adults using volunteer tutors. Tutoring takes place at a time and place convenient for both the tutor and learner, and is free and confidential. In the last fiscal year, 625 volunteers in the affiliates provided more than 27,000 hours of tutoring to 800 learners. Rhode Island READS has committed four VISTA members to work on the expansion and development of this project.

## Volunteers in Providence Schools (VIPS)

Four VISTA members are assigned to community engagement activity work in reading and literacy programs. One VISTA member has implemented reading programs in nine elementary schools. In addition, VISTA members developed an in-school reading

motivation, arts-enrichment and dramatic arts program. VISTA members organized and supervised after school study-skills programs, which are dedicated to providing reading workshops for parents and study skills supervisors. VISTA members have assisted in the significant strengthening of collaboration with reading teachers. Six additional VISTA members will be assigned to VIPS next year.

### Conferences/Workshops

Rhode Island READS, with the assistance of the Corporation for National Service and the Rhode Island Commission for National and Community Service, assisted in the planning and sponsoring the “Governor’s Policy Seminar on Brain Development Research” last winter. Other sponsors included the Educational Commission of the States, United Way of Southeastern New England, and Rhode Island KIDS COUNTS and the RI Department of Education.

Plans are already underway to assist in the sponsorship of at least two conferences for early childhood providers and one addressing new brain development issues in the next year.

### Retired and Senior Volunteer (RSVP) and Foster Grandparent Programs (FGP)

Over 300 RSVP and FGP members are currently working in the Rhode Island READS projects. Their activities include coordination of building activities, recruitment of volunteers, assistance in planning next year’s projects and related services.

Two VISTA members were assigned to these programs during the past year. The immediate and effective success of this collaboration with Rhode Island READS prompted the project to designate seven additional VISTA members to RSVP and FGP programs next year.

### Who will serve as a Rhode Island READS volunteer?

Individuals to be targeted as potential volunteers include:

- Business and industry management and personnel

- Public elected officials
- Senior citizens
- College Students
- High school students
- Parents
- Community members

### Business and industry management and personnel

Plans to create partnerships with leaders of business and industry are in progress and a program will begin this fall. Mrs. Margaret Edwards, executive director of the Public Education Fund, has worked with Rhode Island READS to develop this collaborative effort. The project is designed to accomplish five outcomes:

- A. To provide leadership to schools and community organizations in creating reading and literacy programs.
- B. Provide personal reading activities with children and serve as positive role models.
- C. In the process of these sessions, children will have an opportunity to develop an appreciation for reading and begin to believe that their lives can be more successful with an improved standard of literacy.
- D. To appeal to businesses and industries to allow paid, release time for their employees, so that they can provide exciting, positive reading experiences for children on a regular basis.
- E. To develop a long-term commitment for human and financial resources to combat illiteracy all over Rhode Island (which will certainly benefit employers, in turn).

### Public Elected Officials

Lt. Governor Jackvony will challenge all public elected officials to volunteer at least one hour per week to improve the reading ability

of our children. Public officials will have the opportunity to experience the breadth and depth of the reading problems in Rhode Island in addition to making a contribution toward solving the problems.

We believe that this involvement will provide a model for the citizens of Rhode Island and encourage their personal investment in the project. Our public officials, at the highest levels, have committed their time to this endeavor. We are seeking the assistance of all our elected officials to help in this effort.

### Senior Citizens

Senior citizens are a vast reservoir of individuals who are being recruited to help meet the challenge of teaching our children to read. According to the United States Census Bureau, one of the fastest growing population in the United States are individuals over 65 years of age. Senior mentors and tutors have proven to be extremely successful in educational endeavors over the years.

The Corporation for National Service is an organization respected for its record of utilizing skills and expertise of senior citizens in community service programs. RSVP and FGP volunteers are viewed as vital contributors to the success of this initiative. Their vast personal and professional experience coupled with their enthusiasm and motivational level, are the key to the planning, implementation and sustained operation of this project. The recruitment and utilization of Rhode Island's senior citizens will be vital to the implementation and operation of the project. Seniors are assigned leadership roles, with responsibilities for major aspects of this planning process in implementation of projects, and as tutors and volunteers in programs. Rhode Island READS staff continue to explore new areas for their involvement.

### High school students

Many school departments offer community service and service-learning components at the high school and middle/junior high school level. Often course credit is realized from the experience. These programs can concentrate much of their effort on reading,

grades K-6, through a peer and cross tutoring system. Certainly, high school students would need training and supervision, but peer and cross tutoring have produced exceptionally good results across the country.

The opportunity for students to have a teaching experience under the guidance of professional educators will provide a plethora of opportunities and rewards, which may include acquiring pedagogical awakening and interest, for many, in becoming teachers themselves. At the very least, students will gain skills and knowledge about children, which will serve them well if they become parents.

Lastly, this is an opportunity for our high school students to contribute a valuable service to their community and the future of the state. It also has a strong resemblance to the activities described in the School to Career philosophy. Students will have an opportunity to work in the “real world” and experience a work place environment, its roles, responsibilities, and expectations. It is anticipated that new partnerships between different levels of the educational environment will be established.

### College students

College Programs such as those at Providence College, Roger Williams University, and the Community College of Rhode Island have already shown that college students can play a significant role in developing the literacy skills of children and adults.

College students offer a higher level of skills and knowledge in assisting in the development of literacy and reading skills. Many institutions of higher education now require a service experience as part of the course requirements for graduation. These programs have proven to be the very successful at enlisting college students in community volunteer projects for literacy skill development.

### Parents as tutors

We are training selected parents as tutors for the following reasons:

1. Parents can be a positive reinforcement to a child in improving their reading ability. By virtue of their experience with children and their understanding of their own child, they are often excellent tutor and volunteers in classrooms and programs.
2. Through training and experience, parents can become more proficient in their personal literacy skills.
3. Family literacy is the foundation for increasing the literacy of Americans; this is true especially for those to who English is a second language. Adult literacy increases and often precedes children becoming proficient in English. There are critics who maintain the school is responsible for teaching the child literacy and reading skills. We would counter that the sheer numbers of new Americans who speak languages other than English make this an impossible task for public education. Therefore, programs, which encourage and expand English language use in the home, are merely an expansion of the educational system. Rhode Island READS strives to increase these programs to fill the need through building literacy skills at home with such tools as Read\*Write\*Now! and Ready\*Set\*Read!
4. By utilizing parents as tutors and mentors, we strengthen the schools; school programs only have a chance to work with children 5 to 7 hours a day, 5 days a week. Is it not somewhat naïve to exclude parents from the opportunity to help themselves and their children through family literacy programs?
5. Providing training and literacy skills to parents is of particular importance to Head Start Programs. Rhode Island READS provides these programs with volunteers, which they desperately need, help deliver critical information about early childhood development to Head Start mothers. A VISTA member is being assigned to Head Start this year to explore additional ways in which we can collaborate.
6. The national trend toward parent involvement programs has been growing quickly. However, many parents are reluctant to go to the school for assistance or information. Parent tutors and volunteers in are a possible means for attracting parents into the

school environment, and becoming involved in the educational process. Rhode Island READS believes parents, as volunteers in schools will facilitate increased parent involvement.

### Management of volunteer tutor

Volunteer management for tutors is divided into five administrative activities: recruitment, selection/screening, training, placement and monitoring/evaluation and training. Rhode Island READS put together volunteer manual to assist in the development of programs. This manual includes technical assistance and plans for training programs.

#### 1. Recruitment of volunteers

A substantial program of recruiting volunteers has already been put into place. A "1-800" number has been created to accommodate individuals who wish to volunteer. We have a WEB site, which will also assist in this function.

#### 2. Selecting and screening volunteers

The basic screening process includes an application, personal interview, and in-depth reference check. A second phase includes a local police and FBI criminal record check.

#### 3. Placing, Monitoring and Evaluation

Volunteers are placed and scheduled to work with children under supervised situations. All sessions are scheduled and recorded by the program coordinator. Volunteers will be observed and evaluated while working with children. Information concerning these sessions will be given to project staff, who will follow-up with training or supervisory meetings with the volunteers. Additionally, all volunteers will have a 90-day probation period during which time progress and work will be reviewed. Each volunteer tutor will be formally evaluated twice per year.

#### 4. Training volunteers

The four primary goals for training tutor and volunteers are:

- A. To provide an overview of tutor activities and responsibilities, so that the individual can make an informed choice as to whether they wish to continue in the process.
- B. To help individuals deselect themselves from the process if they do not have the needed skills, interest, or personal aptitudes to meet the standards of the program.
- C. To train volunteers to meet the needs of those individuals, which will include identifying the individual skills each brings to the process, and his or her preferences among activities.
- D. To provide volunteers who wish to become tutors will need basic information about children and methods of helping them improve their reading capabilities.

We have developed a training package by reviewing both information from within the state and from across the country. Our training is flexible enough to meet the needs of a variety of participants. We have piloted the training program and, through revisions, tailored it to be very successful in meeting individual needs. This may, of course, change as we move further into the project and find more specific needs, which have not yet been identified.

#### Incentives for volunteers

Following the President's National Summit, many felt there would be a substantial increase in the number of individuals coming forward to participate in community service. We believe that since community service is not a social norm in our culture, the number of available volunteers may in fact diminish over time, if this trend is not actively attacked.

The project has identified a number of incentives to assist in the recruitment of volunteers. We saw these incentives as beneficial in

training and support, while volunteers are working in the programs, and we believe the creation of a long term benefits, which may insure deeper commitment of individuals to the projects:

- Our higher education partnerships have agreed to provide advance placement credits through their community service program to individuals who work as tutors. These credits will be transferable to all state institutions of higher education.
- The Department of Human Services (DHS) will offer welfare to work mothers the opportunity to continue receiving public assistance benefits while performing community service as tutor and volunteers in reading and literacy programs. They will also be eligible for advanced placement credits.
- A potential benefit for any volunteer working in Rhode Island READS is the opportunity to apply for AmeriCorps and VISTA positions. An additional advantage would be the educational benefit, which would create the opportunity for these individuals to begin or continue a college course of study.
- Rhode Island READS is exploring the potential for incentives for senior citizens that serve in the project through property tax or income tax credits.

The Rhode Island READS project is a prototype of projects which are being proposed and implemented throughout the United States. The use of volunteers in programs in school, after school, on the weekends, and in literacy programs is seen as an efficient and effective method of solving, at least to some degree, our literacy problems.

Rhode Island READS and the America Reads Challenge can produce maximum results at a minimal financial cost.

Rhode Island READS asks every citizen to take a personal responsibility for achieving increased literacy and reading skills through a statewide effort. The opportunity to engage a large portion of our population in this crusade offers a number of unique opportunities. Among them are the creation of a greater public awareness of the problem, and the harvest of new ideas about how we might make improvements in our present educational system. Another benefit is simply the involvement of our citizens working together for the sake of the state's children, by creating stimulating their interest and enthusiasm for community service. It also offers to both the educational system and social service system a vast reservoir of potential volunteers to assist in programs, which address the rapid changes in our society.

The problem is extremely clear: many of our citizens, in particular our children, need assistance in developing improved reading and literacy skills. Rhode Island READS will provide the opportunity, and the leadership, to successfully fill this need.

### The future and Rhode Island READS

Many programs and projects are being planned or explored for the future. The following list identifies some of the possibilities being considered.

#### A. Even Start and Rhode Island READS

The creation of a statewide Family Literacy Advisory Council is the linchpin of the Rhode Island plan. Comprised of the relevant partners in family literacy, it would provide a forum for public information and the implementation of proactive steps to bring consistency, quality and unity to the family literacy movement. Rhode Island has many programs and projects, in addition to its public schools, which offer and operate multifaceted literacy programs. A statewide literacy council would bring these programs together, and ensure consistency in the instructional and curricular programs, utilizing the best practices, streamlining and coordinating efforts, and making the most of our resources.

It is further proposed that a voluntary computerized tracking system (based upon a management information systems model) be available to all participants in literacy programs. One Head Start program has such a system in place and Rhode Island will begin implementing a statewide “health card” system for children in public schools in 1999. Rhode Island has an established computer network serving local school districts and state agencies already in place.

Rhode Island has five Even Start programs in place; however, because we receive the ‘small state minimum grant’ award, we are unable to work with our neediest communities. By pooling our resources, Even Start, Rhode Island READS, Adult Education, Early Childhood Education and the state’s literacy initiative, in conjunction with new funds from this proposed program, we anticipate the implementation of seven new Even Start programs in the areas of highest need in Rhode Island next year.

The Statewide Family Literacy Advisory Council will establish a task force to create program standards for *all* family literacy programs. These standards will build on the standards and curriculum frameworks already developed and implemented in schools. These standards will refer to the standards of Even Start and those developed by the National Center for Family Literacy.

The formation of a Statewide Family Literacy Advisory Council will also create a forum for identifying, and advocating for, needed legislation, and the procurement of permanent resources for family literacy programs. The council will aggressively work to create a legislatively based statewide policy on family literacy as a basis for state supported programs. Legislation similar to the Arizona law will be used as a model.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Early Start Proposal – Diffendale, Mason and Morton, Rhode Island Department of Education, 1998.

## B. Head Start and Early Childhood Programs

Rhode Island READS will work with Head Start programs to increase the number of volunteers involved with the children in their programs. In addition, the project is committed to developing collaborative partnerships with child advocacy organizations, to assist in creating more effective state programs and policy for child development.

Head Start programs will also receive assistance with staff training and development. Rhode Island READS has identified a number of instructional programs and curriculum packages which can help parents become more confident and more capable with their children as “first teachers” at home. The project also proposes using qualified parents as volunteers in schools and programs. These programs will have access to training, technical support, and the library of curriculum resources available through Rhode Island READS.

The use of new and effective programs for child development in school, literacy programs, and at home, remains an area, which needs attention in this state. RI READS will attempt to assist Head Start Programs and other child care agencies in introducing their staff and parents to these practices through a number of events, including co-sponsoring conferences, workshops, and training programs. In addition, Rhode Island READS will utilize its public relations and outreach network to create a greater public awareness of the need for improved early childhood services.

## C. Safe sites for programs

Rhode Island READS has the responsibility of insuring that any program offered through the project is conducted at a site, which is safe for children and adults. Given the preponderance of child molestation crimes and violent acts in our country, safe sites for children and volunteers must be a high priority.

Our volunteer management process is only one of the ways in

which we will insure this safety. Each project will be housed in a facility, which is structurally sound. In addition, each project will be provided with release forms which designate how a child will leave the project after each session; who may pick up the child, will they walk home, etc. Program staff will be instructed never to leave a child unattended after a program. Staff is to be certain that the child is released from the program only in the prescribed manner. Through the course of the next year, projects will be started and monitored with standards, which maintain safe site practices.

#### D. America's Promise and Rhode Island READS

Our partnership with America's Promise has just been formed in the past few months. However, we feel the potential for developing cross age tutoring and mentoring programs, utilizing the dedicated youth affiliated with America's Promise, is substantial. We are working on a plan to integrate our programs, combining our common and individual resources to the greatest advantage.

#### E. Library partnerships

Our collaborations with the Providence City Library and the State Office of Library Services have been very fruitful. As previously mentioned, the summer program was extremely successful. In addition, our assistance with library early childhood programs is also reaping great rewards for the state's children. We are presently discussing new initiatives and activities jointly sponsored by our organizations. A great deal of our work with after school and weekend programs will be housed in our library system.

#### F. Mentoring program

The Chamber Education Foundation in Warwick, Rhode Island has a distinguished mentoring program, which they have implemented in several public schools. Rhode Island READS has worked in partnership with this organization to provide a mentoring component for the project.

Mentors are a positive, nurturing influence in a child's life, in particular for those children who have no supportive family structure. Having gained the trust and confidence of a child, a mentor can assist her or him to make good decisions about his or her activities and behaviors. We are absolutely convinced this process will make a difference in how children perform and participate in school and in society.

Much of our work is experimental and an exploration of how we can use volunteers to their greatest capacity for our children. We accept the fact that some programs will need revision and review, others may fail. But we have the expertise and experience to make the adjustments needed to realize our goals. Literacy and reading skills must improve in Rhode Island. We are dedicated to that outcome. We are working in four new areas to develop programs, which have already shown great potential for increasing the reading and literacy skills of our children:

1. Infant Brain Development – The Education Commission for the States (ECS), under the direction of its president, Frank Newman, Ph.D., has delivered a significant volume of information pertaining to scientific research and practical application of infant brain development practices which cannot be disputed. The involvement and interaction between an infant and his or her caretaker, from the moment of birth, has a significant effect upon the intellectual growth and development of the child. The infant's brain can, and does, develop a greater capacity to learn when provided with interactions and activities such as reading, singing, talking and comforting activities. It is our contention that the number of children requiring special education services can be significantly decreased if these practices are implemented. Rhode Island READS is dedicated to increasing the knowledge base of parents and infant care providers about these and other infant brain development practices which will greatly benefit the children of our state.

2. Educational kinesiology – New and emerging research indicates a strong case for the relationship between cognition and planned physical activities. Our early childhood experts are examining the literature and reviewing experimental practices from locations across the country.
3. Literacy through Computers – Initial research pertaining to the use of computer software with students experiencing difficulties with reading and literacy have produced a number of interesting findings. We are examining programs, which strengthen specific areas of the brain, in order to help children overcome their reading problems. Computers are of use in this regard, and Rhode Island READS is examining every potential contribution they can make to our programs.
4. Literacy and the arts – The arts offer children new learning experiences, which can accommodate differences in learning style and increase motivation. Our first “literacy and the arts” programs at VIPS have been more successful than we had anticipated. A new “literacy and the arts” collaborative with a local art group, a college, a theater group and several interested professional artists is forming the basis for a major collaboration. We believe we must stay on the cutting edge of experimental learning activities. Literacy and the Arts have already achieved some national recognition. We propose to consolidate and collate information from our experiences in Rhode Island to develop a program of significance for children.

We are enthused about and, actively pursuing these projects. They can make a real difference for our children. But it will be positive performance, customer satisfaction and quality programming which will be the measure of the success and sustainability of Rhode Island

READS. We are implementing and/or supporting programs in over 80 locations this fall. We estimate this number will grow to over 100 throughout the rest of the year.

## Observations and Recommendations

### The Corporation for National Service

The Corporation for National Service offers human and financial resources to many significant projects and programs including the America READS Challenge. Rhode Island READS has benefited immensely from their services. In particular, the following have provided tremendous support and leadership:

#### Rhode Island State Corporation Office

The Rhode Island State Corporation Office has tremendous credibility and standing in the human service, community service and educational communities. Vincent Marzullo, the state director, has provided access to a myriad of potential stakeholders and resources throughout the state. In particular, state offices are extremely flexible and responsive to creative and new projects. Of particular note is their ability to provide perspective, and knowledge of similar projects through local, state and national entities.

State offices are not motivated by financial considerations. In Rhode Island, they align themselves with projects, which improve the community and its citizens. An additional contribution of the state office is the provision of useful information about the protocol for transacting business internal and external to the corporation's many entities.

In Rhode Island, the state director strategically placed VISTA members in key organizations and programs prior to the emergence of our project, which provided a sound base for our implementation. This placements provided significant access to individuals and programs which were essential to the development of Rhode Island READS.

In short, Rhode Island READS would not have attained the level of success it has enjoyed over the past year without the foresight and involvement of the State office. Fortunately, Mr. Marzullo anticipated the significance of the President's America Reads Challenge and has worked in excess of all expectations to help the project succeed. These services are available in all states and should be tapped into by project leaders.

### Rhode Island Commission for National and Community Service

Rhode Island's state commission has been of great service in its partnership with Rhode Island READS. In Rhode Island, the executive director of the commission, David Karoff, was instrumental in helping the project to get funds for training tutors and creating a communication center for recruiting volunteers. In addition, Mr. Karoff provided valuable insights and contributions while serving on the Rhode Island READS steering committee.

The commission's training and technical assistance director was instrumental in developing positive ties with AmeriCorps projects and trainers. This resource is also available in each state, and projects should search for similar partnership.

### Ethnography

We have found that collecting information and data about the project is an extremely important process. In this regard, we have taken an ethnographic approach to record keeping of project activities. While we save a great deal of the documentation and data from the work in which we are currently engaged, it has become most relevant in two areas. First we find that we can retrieve early versions of written work or plans as we move forward on a specific project activity. This helps us keep in mind the original intent of our agenda, and judge how we are progressing.

A second use involves assisting other projects and programs, which may contact us for information about how we went about a specific

process or succeeded in developing a project. We can send out that information to them.

### Project identification

One of the secrets to successful dissemination and partnerships is seeing to it the local level of the program receives the primary publicity and credit for the project. This is essential to programs where individuals give their time and effort voluntarily.

We encourage local projects to develop or maintain their individual identity. For example, Rhode Island READS is the statewide project implementing the America Reads Challenge, but most of our collaborative partners have their own identities. This also helps maintain a positive relationship between the statewide project staff and the local program personnel.

### Alligators and other beasties

Although it was not initially apparent, there were individuals and groups which did not want to see the Rhode Island READS project succeed. We call these groups' alligators and other beasties. From their ranks come individuals with agendas, which are not friendly to our initiative. Through discussions with America Reads Challenge project directors and staff from across the country, this resistance appears a fundamental problem and exists at the local, state and national level. Despite the fact that an America Reads Challenge project may help many children to improve their reading and literacy skills, there is opposition in some quarters. This is not a short-term phenomena, either here in Rhode Island or across the country. However, we make a concerted effort to keep in regular contact with our opposition. They provide us with information and ideas, which improve our project, help us to avoid pitfalls and skirt territorial conflicts.

### Stay focused

When necessary we review and revise our action plans and strategic plan. This helps us remain focused and on track. As we became more successful, people began to approach us with ideas for other

related projects. Without periodic review to maintain our perspective our attention could have been siphoned off to many other opportunities or programs. We soon discovered that diluting our power base and resources decreased the rigor of our project.

Many of the ideas presented were (and are) very appealing, with excellent potential. However, it is important to keep our eye on the target and not be needlessly distracted. As Rhode Island READS progresses, we will encounter more details and hurdles which we must attend to. We give ourselves the opportunity to be flexible, and not over-committed.

### Collaborative insights

Establishing basic criteria for collaborative partnerships is a fundamental practice, which assists us in deciding upon the viability of new partnerships. Making good judgments about venturing into new collaborative arrangements is one of our most important decision functions. Criteria for these collaboratives helps Rhode Island READS to avoid being distracted by potential partnerships which appear to have merit, but are not in concert with your goals and objectives. For example, one such criteria for Rhode Island READS is that we do not collaborate with organizations which don't screen volunteers, including a BCI check.

Collaborative partnerships are exciting, and they can be productive mechanisms for moving both partners forward. But they can also be counter-productive, and actually harmful to your project, if not executed in a productive manner. The following are suggestions, which should be considered when engaging in this process:

- Establish an inside contact: We never make "cold" phone calls to other groups or individuals. Often approaching the right person or individuals within the organization who can provide information to key personnel can make your first contact more productive.
- Review and research: You will make better decisions about a potential collaboration by collecting and reviewing information about the organization. Talking with someone who is presently

working with the organization, or has worked with them, is also helpful.

- **Providing Information:** Sending information about your project (mission, goals, objectives, standards and resources) can save time and energy.
- **Memorandums of agreement:** Once a final agreement has been created, write a memorandum of agreement which specifies each member's roles and responsibilities in the arrangement. Be specific where possible, and discuss those areas, which are not well defined. Leave as little ambiguity as possible. This document protects both you and your partner(s) from misunderstandings or problems. But make not mistake, no matter how well you plan, there will be issues in any collaborative arrangement.
- **Making Commitments:** The administration of quality collaborative activities is the fulfillment of the agreements entered into by the partners. While extenuating circumstances often occur, a broken commitment can produce negative ramifications, including reluctance by other programs or projects leaders to work with you.
- A successful collaborative arrangement results in the completion or improvement of a project. Often, collaborations may cease after the goal(s) of the initial agreement has been completed. However, one objective of a successful collaboration is usually to re-engage the partnership for new and more meaningful joint endeavors. If programs are to become integrated into the fabric of the community and continue for the benefit of our children, collaboratives need to grow and become more interrelated over time. Long term successful collaboratives are the basis for sustainability of projects and the America Reads Challenge.
- **Hidden agendas:** Every party entering discussions about a collaborative arrangement has an agenda of items and outcomes. We all speculate about potential "hidden agendas"

at length, which can sometimes become a distraction or barrier to building a relationship. We believe that if we do our homework about potential partners and enter into a dialogue without making hasty decisions, we can make sound, fruitful decisions.

We might ask ourselves these questions: do we lay all the cards on the table when we first begin discussing a partnership? Do we meet with a potential partner without revealing certain items we hope to accomplish in initial meetings? Neither partner will ever know all about the dynamics intentions of the other. Forming a relationship, which will be mutually productive, is the most important consideration.

### Evaluation and research

The America Reads Challenge has only experienced a small part of the scrutiny it will receive in the next few years. There is no question that it will be analyzed and reviewed in the same context as other programs under the federal GPRA legislation.

The issue of evaluating the effectiveness and impact of America READS on children is of particular significance. Initially, satisfaction surveys administered to students, parents, teachers and administrators will suffice. However, some critics are asking for more substantial quantitative proof the effectiveness of America Reads programs.

The calls and clamor for experimental and quasi-experimental research pertaining to America Reads programs unleash a litany of questions and variables, which cannot be easily answered because of the variety of program types and models. Of course there is a need for this research and we must move forward to meet this challenge. Our best hope at this point is the use of assessment tools used on a pre-post basis to measure individual student improvement in reading. This of course will not be acceptable to our critics (remember the alligators and the beasties).

We believe that the use of standardized test results to measure the success of America Reads is not viable at this point and could

actually be detrimental to the movement. In time we will develop the methodology and sophistication to utilize these instruments and the data they capture. The President's Challenge needs time to find, train and use volunteers in many capacities to help our children raise their literacy skills. Unfortunately, we will be under increasing pressure to show results in the next year or two.

### Higher education

Institutions of higher education who provide students with teacher training programs have come under greater scrutiny in the past few years. We believe the system of teaching pedagogical skills to our future teacher's needs to be examined and revised.

Fortunately, many college and university programs have already begun serious internal examinations of their own programs. America Reads offers them a real opportunity to send students into schools through volunteer and Learn and Serve America programs.

The outcomes of these hands-on experiences are two-fold: some students may determine at an early stage of their college careers that working with children is not their calling.

The opposite side of the coin highlights a number of those experiencing the joys and excitement of working with children who will choose to become teachers, rather than pursue other careers. Rhode Island READS is working with seven institutions of higher education to examine this process. At the very least, the opportunities offered through federal work study funds, and the growing number of colleges which are requiring "service credits" for graduation, will provide a broader base of young adults who are equipped to help our children.

### Where gaps exist in the America Reads Challenge.

The America Reads Challenge office under the direction of Ms. Carol Rasco has done an excellent job of disseminating materials and information pertaining to the project. In addition to a web site, the office is extremely accommodating to e-mail requests or telephone

inquiries. The America Reads conferences have been extremely helpful.

However, there are several areas in which the America Reads Challenge needs answers for new projects and issues. Activities related to special education are lacking. We are still sorting through the information on tutoring children in general, and have not found enough significant programs for those with special needs. Likewise, because of the tremendous influx of students speaking a language other than English, we need additional support for ESL programs.

And of course, we need additional financing. This is why Rhode Island Reads staff members are perplexed by the inability of the United States Congress to find a suitable compromise to the Reading Excellence Act. The “Goodling Bill”, as it was originally dubbed, was not user-friendly to America Reads projects. President Clinton’s staff initiated a drive to find funds to be used for new practices and instruction in reading and literacy. The potential of assisting programs which were not considered “Best Practices”, seemed to be the stumbling block which congressional leaders were unable to avoid.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the “New Math” catastrophe and the more recent dismissal of phonics by Whole Language enthusiasts fully understand how the “myth” of “Best Practices” is can be a barrier to innovation in curriculum design and creativity in instructional practices. It can also lead us down a path, which eventually prove to be very unproductive, potentially harmful.

### Summary and Conclusions

The future growth and development of America depends, at least in part, on the success of this initiative. Rhode Island READS will strive to accomplish its role to insure that the America Reads Challenge becomes a significant, successful opportunity for our children.

Those, who are devoted to this project, are one of the last bastions of hope for this society. By fighting to improve the reading and literacy skills of our children, we are truly waging a war to create a better future.

We implore all of you to hold firm and stand together. Share your resources, knowledge, and skills. Practice compromise and flexibility to smooth your differences and get on with the work, which is imperative to our survival. Forget territorial disputes. The America Reads Challenge has just been launched. To prevail, we need every resource we can garner.

To completely summarize this document and recount all my experiences with the America Reads Challenge would, I fear, drive most readers to distraction. But let me say that I can not count the number of exciting moments I have experienced during the past year. The exultation of watching children improve their reading skills for a lifetime is not measurable. The smiles of children listening to a volunteer read a book, glued to every word have a value, which is priceless. And the great joy of working with dedicated individuals who have become close colleagues and friends while we pursued a common goal will always be with me.

Without a doubt, this has been the most rewarding and satisfying year of my career.

But there is also the harsh realization that I have become a political academic-educator, forced to bargain, compromise and capitulate, while attempting to keep my perspective, integrity, and values intact. I am a much wiser person for the experience.

Our America Reads Challenge offers a brighter future, more self-fulfillment, to the children of Rhode Island and America. It is truly a blessing. The next year will “tell the tale” of how successful we have been in helping each child in moving toward a higher understanding of, and utilization of, literacy and reading skills.

In time, our epitaph will be written in terms of how effectively we accomplished our goals, and what remains in place after we have gone. With this said, there is no need to write a conclusion. We are far from conclusions. We are positioned at the threshold of a great opportunity for the children of our state and our nation. Bring on the alligators and the beasties. Let’s Rock and Roll.