

Our Turn: Sarah Friedman and Meg O’Leary: A model that helps Latinos thrive

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In a Jan. 14 Commentary piece (“Dismal outlook for R.I. Latinos demands action”) Central Falls Superintendent Victor Capellan shared his thinking on the Annie E. Casey report ranking Rhode Island last in the nation for opportunities for success for Latino children.

Rhode Island is already home to a national model of what success in this realm looks like. The Learning Community, one of the highest poverty, highest performing K-8 urban schools in Rhode Island, has effectively closed the Latino achievement gap.

On the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) English Language Arts assessment, Learning Community’s Latino students outperformed the state’s white students by 7 percentage points and reached proficiency at two-and-a-half times the rate of their Latino peers statewide. The Learning Community also closed the gap between students of color and white students, with our students of color outperforming the state’s white students by 6 percentage points.

With 84 percent free/reduced-price lunches, 96 percent students of color, 81 percent Latino, and 33 percent English language learners, our school shares the same demographics of Rhode Island’s most challenged urban districts. We are proving that Latino children and children in poverty can succeed at our own school, and we have been recognized nationally by The New York Times for our work with other Rhode Island public schools.

We worked for the past five years with the elementary schools in Woonsocket and Smithfield, providing professional development based on practices piloted in Learning Community classrooms, with an average increase of 22 percentage points in the number of students reading at grade level.

These remarkable results are not because of the Learning Community alone. The results reflect the hard work, talent and dedication of Rhode Island’s public school teachers and administrators when barriers to practicing the strategies that work are removed. As both a school and a professional development group, The Learning Community well understands those barriers: time, over-testing, split priorities, constant interruption, poor scheduling, ever-changing state mandates and lack of support. Our professional development partnerships take all of the barriers into account to ensure success.

Last June, we launched an English as a Second Language certification program where public school teachers from any school can learn the real, hands-on and pragmatic approaches we use in our school to effectively teach our English learners and become certified.

As a charter school, we can best support the work of our state's public education system to close gaps for our low-income and Latino students by:

- walking the walk of having demographics that truly reflect our sending communities in every way, including the number of special education students, English learners, and rates of racial diversity and poverty.
- proactively sharing our successful strategies and systems with teachers in district schools, with measurable results for their children.
- raising funds to make our professional development free to many other urban public schools.
- advocating, alongside our district colleagues, for our most vulnerable children across the state: children of color living in poverty.
- committing to a responsible pace of growth so that our funding is financially responsible in impact on cities and towns and the schools that operate within them.

Rhode Island's Latino students, and all students, have the right to a high-quality public education. It is our legal and moral responsibility to give them every chance to succeed. We want them to know they can be proud of their cultural backgrounds, of the languages they speak, and above all, of their families.

We hope the recent Annie E. Casey study urges us forward to fulfill our collective promise to our Latino children: access to the education they deserve so that they can be leaders in our economy and democracy.

Sarah Friedman and Meg O'Leary are the co-founders and co-directors of the Learning Community, an independent, public charter school in Central Falls.

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