



# Reading Makes a Difference Kids Helping Kids

by Wendy Fachon

**T**he Empowerment Factory (TEF), in partnership with the nonprofit Jester & Pharley Phund, has introduced a literacy curriculum for low-income children that combines reading, creativity and compassion. During the 2019 Summer Child Opportunity Zone (COZ) program, organized through the Pawtucket School Department, 94 students from two Title I elementary schools participated in TEF's three-week read-a-thon to provide copies of David Saltzman's bilingual book, *The Jester Has Lost His Jingle/El Bufón Ha Perdido Su Gracia*, to pediatric cancer patients at Hasbro Children's Hospital.

TEF's Reading Makes a Difference (RMD) Empowerment Project brings deeper meaning to reading. One of COZ's school program coordinators, Jennifer Rigley, states, "It offers the concept that reading matters and extends this to children. I feel the children were able to find new pleasure in reading." TEF has curated a selection of artfully compassionate books and identified key motivational ingredients, blending these together to address the state's low performance in English language and literacy.

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## English Language Literacy

Just how low are those English language and literacy numbers? Only 40 percent of Rhode Island third-graders met grade-level expectations for reading on the 2018 Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) test, according to the Rhode Island Kids Count Fact Book. In Pawtucket, where poverty is high, that number is even less (30 percent). Students unable to reach the third-grade proficiency milestone generally fall behind academically and are four times more likely to drop out of high school. This has a huge social and emotional ripple effect. According to the Literacy Project Foundation, three out of four people on welfare cannot read. On the other hand, as the literacy rate doubles, the per capita income also doubles.

Pre-kindergarten programs that teach language and literacy skills have the greatest impact on children living in poverty, however, less than half of Rhode Island's children are enrolled in early learning programs. It is important to help the less privileged catch up during the kindergarten year, which is also a critical time for cultivating basic social, emotional and behavioral skills.

During TEF's summer program, each class began with a mindful moment of conscious breathing, to help settle the students into the day's lesson. Then, students listened to the presentation of an illustrated children's story that prompted a class discussion about a variety of social and emotional concepts, such as kindness, feelings, positive thinking, perseverance,

## The Power of Reading Aloud

**A**ccording to Reach Out and Read Rhode Island (RORRI), reading aloud is widely recognized as the single most important activity leading to language development. In the early years it exposes children to story and print knowledge as well as rare words and ideas not often found in day-to-day conversations or screen time. Reading aloud gives children the opportunity to practice listening—a crucial skill for kindergarten and beyond.

Reach Out and Read gives young children a foundation for success by incorporating books into pediatric care and encouraging families to read aloud together. Doctors and nurses at 70 Reach Out and Read practices across the state give brand-new books to young children when they get a checkup. By talking with parents and caregivers about the importance of reading aloud, they provide families with the tools they need to put their children on the path to school success. Learn more at <https://www.rorri.org>.



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acceptance, empathy and diversity. The discussion led into a creative activity. For example, conversations about character led into puppet-making and writing scripted stories. Discussions about kindness and positive thinking led into card-making to send cheer to hospitalized children.

TEF's RMD Empowerment Project encourages students to choose enjoyable books and requires them to keep a personal reading log, recording the book titles and the number of pages read each day at home. Parents are asked to initial the log entries, which invites reinforcing parent engagement. This is especially important for the youngest children. More than 50 percent of the students in grades K-1 completed reading logs, setting a baseline for future progress. All summer learning teachers maintained logs of what they read aloud to students during their own independent class time. By reading with fluency and expressive voice, teachers bring excitement to reading, while modeling good reading skills.

### Project Feedback

Feedback collected from students at the conclusion of the project were gratifying.

- 70 percent agreed that the read-a-thon made them want to read more.
- 68 percent agreed that reading books together in class made them want to read more.
- 46 percent claimed to read more than usual with their parents at home.
- 82 percent felt their reading improved as a result of the program.
- 69 percent saw other students being more caring as a result of the program.

Teacher feedback was also positive, with one teacher citing the most effective aspects of the program as “positive, loving vibes, books about feelings, emotions, sickness—real life lessons.”

In a final read-a-thon celebration, the top readers were awarded Jester books and certificates for their achievements. The Jester attended as a special guest, and as a result of everyone's reading efforts, the students were able to present 30 Jester books and 30 Jester dolls to Lisa Abbenante, executive director of The Tomorrow Fund at the hospital. Abbenante shared a short video presentation featuring the children that would benefit from the students' kindness and caring. The celebration concluded with students dancing around the cafeteria waving happiness wands to their favorite dance music. Looking back on the event, Abbenante comments, “This was the truest and most sincere form of kids helping kids.”

TEF is inviting the Jester to help celebrate its 3rd Annual Healthy Living Community Event on Saturday, September 21, from noon to 3p.m. at the Elizabeth Baldwin Elementary School, in Pawtucket. This event will highlight the installation of four community lending libraries, taking the form of reading robots. Each robot is a site-specific public art project made from re-purposed metal newspaper distribution boxes. These will house books donated by Books Are Wings for easy access by the surrounding low-income community, giving students involved in the RMD program the ability to acquire books for free.

*For more information, call 401-365-1010, email [Howdy@EmpowermentFactory.org](mailto:Howdy@EmpowermentFactory.org) or visit [TheEmpowermentFactory.org](http://TheEmpowermentFactory.org). See ad on back cover.*

*Wendy Fachon is a frequent contributor to Natural Awakenings.*

There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate's loot on Treasure Island.

~Walt Disney.

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