



**David N. Cicilline, Mayor
City of Providence**

**Keynote: a Conversation about Children of Incarcerated Parents
Thursday, April 10th, 8:30 a.m.
Bryant University**

Thank you for that kind introduction and for inviting me to be here with so many experts from across the state. And thank you for coming together to work on this critical subject.

I am especially grateful to have the opportunity to talk about our collective responsibility to children, especially those with incarcerated parents. Whenever I am visiting our schools or after-school programs talking and listening to children, or working on children's issues in venues like this, I know that I'm spending my time on something really important.

As you know, I have very strong feelings about kids, the rights they have and the opportunities they deserve in life. In fact, I believe that my greatest responsibility as Mayor is to ensure that our children have access to the tools and resources necessary for them to succeed, and I also believe that we have a responsibility to be *actively* engaged in assuring their healthy development.

This is a deeply held and very longstanding belief of mine.

As a young person, I was not shy about sharing my perspective or point of view. Looking back, some may have considered me a little strange or even obnoxious at the time. But it just never occurred to me that my concerns and those of my peers should matter any less than those of the adults around us. I understood who made and enforced the rules, but that didn't mean I couldn't or shouldn't say my piece and be heard.

This is one of the reasons I was really active in local issues when I was young. At age 15, as a Narragansett resident, I led a successful campaign to require the newly-formed Narragansett School District to offer Italian language instruction in the school department's curriculum as was required by law, and was a regular – and vocal – attendee at every town council meeting despite not being old enough to vote. I also organized a group called CARE, Citizens Against Reckless Expansion, to stop a condominium development on an important oceanfront site.

I believed then – as I do today – that it didn't matter whether you were 15 or 50, each individual's viewpoint deserved respect.

I am not asserting that we should treat kids like adults, but that we must take them seriously as the kids they are – at whatever stage of development that might be.

In fact, that's where I think any effective children's policy begins. The best way to start improving the lives of children is to begin by taking them seriously as people.

This isn't something we tend to do as a society. For the most part, we either think of them in terms of stereotypes or we think of them as helpless victims in need of rescue. Even those of us who are working on their behalf can find ourselves thinking about kids in broad abstractions – as “cohorts” or parts of “systems.”

One of the best experiences I've had – and one which validated my long-held belief – was visiting the town of Reggio Emilia, in Italy.

This town and the villages that surround it had been completely devastated by World War II. But out of that rubble, as the city rebuilt itself, a group of parents developed a new approach to early education.

At its core, the approach is about taking each child seriously as an individual, and that all adults have a responsibility to further the education of children.

Children must have some control over the direction of their own learning. Learning must make sense from the child's point of view, and children should have the opportunity to explore their surroundings and express themselves accordingly.

These principles have influenced everything in Reggio Emilia, from the culture to the architecture. Children's art is displayed throughout the city. Children designed the city map. It is an entire city built upon the simple idea that children are full participants and valued members of society.

Children are not worshipped, but they are prioritized. Adults are imbued with greater meaning and purpose. Everyone is responsible for helping to prepare the next generation.

When it comes to children of the incarcerated -- and all our kids -- we need to adopt a similar sense of common purpose and responsibility, like the people of Reggio Emilia. And we need to be moving in that direction now more than ever.

As a government, and as a body politic in Rhode Island, we are in varying degrees of difficulty and even crisis on many fronts.

We are facing a serious state budget crisis as a consequence of our inability to respond to warnings that have been clear for a number of years. We are facing a national and state economic slowdown and recession, which will have severe consequences for our children and families. And, as people, we are facing a crisis of confidence with no real rationale for how we are going to come together and solve our big challenges.

There's a great deal that needs to be done, including accelerated economic development efforts and major structural changes in our government, but imagine the different attitude we would have as a state if we started by putting kids first – if we made the healthy development of each and every child our highest priority and a matter of personal responsibility for each adult.

Not only would it give us a sense of moral purpose and direction, but it would settle many of our internal struggles over what to prioritize with our time and resources.

I think a lot of us would feel more comfortable with severe consequences for all kinds of adult law breakers if we were confident as a community that they had been given a real opportunity to succeed as young people.

If we knew that an offender had been supported by a community of caring adults and had been given access to a healthy and productive life, then we would surely agree that that adult has full ownership of the consequences of his or her actions.

As those of us in this room know, if we were able to become a community that makes every child a priority and the personal responsibility of every adult, it would also help to place us on a long-term path for sustained economic growth and real prosperity. Many claim we cannot afford the costs of investing so heavily in kids. The truth is we cannot afford not too.

My police chief says it all the time. The best crime prevention strategy is investing in kids. We cannot arrest our way out of these challenges.

As Elizabeth Burke Bryant will tell you, the data supports this.

A long-term study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (A.J. Reynolds) looked at families who worked with child-parent centers in Chicago and those that didn't. The centers worked with

over 100,000 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income neighborhoods since 1967, providing preschool and parent training services.

Children from similar neighborhoods not engaged by the centers were almost *twice* as likely to be taken from their homes and either placed in foster care or adopted. These children were also 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by the time they turned 18. They were 24% more likely to be incarcerated as an adult than the children who went through the child-parent centers.

The bottom line savings are staggering. The child-parent centers cut crime, special education and other costs to the degree that they saved more than \$10 for every \$1 invested.

A separate economic study conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota found that a high-quality early education yielded an annual rate of return of 16% on each dollar of investment. Compare that to the 7 or 8% that has been the average for the stock market.

So we should be looking at our poorest and most at-risk children as both our greatest responsibility *and* opportunity. We have every moral and economic incentive to place them front and center.

And yet it appears we're moving in the opposite direction. At-risk kids may be an opportunity in the long-term, but they are also an easy target in the short-term. Especially when one or both of their parents are in prison.

In tough times, as trust breaks down, and we are missing the leadership to pull us together around a common cause, it is all too easy to look at life as a zero-sum game -- where that person over there who is getting something represents something being taken away from me.

This attitude breeds a slow burning resentment, with real potential for combustion, and undermines the kinds of conditions that invite real answers to complicated problems.

In this environment, the most defenseless of all are the children of the incarcerated. It is they who stand to suffer the harshest and most undeserved consequences of the actions of all the adults around them.

A couple of years ago, I visited a 5th grade class. I remember that it was a Friday. It was a lively discussion with all the kids participating, except for one boy in the back who was visibly upset.

After the class was over I asked him if he was OK. He became even more upset as he told me his mother “went to jail on Monday.” You could see this child was scared – his world shattered.

I tried to comfort him as best I could, but I thought, “How is this 11 year-old child going to concentrate on anything at school when his mother is in jail?”

What kind of trauma did this boy experience the day his mother left? What did he have to experience in the months and weeks leading up to that day and in the days since?

We must have services and support in place to provide children in these circumstances with all the help they need.

Studies tell us that children of incarcerated parents suffer depression, low self-esteem, use drugs, and perform poorly in school. But one look at that boy's face and I knew in my gut that there was something far more profound going on than any statistic can illustrate.

Children of the incarcerated have been cheated already. Through no action of their own, they have been placed at a huge disadvantage in life. We have a moral responsibility to them.

But if we duck that responsibility, the cost will be enormous. And not just in dollars. It is the cost of the play that never gets written; the cost of the innovative company that never gets launched; and the cost of the scientific discovery that never gets made – all because this child is not afforded the opportunity to realize his or her potential.

All children have an absolute right to the opportunity for success in life – without exception. Those of us who believe that should make no apologies.

And let me add that I don't know anyone who thinks that parents should somehow be relieved of their responsibilities. But some people think that's what we're suggesting when we say that we are all responsible for our kids. Just the opposite.

The parents of Reggio Emilia are *more* engaged in their children's lives, not less.

And I find it hard to imagine that someone who abdicates his or her parental responsibilities – someone who is either that lost, desperate or cruel -- is going to change their behavior based on whether there is support in place to pick up the slack and make a difference in a child's life.

We must repurpose our community in such a way that kids are our first priority and a matter of personal responsibility for every adult. I believe we can achieve that. I believe it is entirely possible if we have the political will.

Some will call that naïve, but I don't think this is an impossible ideal any more than bridging the divide between community and the police was an impossible ideal not that long ago, in my city.

In that case, policy people talked for many years about the need to break down the barriers between police and the community, and the need to develop relationships to prevent crime as a joint effort. That sounded like quaint and dreamy “kumbaya” talk to a lot of people. But in Providence and New York and many other cities where it was thought to be impossible, it's been done. And it's having an historic and positive impact on people's lives.

In fact, despite the strong headwind, and thanks to many of you, we are already making Providence more of that kind of a community. We have a long way to go, but we're moving that way.

One example is the Providence After School Alliance and our AfterZones. The program is based on an assessment of what our middle school children want and need to have a fun, healthy and productive hours during what had become a sometimes dangerous time between the school bell and when parents or guardians got home from work.

It's based on the realities of life in the 21st century where parents work; and it takes the viewpoint of kids extremely seriously. Its offerings are a direct reflection of what kids and parents told us they wanted. It also exposes our kids to a variety of new caring adults with whom they can form a bond.

So I would ask you today, as you discuss new and better approaches to supporting our children of incarcerated parents, to think about how this work can help make Rhode Island more like Reggio Emilia.

How can we structure systems so we don't treat these children as a monolithic bloc of people lumped together by similar problems, but as individual children with their unique hopes, dreams, and promise? How can we take them more seriously? And how can we promote more bonds with caring adults, beyond their parents and caretakers?

Lincoln said, "you can't escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

I am extraordinarily grateful for the work that you are doing in response to these challenges and in support of the opportunity each child represents.

Together we can create a brighter, more promising future for these children
– our children – as well as our city and state.

Have a great and productive day together. Thank you.