

## Stories of Progress

*These stories illustrate how children's and families' lives will be different as a result of Thrive in Five – and how the city will be different.*



### Ready Families

*"It was great. It got us out of the house for a few hours,"* the hair-braider says to Laila about the library's story time session that she went to last week with her own two-year-old. Laila, who moved here from Haiti a few years ago, remembers that as a child in her home country, it seemed like everyone knew each other and there were always people around to help out. Now with her three-year-old son, she's often home alone with him while her husband works. *"You should go – here are all the times and it's just down the street"* the stylist says. *"It sounds like fun,"* Laila responds and puts the flyer in her bag, not intending to go. She's never been to the library and her English isn't very good.

A few days later, Laila is food shopping with her son. As she's paying, the shop owner asks her son what letters he knows. *"What a smart boy. You should take him to story time,"* he says as he hands her the same library schedule. *"Thanks,"* she says, again putting the flyer in her bag.

The next day, Laila's waiting for the bus when she opens her bag and sees the two flyers. The woman sitting next to her notices the library schedule and says how her daughter loves to look at books. *"I never would have gone in there if it weren't for everyone telling me about how much their kids love it. But now we never miss it – just talking to other parents is nice. Have you been?"* Laila says no, but sees that there's a story time for three-year-olds on Friday.

On Friday, it's raining. Even though she's nervous about it, going to the library sounds a lot better than staying inside all day with her son, arguing about keeping the TV off. When they get there, her son is captivated by the story in no time, and loves playing with the other kids. Laila shyly chats with the other parents, including the mom from the bus stop. She hears about all sorts of different things to do right in her neighborhood with her son, including a free swim class at the community center. She has always wanted to learn how to swim and hasn't felt safe taking her son to pools or beaches since she can't.

When she stops at the community center to get the swim schedule, she is surprised they also offer free adult computer classes; she knows she needs to get a job soon. Over the next few weeks, she notices posters and information everywhere she goes that give her ideas about activities to do at home. Pretty soon, Laila and her son are out a few days a week – visiting the library, trying the play group at the elementary school, and going to a park with another woman she met from Haiti at the play group and that woman's friend from Guatemala.



Four months later, Laila has an appointment at the hair salon again. She sees three young children running all over as an exhausted-looking mom gets her braids done. The hairstylist smiles as she hears Laila saying to the mom, *"Have you ever been to story time at the library?"*

### Ready Educators

Racquel always liked kids. A few years after high school, as a single mother with a young child of her own, she decided to become a family child care provider, taking care of her daughter and up to five other kids at a time in her apartment. Now she has her license from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care and has earned a reputation in the neighborhood for being great with children. She knows that children need a lot of stimulation and a consistent schedule. She tries to take them out to the park regularly, especially now that the tot lot has been re-done and neighbors have taken on working with city officials to keep it clean and safe. But she is still shy about talking to other people at the park, and sometimes it doesn't seem worth all the trouble to get coats and boots on six children. Yet she feels lonely at home on her own with the kids.

A few months ago, Racquel heard from four different people about a neighborhood networking meeting for child care providers and finally decided to check it out. It was surprisingly fun to meet other women doing the same job. She even went to a few education workshops with them. At the last meeting, Racquel heard

about an initiative in Boston to ensure that all child care is high quality. *"I went back to school and got my Child Development Associate credential,"* said the presenter. *"I thought I knew everything I needed to know, but this has helped me understand the stages kids go through, why they do what they do, and how to help my kids be ready for kindergarten. I tell you, I never thought I would be taking college classes!"*

Racquel decides to apply for the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and enrolls in the next round of a training program offered at a local college. After taking the classes and demonstrating what she's learned, she earns her CDA credential and college credit. Getting her CDA has helped build her skills and develop the confidence to continue her education – and she has noticed a difference in how much she enjoys her job and how she works with her kids. Her CDA advisor helps her apply to a college program and get a scholarship to cover tuition. In the fall, she starts taking classes towards an Associate's degree. Racquel finds it hard to balance going to school and caring for kids while supporting her own child. But for the first time in her life, getting a college degree seems possible and worth the work.

---

## Ready Systems

When Anthony picks up the phone, he immediately recognizes Mrs. Rodriguez's voice. She's been a client at the health center where Anthony works. Anthony got to know her when she started caring for her four-year-old grandson, Paolo, full time. Paolo's father, Mrs. Rodriguez's son-in-law, abused Paolo when he was an infant, and even though his physical development is normal, Paolo's social skills and emotional development are behind. Anthony became Paolo's "care coordinator" when Mrs. Rodriguez was given custody of her grandson. He met with her at her church for a welcome visit he provides to families he works with whenever a new baby or child comes in to the family. Mrs. Rodriguez knows that she can call Anthony anytime she has a question about Paolo, and they speak regularly in Spanish.

A year ago, Anthony found a preschool for Paolo that would provide on-site support for his social and emotional issues. He sees a therapist at the preschool two times a week and it has been going well. Paolo will be going to kindergarten next year. That's what Mrs. Rodriguez is worried about.

*"I have all this paperwork to fill out and I don't understand it,"* she says, *"and honestly I am worried about him making a change, going to a new place."* They set up a time to meet later that week at Paolo's preschool so that Anthony, Mrs. Rodriguez, and Paolo's therapist and preschool teacher can go over the forms and work together to make sure Paolo has a smooth transition between preschool and kindergarten, thinking about how to work with him over the summer.



By the following November, after a few rough weeks here and there, Paolo loves kindergarten. When Mrs. Rodriguez brings him in to the health center for a physical, Paolo rattles on and on to Anthony about his new teacher and friends. *"His teacher went over this thing called an assessment with me last week. He's right where he should be in most areas, but is a little behind the other kids socially. We came up with a plan of what we'll both do to help him be where he needs to be by the end of the year, really ready for first grade,"* says Mrs. Rodriguez. *"I am still a little worried,"* she admits. But she also gives Anthony a pat on the shoulder on her way out, sighing, *"I never could have gotten him here without your support."*

---

## Ready City

Paul O'Brien has always been committed to making his company's "family-friendly" policy more than just words on the corporate values poster behind the receptionist's desk. As the head of his department at the bank, and a father of four himself, he is flexible with the managers and employees that he supervises, approving time off for meetings at school and doctor's appointments with their kids, in line with a newly-revamped corporate policy.

As he hears his wife talk about their friend Cara, Paul is relieved that his company isn't the only one providing more flexibility for employees. Cara, a friend from their college days who is now an architect, had to leave her husband recently because of domestic violence and she is struggling to work full-time and raise three young children. Her employer has allowed her to switch to flex time and she is relieved that most pediatrician's offices now offer evening and weekend hours for well-child and sick-child visits.

Many of Paul's employees have young kids, so it's pretty common to hear stories around the office about the frustrations of raising children. A few weeks ago, Paul read about the latest *Thrive in Five* School Readiness Summit in the paper. He was impressed that over the past six years, Boston had raised by 40% the number of kids who were ready for school when they entered kindergarten. The article mentioned how many resources are available for companies to support their employees, everything from information about what to look for when choosing a school or child care center to ways to support language development in very young children. Some companies were now offering workshops for employees during lunch about parenting and child development.

A few weeks later, after lots of informal outreach techniques that the presenter suggested, especially to get dads to come, the bank's conference room is packed with employees interested in hearing about constructive discipline techniques for toddlers and preschoolers. *"I am embarrassed to admit it,"* says one dad of twins at the end of the 90-minute session, *"but I had no clue what to do when my kids acted up and I just relied on what my dad did growing up – and I won't even go into what that was! I don't have time to go to a parenting class and honestly, I never saw myself doing something like this."* Paul stands in the back, impressed by the turnout and committed to doing this more often, also a bit surprised about what he himself just learned from the presenter.

## Children Ready for Sustained School Success

Geneva was nervous about the parent-teacher conference. Her daughter, Lakeisha, had just started kindergarten a month ago. At the conference, the teacher wanted to talk about the "assessment" he had just finished of her daughter's development. To Geneva, it sounded like a test, and she was worried that Lakeisha wouldn't do well.

As Geneva walks into her daughter's classroom, she notices all the drawings along the wall. Mr. Jenkins, the kindergarten teacher, points out Lakeisha's: *"She has a great imagination!"*



As they discuss Lakeisha's assessment, Mr. Jenkins explains that it isn't really a test at all. *"I watch a small group of kids in the class for a few days and then write up a summary of where they are in different areas of development. They don't do anything different from the rest of the class, and really, don't even know that I am assessing them."*

*"So, it's not like a test, you're just watching to see what she can do?"* asks Geneva.

*"Yes. But even if she can't do something yet, I look to see if she's almost there,"* explains Mr. Jenkins. *"Each child is different. By knowing where they are in their development, I can help them get to the next step. Let's talk about where your daughter is."*

As they talk through the assessment, Geneva hears much of what she already knows about Lakeisha. Her daughter's vocabulary is great – her preschool teacher encouraged Geneva to chat with Lakeisha a lot at home, while cooking or grocery shopping – and Lakeisha is very creative. In most areas, she is progressing as she should be, but she needs to work on her fine motor skills and on dealing with disagreements with other kids without yelling or running out of the classroom. Mr. Jenkins says they are working on this at school and suggests some activities Geneva and Lakeisha can do at home. He also talks about how Lakeisha's grandma and grandpa, who came to live with them when Geneva's husband died last year, can help too. *"With your help, in the spring when we do the assessment again, I'm confident that Lakeisha will be right where we all want her to be."*



As Geneva leaves, she admits to herself that she feels a little embarrassed that Lakeisha still has some trouble with anger, but she's proud of her daughter's accomplishments, optimistic about what to do next, and relieved that the next steps aren't all on her shoulders. She is also hopeful that everything Lakeisha learns will have a positive effect on her little brother who is 18 months old, since the two of them play together often and Lakeisha is now teaching him some letters and colors.