



Health Equity Case Study:

Professors Address Provider Shortage and Diversify Graduate Education

Summary

When schools lack teachers and other specialists, it keeps children with disabilities from receiving the early intervention services they need. Three Nazareth College professors knew that they could play a role in solving the issue – at least locally. The result was Project RISE (Rochester Interprofessional Scholars of Early Intervention). Project RISE is helping recruit racially diverse graduate students in education and allied health programs with the goal of addressing staff shortages and diversifying the workforce. It also gives those students the ability to work in the field while completing their degree.

Project RISE

Helping recruit racially diverse graduate students in education and allied health programs with the goal of addressing staff shortages and diversifying the workforce.

Meet The Team



Professor of early childhood education



Professors of speech-language pathology



Graduate students in allied health and early childhood education programs



Community experts in social work, early childhood education, and other related fields

How They Identified the Issue

Through her work volunteering with early childhood and collective impact organizations in Rochester, New York, Lisa Hiley, a Project RISE director and associate professor at Nazareth College, saw firsthand how the provider shortage impacted area children.

“My passion is working with young kids,” said Hiley. “And what I see right now is that way too many young kids are going without services.”

Early intervention services help children with disabilities improve their long-term health, educational, and social outcomes. However, a shortage of teachers, occupational therapists, social workers, and other professionals means that many Rochester children aren’t getting the help they need. Compounding the problem is the fact that the current workforce doesn’t represent the children and families served.

“Disproportionate representation can reduce provider-client trust, result in over-representation of minority groups in special education, and drive further distrust of a system that has historically marginalized children and families of color,” said Hiley [in an interview about the program](#).

As a professor at Nazareth College—the only regional college offering a broad mix of allied health and early childhood education courses—Hiley and colleagues Dr. Susan Strum, Associate Professor and Director of the Graduate Inclusive Childhood Education Programs, and Dr. Rupert Johnson, Assistant Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders, were in a unique position to address the shortage. The result is Project RISE.

Collaborating Across Professions

Hiley, Sturm, and Johnson originally met through interprofessional committees at Nazareth College. Even though they taught different subjects, the three shared a passion for diversifying their field and supporting the local community. Together, the three created Project RISE, which is helping solve the provider shortage by better preparing students to work in the community. The team pursued grants to fund establishing the academic experience and community partnerships as well as scholarships for traditionally underrepresented groups.

Project RISE combines interprofessional coursework, fieldwork, and community partnership experiences to prepare graduate students to promote the development and well-being of children 0 to 8, including children with disabilities. Students participating in Project RISE will also train to work with families in culturally responsive and



“Disproportionate representation can reduce provider-client trust, result in over-representation of minority groups in special education, and drive further distrust of a system that has historically marginalized children and families of color”

Lisa Hiley, Project RISE director and associate professor at Nazareth College

trauma-informed ways. These skills will help build trust between providers and families.

Project RISE implemented the following to help prepare students:



Interprofessional courses taught by local experts.

These one-credit courses are developed and taught by local experts, such as the head of educational outreach at the local PBS station. The classes ensure that students learn practical skills on current topics from a diverse set of professionals.



Coordinated fieldwork in the community. This program helps students complete their clinic fieldwork hours in conjunction with local providers, such as early intervention and preschool. This includes using reflective practice to promote critical analysis and self-reflection in clinical work.



Paid work experience. Through the co-ops, students are paid to work with kids and families. For example, some Nazareth College students work at the library’s early literacy program or in local nonprofits. These co-ops pay a living stipend that helps make school more affordable.

In addition, the students who are enrolled in Project RISE are representative of Rochester’s local community. Financial aid and access to professional networking and support is available for students who represent traditionally underrepresented populations.

Ongoing Collaboration

RISE Scholars are currently being recruited and enrolled in the program. As soon as Spring 2023, the first cohort of RISE scholars will be fully prepared to enter the workforce as specialists in early intervention services.

Hiley, Sturm, and Johnson continue to expand Project RISE. They are particularly focused on creating a pipeline for recruiting more students from diverse backgrounds. For example, the program is doing more outreach to local community colleges, high schools, and childcare providers to talk about the field. They are also exploring new initiatives, such as offering free childcare to students, which will help nontraditional students pursue a degree.



This program helps students complete their clinic fieldwork hours in conjunction with local providers, such as early intervention and preschool.



SPRING 2023

As soon as Spring 2023, the first cohort of RISE scholars will be fully prepared to enter the workforce as specialists in early intervention services.