

# Getting jump on financial literacy



**MAKING CENTS:** Robert Scaffardi, academic-program director at New England Laborers/Cranston Public Schools Construction and Career Academy, speaks to students at the school. His efforts spurred a financial-literacy curriculum at the 240-student school. PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL PERSSON

[By Denise Perreault](#)

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Robert Scaffardi, academic-program director at a Cranston charter school, noticed about four years ago that teachers at the secondary school were each covering different aspects of personal finance in their classes, with no overall coordination and no plan to ensure instruction on key aspects of personal financial competency.

One teacher would talk about balancing a checkbook, another taught about taxes, a third might explain the nature of loans, Scaffardi said. Because the school has no business department, Scaffardi took it upon himself to check out national standards for teaching financial literacy, and he reached out to a local organization for assistance, the Rhode Island Jump Start Coalition. The nonprofit is comprised of academic, business and civic partners and advocates for greater personal financial capability.

The result is a formal financial-literacy curriculum at the 240-student New England Laborers/Cranston Public Schools Construction and Career Academy for Grades 9 through 12, a curriculum that fuses practical finances into every major subject area from history to math and English, Scaffardi said.

"What I've found fascinating about financial literacy is that these kids can take this information, and it is usable the next morning," he said. "[Financial matters] are not just nice things to know, they are truly survival skills now, and it is not a hard sell because these kids are thirsting for this information. You never hear complaints about learning about money."

Driving home the crucial significance of personal financial competency, as this Cranston school does every day, is what the Jump Start Coalition is all about. The coalition works with educators, social workers and businesses to promote financial literacy and, according to Jim Hedemark, executive director, this year begins a push to involve more businesses in promoting workplace literacy.

But the work is best begun at home.

Research has shown, Hedemark said, that the earlier young people learn about financial literacy, the more likely it is they will enjoy a lifetime of full employment. The more finances are discussed in the home, he said, the better young people will be able to deal with weighty workplace and financial decisions affecting their lives far into the future.

The coalition works closely with educators across the state. At the coalition's annual conference on financial literacy Dec. 16, by far most of the 100 or so people in attendance at the R.I. Convention Center were educators, with social workers, human-resource managers and government employees making up most of the rest. The conference featured speakers and panel discussions linking financial literacy with employment.

Ernest Almonte, former auditor general for Rhode Island (1994-2010) and principal of Almonte Group LLC, a financial consulting firm with offices in Providence and Boston, was keynote speaker at the Jump Start conference. He told the gathering that, in early January, the American Institute of CPAs is scheduled to begin a national campaign to "drive home how important financial literacy is." "[Financial literacy] involves everyone from young children to senior citizens, and it crosses over into business, government. There are so many places where it plays a role," Almonte told Providence Business News in an interview after the conference. In the workplace, for example, "how can an employee focus on doing a good job every day if they're worried about making the next car payment or losing their home?" he asked. Almonte is vice chair of the AICPA financial-literacy commission and will take over as chairman in October.

It is not clear how many local businesses are actively involved in helping employees achieve full financial competency. Hedemark and Almonte were not able to identify specific local companies engaged in this work.

The state has had plans to adopt a statewide strategy for teaching financial literacy.

In 2008, the General Assembly approved a joint resolution calling for creation of a task force to develop a statewide action plan for "increasing middle and high school students' knowledge of personal financial literacy," according to a legislative summary, with January 2009 the deadline for presenting a report to legislative leaders.

Elliot Krieger, spokesman for the R.I. Department of Education, said there was a group that met "a few times" to discuss an action plan, but no report resulted. The department is now in the process of adopting common core standards for all school systems and will be reviewing social-science standards in 2013, when "there might be an opportunity to see if there should be a specific reference to financial literacy," Krieger said.

At NELCPS, a district charter school that is a public-private enterprise, Scaffardi said, a curriculum was developed based on national standards that integrated finances throughout all content, rather than limiting it to one course.

Each faculty member chose a different standard to fuse into his or her subject area in "unique" ways so "we were able to cover the majority of the standards," he said. For example, students in consumer math were asked to project ahead to what they would be doing with their lives in five years, how much that lifestyle would cost and how they would pay for it.

In another lesson in what Scaffardi called "problem-based learning," students were asked to "build the American dream." Each was provided with a personal profile of a fictitious person, including age and income, and asked to design a house for that person.

They wrote essays about where in the world the person wanted to live for English class, a history of the area for history class, a record of the money spent on house-building materials for math class and concluded by building a scale model of the home. "They could see the problems that would develop if they want a Bellevue Avenue mansion with a \$30,000 income," Scaffardi said.

In the old days, the educator noted, finances were not taught in school because "it was assumed that families would teach it" or young people would acquire such knowledge naturally as they grew older. "What happened is people were often thrown into situations they were totally unprepared for," he said, falling for scams, winding up in debt or taking on mortgages that turned out to be unaffordable. •