

## Rochester Area Foundation - News & Publications

Quote of the Moment...

Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel in order to be tough

~Franklin D. Roosevelt ~

### Team up with First Steps

Fri, Oct 28, 2005

The Rochester City Council should go ahead and approve a contract for services with Rochester Area Foundation for its promotion of early childhood education.

This action, though, would not be of slight consequence. It requires open debate. As such, it should not be passed through quietly in the "consent agenda" along with other perfunctory actions.

Through a program called First Steps, the foundation seeks to raise the level of readiness for children entering kindergarten. It also seeks \$100,000 from the city to help meet an ambitious budget of \$4 million over five years.

The city can't donate the money. Instead it has to buy a service. In this case, the service is better education for kids, and the payback is immediate and long-term social benefits for the community. If approved, it could be the best buy the city makes all year. At the risk of overstating the issue, approval of this proposal should be seen for what it is: the beginnings of a model for public-funded education.

The aggressive goals of First Steps made it all but inevitable that it become a public/private partnership. Rochester Area Foundation is also seeking assistance from Olmsted County and the Rochester school district.

Earlier this month, when Mayo Clinic donated \$500,000 in hard cash to First Steps and pledged another \$150,000 as a future match, Hugh Smith, president of Mayo Clinic in Rochester, said early childhood education needs to be both a public and private investment.

He said private donations can't be expected to pay for it all. What will happen in five years if First Steps is proven successful but the private sector can no longer support the costs? This is the reason for public support. The financial burden is large.

None of this is to make an argument that taxpayers should become the sole supporters of yet another layer of education. As First Steps moves ahead, it could become more than a model for early childhood education. It could also become a template for how important public programs are funded.

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