

Rochester Area Foundation - News & Publications

Quote of the Moment...

It takes as much energy to wish as it does to plan.

~Eleanor Roosevelt ~

First Steps survey assesses strengths, weaknesses

Rochester Post Bulletin Editorial

Tue, May 2, 2006

 E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

Research for the Rochester Area Foundation's First Steps program established an initial survey of the quality of early childhood education in Rochester. It is an important mark from which progress can be measured.

The work was led by Richard Chase of Wilder Research in St. Paul. It found some good things and some problems with the quality of the learning environments for kids 5 year old and younger in Rochester.

The intent behind First Steps is to improve the readiness of children for kindergarten. This applies to families of all incomes, with different initiatives for different groups. The emphasis of the Wilder research was primarily directed toward low-income families, with 210 interviews in low income households (200 percent of poverty or below) but also interviewed were 100 families with incomes above that same line.

To improve readiness for school, First Steps will work to improve the quality of early childhood education that children receive from their caregivers -- either family, friends, neighbors or day-care facilities.

To measure any improvement in the earliest of educational settings -- typically found in family homes or those of friends or neighbors -- First Steps had to establish a place to measure from. The Wilder report established such a baseline.

In a nutshell, the most positive finding in the report was that there is no widespread family dysfunction in the Rochester community. Generally, children are being raised in loving homes with adequate emotional support. The children play outside and with others. This seems simple enough, but the research cites it as net contributor to a good environment for children. Parents say their children are having "good experiences."

So, things in Rochester are good, but there are gaps. Weak English language skills in some homes and in caregiving settings was the primary common problem. Many of the parents also felt a troubling feeling of "hopelessness." Remember, this feeling surely transfers to the learning ability of children in that setting.

In only eight of 21 licensed child-care centers did a majority of the staff have four-year degrees or higher. There was a mix of some formal training in the facilities, but the report found a need for more.

The need for more and better training of caregivers was the common thread of concern in the report. This will be the challenge of First Steps -- to assist licensed centers get more skilled staff, to help the informal caregiving networks become more knowledgeable and skilled at readying children for kindergarten. Now, there is a place to start.

In 2007 and 2010, the Wilder Research team will be back in Rochester to conduct similar follow-up surveys. The results will be measured against what was found this year.

Ultimately, the design is to help children become more ready for kindergarten. The measurement for this standard is already being done by the Rochester school district. Kindergarten children are given fall assessment tests. These will be the acid determinant regarding the efforts to improve early childhood education has been paying off. Can they be improved? Sure.

Outside of the city's public school system, the First Steps program is the most important

education effort in Rochester. Through it, the Rochester Area Foundation has gone after a problem that, if overcome, will have measurable benefits in the lives of families across the city.

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