

Rochester Area Foundation - News & Publications

Quote of the Moment...

First Steps aims for future

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The Rochester Area Foundation is well known for its "First Homes" campaign. Now, the foundation is taking its knowledge of community development and applying it to early childhood education.

The foundation's track record is strong. Since 1999, through its First Homes program, some 600 homes and hundreds of affordable apartments have been made available to people with few other options.

Beginning this fall, the foundation will introduce its "First Steps" initiative. Its aim is to help children prepare for kindergarten. The idea behind First Steps is simple. Success in the early years of grade school is a powerful indicator of future academic achievement and even life outcomes.

The foundation had been hearing from educators that children were entering kindergarten unprepared to learn. Cumulative data from Rochester's 2004 kindergarten first quarter report cards indicates some truth to the anecdotal concerns.

The language and literacy assessments for Rochester kindergarten children showed 11 percent were given the lowest mark, 39 percent were given the upper of three assessment marks, but a full 50 percent fell in between.

A comparison with state scores gave the foundation further evidence of a problem. Compared with 2002 and 2003 state scores, Rochester had fewer children in the top rank of literacy assessments and more children in the midrange rank.

The obvious question is whether the middle 50 percent of kindergarten students skew higher or lower, toward the more ready level or toward the bottom category, indicating a serious problem. An initial effort from the First Steps program is to determine a baseline of readiness to enter kindergarten. Then comes the real work.

First Steps will try to communicate with the parents of at-risk children. Making it all the more difficult, the children who will need the most help tend to have parents who either can't or, so far, have not been providing their children the critical early developmental training they need.

Future First Steps action will include working with parents and area day care providers on how they can get the children up to speed.

The bottom line is that anyone who is a care giver to these children will be eligible for training and learning aids to improve the readiness of children for school.

What First Steps aims to do is a daunting task, but a crucial one. Success will be measured by changes in the first-quarter report card scores and the overall baseline. Because of what is at stake -- children -- this initiative is one of the most important community development projects ever attempted here.

Accept everything about yourself - I mean everything, Some regard private enterprise as if it were a predatory tiger to be shot. Others look upon it as a cow that they can milk. Only a handful see it for what it really is--the strong horse that pulls the whole cart.

~Sir Winston Churchill ~

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