

## Rochester Area Foundation - News & Publications

Quote of the Moment...

Be sincere, be brief; be seated.

~Franklin D. Roosevelt ~

### Preparing children for kindergarten ensures our future

By David Stenhaug

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 E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

Are our children ready for kindergarten?

Soon our children will be heading back to school and our 5-year-olds will be taking those very first steps into their kindergarten classrooms. The first day of kindergarten is one of those memorable days in the life of your child, especially as you dream of the unlimited opportunity your child should have as an adult.

The reality today is that we have a greater number of children than ever before entering kindergarten not fully prepared to learn. A child not ready for school runs a much greater risk of not catching up with his or her peers, increasing the possibility that the potential each child should have as an adult will not materialize.

It is disturbing that six out of 10 of our children entering kindergarten are not fully prepared to learn. This is the assessment of Rochester children entering kindergarten last year.

Children not ready to learn will face an uphill battle throughout school. Those same children also will incur greater costs within our social services, educational and criminal justice systems, and most importantly, the dreams we have for our children might be dashed because they did not even start out of the gate on an equal footing.

Studies have shown that a 5-year-old's brain development is 75 percent complete. Simply put, if healthy interactions with family, friends and perhaps child-care providers are absent, the child's brain does not develop the way it does in a nurturing environment.

The Rochester Area Foundation has a plan to address this with an initiative called First Steps. There are four key roles the foundation will play: communicator, convener, evaluator and fund-raiser.

The public needs greater awareness of the need to better prepare our children for school. Second, we will work with key planning partners throughout the community to enhance and better coordinate the services we have in place. Third, an evaluation of what is effective and what is not will get the best return on our investment. And finally, we need to raise more than \$4 million to invest over the next five years to obtain the results required. This amounts to \$65 per child, per year, in Olmsted County.

Beyond these four roles, other goals have been identified:

- Educate parents, grandparents, day-care providers and others on school readiness.
- Offer targeted support to the 2,600 children from lower-income families and families where English is spoken as a second language in the home.
- Enhance the quality of existing programs.
- Seek ways to integrate services to improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- Assess and evaluate progress.
- Most importantly, make school readiness a community priority.

The business case for First Steps is powerful. Art Rolnick, senior vice president and economist of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, postulates that the best economic development strategy we can make today is an investment in early childhood. In fact, Rolnick maintains that such an investment will provide us, the official rollout of First Steps will begin this fall. We are featuring the popular Teddy Bear Band on Sept. 13. The public is invited to all of these events. For information, call 282-1027 and check the Web at [www.FirstSteps.us](http://www.FirstSteps.us).

It is only fair that, as a caring community, we all work hard to give every child entering kindergarten the best chance possible for a life of unlimited opportunity.

**David Stenhaus is regional vice president of client services for Wells Fargo Bank, vice chair of the Rochester Area Foundation's board of trustees and chair of its First Steps advisory committee.**

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