

Preschoolers get scholarships

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By Heather J. Carlson

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Dozens of Rochester-area preschoolers are getting their first taste of school, thanks to \$48,000 in scholarships awarded by the Rochester Area Foundation's First Steps initiative.

These new scholarships have enabled 27 area children from low-income families to attend preschools in the community, said Kevin Ewing, the initiative's director. He said the scholarships are one way of bolstering First Steps mission -- to make sure children enter kindergarten prepared.

"There are many children that get to school that aren't fully prepared and (First Steps) is working to implement a number of strategies to help with that issue," Ewing said. "Providing scholarships for children who otherwise could not afford it is one of many strategies."

The nonprofit Rochester Area Foundation launched the First Steps initiative last year. During the next five years, the foundation expects to spend \$4.3 million as part of the initiative, Ewing said.

Last month, the foundation awarded the preschool scholarships to families on a waiting list for Child Care Resource and Referral's School Readiness Program. The program helps children age 3 to kindergarten age from low-income families to participate in early childhood education programs, said Jillayne Schuder, the program's coordinator. To qualify, a family's income must not exceed 185 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, that means a maximum annual income of \$40,302.

The First Steps scholarships are for six months. Ewing said the foundation hopes to continue the scholarships next fall.

Rochester parents Megan and Steve Rolbiecki say they've seen the benefits of preschool firsthand. The couple's twin 4-year-olds, Jacob and Joshua, participate in the School Readiness program and have been attending Rochester Buttonwood School for about seven months.

Since starting school, the boys have developed new social and academic skills, Megan Rolbiecki said. She said the program has been particularly helpful for Joshua, who has mild cerebral palsy.

"It has helped (Joshua) physically because he is around his peers," she said. "I think he pushes himself a little harder to keep up with everyone else."

Without the program, the Rochester mom said, the family could not afford preschool.

"It's just a great program, and we are very happy that we qualified for it and that it's out there," Megan Rolbiecki said.