

Don't waste opportunity to close achievement gap

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By Jean Locke

School is under way. Misty-eyed parents have waved good-bye as eager kindergartners went to school for the first time and many wondered, "Is my child really ready to start school?"

Unfortunately, for too many children the answer is, "No." Only about half of Rochester-area children are fully prepared to start kindergarten. Some will catch up. Many will not.

For the past several years, the Rochester Area Foundation and many other organizations have tried to call attention to the fact that school readiness is not just an issue for children and families. School readiness affects all of us ... it affects you. School readiness is not only about making sure the next generation can reach its potential. School readiness is a quality of life and economic issue for our entire community, our state, and our nation.

For children, success in school affects their future success in work and in life. For our society, children's success in school means more jobs, higher revenues, better business productivity, and less public expenditure. These facts have been repeatedly documented.

Our community cannot afford to let our children lag in a time of global competition in a knowledge-based economy. Our economic competitiveness and our quality of life are at stake. If our society and economy are to prosper in the future, all children must have the opportunity to fully develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

This is what Superintendent Romain Dallemand and Rochester public schools have rightly called out as the "Opportunity Gap" for students. The school district's five-year strategic plan for improvement recognizes that to close the gap, it is critical that children arrive at school fully prepared.

Being fully prepared to start school does not mean that our children need academic preparation. Being prepared requires solid physical, emotional, and intellectual development of young children. Fully 80 percent of a child's brain is developed in the first five years of life, before kindergarten. The experiences of early childhood shape the brain's architectural structure and affect capabilities for the rest of life.

Children master different skills at different ages, but healthy development in the early years creates the foundation for later school achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, and even successful parenting. Will the children of our community have a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health?

The Rochester Area Foundation's First Steps initiative is pleased that the Rochester school district acknowledges that to close the opportunity gap for students, our community needs to work with and provide supports to families and children's care givers so that all children have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

We urge others in the community to join forces with the school district to close that gap.

We can and must do better.

Jean Locke is chair of Rochester Area Foundation's First Steps initiative.