

First Steps initiative assesses its path

By Jeffrey Pieters

The Post-Bulletin

Two years after its start, an early-childhood education initiative in Rochester is retracing some of its first steps.

The initiative, called First Steps, was launched by the Rochester Area Foundation in the spring of 2005 to address a serious local issue: that an estimated 6 in 10 children start kindergarten without all the skills they ought to have. Falling behind in school -- even as early as kindergarten -- can lead to bigger problems.

Enter the First Steps program, which splashed onto the scene with a \$4 million fundraising goal and a kangaroo mascot exhorting children to get "K-ready."

But in so doing, First Steps apparently hopped on a few toes -- ones belonging to nonprofit and government agencies already working on school-readiness issues in relative obscurity.

Now, First Steps is looking for a better way to fit in.

"There were missteps along the way," said Paul Fleissner, director of Olmsted County Community Services and a First Steps board member.

"It was just part of their learning," he said. "I think they're making progress."

New year, new leader

In January, First Steps hired a new leader with experience in human services and politics -- former state Sen. Sheila Kiscaden.

Kevin Ewing, the previous director of the effort, left the organization. He did not return a phone call.

Kiscaden, hired as a consultant with a four- to six-month minimum commitment, is assigned to carve out a place for First Steps to work on school readiness in a way that's complementary to the other service providers.

A way to do that, Kiscaden said, is to ensure that all of the providers -- First Steps, the FACES family services collaborative, United Way and others -- fill roles that suit each organization's talents and priorities.

"It's about all of us, not about any one program," Kiscaden said. "Not about the foundation, but about how we, as a community, work together to reach this aspiration."

First Steps will be the most visible of the bunch. While many of the government and nonprofit groups are geared to help disadvantaged families and children, First Steps' goal is to make sure every child, regardless of income, is made school-ready.

For that, First Steps plans a public information campaign to encourage things such as parents and caregivers reading to their children every day.

First Steps also plans to develop quality standards and a rating system for child-care providers, and will urge local businesses to be more family-friendly.

"We need to make school readiness a priority, and that's for all children," Kiscaden said. "It hasn't been broadly talked about in our community."