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Kent County Takes The First Steps To Ensure All Children Have The Opportunity To Reach Their Full Potential

Community leaders launch a new early childhood initiative

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Grand Rapids, Mich.—Thousands of children in Kent County are already one or two years behind on the first day of kindergarten. That achievement gap only widens as the children get older. To combat this trend, community leaders announced First Steps, a major new early childhood initiative committed to making sure that **every child in Kent County will be ready to succeed in school and in life.**

First Steps is a partnership of parents, community agencies, business leaders, healthcare providers, educators, foundations, faith leaders and individuals who are investing in our youngest children to ensure a better future for all. The inaugural funders for First Steps are the Frey Foundation, Steelcase Foundation, Heart of West Michigan United Way and Early Childhood Investment Corporation. First Steps is led by the Early Childhood Children's Commission, co-chaired by Doug DeVos, president of Alticor, Inc., and Kate Pew Wolters, director of Steelcase, Inc.

"Each child is a treasure to Kent County," said DeVos. "It is our goal to ensure these treasures are not wasted, but given the opportunities to reach their fullest potential. First Steps is designed to do just that."

First Steps is focusing on the earliest years—prenatal to age 5. There are four main goals:

- help all children access quality healthcare
- give families the tools they need to provide opportunities for their children
- improve the early learning opportunities that build healthy brains
- make children and families an urgent community priority.

Over the next six months, First Steps will announce several pilot projects designed to meet those goals. These pilot projects will include some new services for families as well as better alignment and coordination of and improved access to existing programs. It's a universal and voluntary system designed to reach all young families in Kent County.

"We understand that this is just the beginning of the process," Wolters said. "It's significant, though, gathering together a community of providers, parents and business people around one goal: to help ensure that all of our children have the opportunity to reach their full potential."

Compelling scientific research suggests investment in early childhood development is a must. Children's brains develop more by their third birthday than during any other time in their life. This is the time when they learn how to think, solve problems, cope with stress, be creative and communicate. Much has been learned over the last decade about how the architecture of a child's brain is formed. Genes provide the blueprint for the brain, but early relationships and experiences guide how the brain is built.

There is strong evidence that a community investment in young children will strengthen the future prosperity of Kent County. It can lead to higher graduation rates, lower special education costs, a better-trained workforce, a reduction in crime and a reduced dependency on welfare. A RAND Corporation study found communities that invest in young children receive an economic return of between \$1.26 and \$17.07 for every \$1, depending on the type of program.