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\$15M project aims to improve preschoolers' literacy skills

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Staff

Nearly 40 percent of Elmira's kindergartners began school this year without the early literacy skills educators say are critical to future success. Officials from the Chemung County **School Readiness Project** a group of educators, health care providers, social service representatives and government officials committed to preparing children up to age 5 for school want to cut that number in half within five years. The group outlined a five-year, \$15 million plan Tuesday during a meeting at Elmira's Steele Memorial Library. They want to increase student success in Chemung County through home visits, quality early care and education, parent education and health care services. "If a young child comes to school healthy, loved and literate, he or she will always succeed. ... Unfortunately, the reverse is also true," said Carl Hayden, an Elmira attorney, former state Regents chancellor and chairman of the **School Readiness Project**.

Some components of the project are already in place, such as extended-day Head Start at Booth School, said Randi Hewit, program officer for The Community Foundation of the Elmira-Corning Area. The **School Readiness Project** is expected to be fully operational in September. Funding for the project of which \$6 million is new comes from the Community Foundation, Chemung County, New York state and the Elmira City School District. Every parent, regardless of their circumstances, needs help at one time or another, Hewit said.

Among the services the **School Readiness Project** will offer are nurses whom parents can check in with when their children are 3, 6 or 9 months old and educational activities for parents at convenient locations, such as their church or workplace. Training also will be offered to child care providers. Readiness project officials said they wanted to make sure children have the support they need to succeed in school. "The Community Foundation understands how important our youngest citizens are, and that the future of our community rests on their shoulders and those of their exhausted parents," Hewit said.

Increasing student success is the group's ultimate goal, **School Readiness Project** officials said. In the 2005-06 school year, 39 percent of all kindergartners in the Elmira City School District did not meet early literacy standards and, at the same time, 38 percent of district fourth-graders did not meet state standards on the English language arts test. Educators, such as Elmira Superintendent Raymond W. Bryant, said starting early is key to helping students perform well in later grades. Chemung County Executive Tom Santulli theorized that the funds spent to better educate the population could save money on social service programs in the future.

Parent Nykole Parks, whose daughter, Jazmyne, is a fourth-grader and whose son, Jordan Brooks, is a senior in the Elmira City School District, said the **School Readiness Project** is an idea whose time has come. She said such a service would have helped her after her children were born. "I was excited (about the project) because as a young parent, I felt sort of uneasy about where to go with specific questions," she said.