

June 15, 2006

## Breaking new ground *Staff (Editorial)*

Somewhere in her heavenly art studio Helen Schuyler must be smiling. The former art teacher's bequest to the Community Foundation of the Elmira-Corning Area is going to help a lot of kids get a running start on school.

It's a quest that many people in this community have been on for years, with varying degrees of success and not for lack of effort but for lack of money, coordination and cooperation. Now, though, thanks to about \$1 million from the \$15 million Schuyler left to the foundation two years ago, the many groups dedicated to helping kids succeed in school have come together to form the Chemung County **School Readiness Project**.

The goal is simple and always has been, assisting pre-school kids and parents who need help in handling the rigors of formal education. But the simple goal has not always had a unified community effort behind it, until now. The Readiness Council, formed this year with the foundation's backing, has set an ambitious objective over the next five years to reduce the percentage of children who enter kindergarten miles behind other kids in reading and other basic learning skills.

The payback to the community, though not always easy to quantify, will come in better student performance, a larger skilled work force to attract new business, less reliance on public assistance and, in general, a more attractive living environment.

The lineup of people behind this project reads like a who's who in government, business and education. In particular, the Community Foundation was smart to recruit former Regents Chancellor Carl Hayden of Elmira as its go-to guy. No one in New York state understands better than Hayden the lifetime of disadvantages that awaits children who are undereducated.

But the value of this program lies not just in getting children better prepared for school. It also involves attacking the problem almost from the moment such children are born by helping parents with child rearing, health care information and child-learning skills, especially reading, that can ensure their kids enter kindergarten with higher chances of success than they ever could have imagined.

In a district such as Elmira, that could mean that many more of its 7,082 students will score better on tests and stand better odds of getting a Regents diploma. It also can cut the number of unprepared kindergartners in half, according to the foundation. Plus it is bound to lower the district's 7.3 percent dropout rate, last updated in 2004-05.

However, this is not an Elmira-only program, an impression that the council must work hard to overcome. The Elmira Heights and Horseheads districts also have bought into this. In fact, superintendents from all three county school districts are on the Readiness Council. The point is to identify every infant and parent, before they leave the maternity unit, and work with them, if they need help, for the next five years of the child's life.

The program is going to cost \$15 million — \$6 million in new government and private funding and the other \$9 million from existing programs.

For too many years, agencies and organizations have soldiered on in their battle against illiteracy and early childhood problems. Under the Readiness Council and with the Community Foundation's support, a new alliance has given earlier efforts an extraordinary chance to fix a longstanding community problem.

Helen would approve.