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School Readiness Project makes big strides After only 18 months, early childhood effort has had success.

Guest View: Carl Hayden

Carl Hayden of Elmira is the chairman of the board of trustees for the State University of New York, former chancellor of the state Board of Regents and a founding member of the Chemung County School Readiness Project.

This is a good time to report to the community on the progress made by the Chemung County School Readiness Project, an unprecedented collaboration among the Community Foundation, Chemung County, all three Chemung County school districts, Southern Tier Pediatrics and an impressive array of human services and social services agencies. It is important that the community know more about the project and acquire a sense of ownership in what is turning out to be one of the most important undertakings of its kind in the state.

The purpose of the project is to give every child a fair shot at succeeding in school. Obviously, we can't ensure that every child arrives at school with the same set of opportunities as every other child. What we can do, however, is to knock down as many poverty-inspired barriers as possible. These often include deficits in literacy, nutrition, health and mental health. And poor children always suffer from the lack of stability that comes with an itinerant lifestyle.

The project has four main elements. It is our intention to deploy nurse home visitors to make health and mental health information available to the families of every newborn, to help parents learn how to navigate the complex system of childhood services for families and children, to help them improve their parenting skills, and to upgrade the quality, availability and literacy content of child care. In every one of these activities, we intend to focus relentlessly on the development of literacy skills. All of it is voluntary; no one is requiring that anyone do anything.

Here is what I can tell you about where we are today, only 18 months since the launch of the project:

1. 98 percent of the families of every newborn have enrolled in the project's nurse home visitation program. That is, by any measure, an extraordinary vote of confidence. Nurse home visitors will provide support for participating families for up to five years.
2. We are well along in creating and implementing a system of quality standards in the child care community and have expanded and improved the quality of care for infants and toddlers.
3. We now have more than 600 prekindergarten students in Chemung County.
4. School districts are implementing a common screening system for incoming kindergarten students built upon input from parents. Parents, after all, have the most relevant and detailed insights, and we would be remiss in not using those insights to the benefit of their children. By the way, I give particular thanks to the many teachers involved in working through this common screening system across three districts. They acted for the common good, despite a good deal of dislocation involved in abandoning prior practices.

5. Plans are under way to add a new family resource center and to make available mental health services for young children.

6. Two major universities, Cornell and Columbia, are already tracking our progress and helping with the task of evaluating our results.

This is a wonderfully encouraging beginning that has attracted the attention of child care advocates, health professionals and educators around the state. If we succeed in seeing it through to a successful conclusion, it will have dramatic implications for the life opportunities of hundreds and hundreds of our children. I urge you to take a look at the project's Web site to learn for yourself about the rich array of services available to you and to your children. You will not be disappointed.