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New report: Gaps in early childhood services stunts kindergarten readiness in Kent County

First Steps Kent report shows investments in early childhood services yield lifelong returns

GRAND RAPIDS, MICH. – Too many Kent County children and families don't have access to vital early childhood health services and screening, early childhood education and parenting education, according to a new report by **First Steps Kent** released today.

“Our analysis shows that we can do better as a community to ensure all children and their families have access to vital early childhood services and programs,” said **Annemarie Valdez**, First Steps Kent CEO. “When we invest early, babies are born healthy, families are strengthened and children are developmentally on track. Investing in early childhood services removes barriers to success and helps make Kent County more equitable and prosperous.”

The report, “**Re:Focus: Analyzing Gaps in Early Childhood Services and Funding in Kent County**,” found that although Kent County has made significant progress in making sure children ages five and under are ready for kindergarten, many Kent County children enter kindergarten without the building blocks and tools they need to be successful in life and in school. Among the major findings:

- Fewer than 1 in 5 economically disadvantaged children have access to 3-year-old preschool.
- Fewer than half of vulnerable families are getting home-based parenting education and support.
- Thousands of Kent County families can't afford quality child care, which costs an average of \$8,000 per year.

“While Kent County has made great gains, especially with preschool for all 4-year-olds, the First Steps Kent report shows us we have more work to do,” said **Brook Veldkamp**, kindergarten teacher at Challenger Elementary in Kentwood. “The benefits of the investment are clear: Health and brain development during the first five years of life are critical to a child's future. We can remove needless struggles for many, many more children with adequate services during those early years.”

The First Steps Kent report provides several actionable steps for closing the gap. With the data in hand, community members can now prioritize resources on key areas. The report also opens the door to better collaboration and alignment of services to optimize the community's current collective investment in young children.

“We all have an important role to play to ensure funding and support for high-quality early childhood programs and services,” said **Lynne Ferrell**, senior program officer at the Frey Foundation. “Healthier children, better academic outcomes, less crime and a better-trained workforce benefit the entire community.”

The report was released during a community breakfast attended by local educators, business and community leaders, philanthropists, parents and early childhood advocates at Grand Rapids Community College this morning. To read the full report, visit firststepskent.org/media.

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First Steps Kent is an independent non-profit that works to strengthen and coordinate the system of early childhood services through research and innovation. First Steps is leading a community-wide effort to develop a system of support for children age 5 and under (and their families) that ensures every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life.