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## Kindergarten screening, the first step of college prep

BY RACHEL WELLS



Every child in Sangamon County could be a college graduate with the potential to bring more businesses, and more economic wealth, to the Springfield area. That's the idea behind the Continuum of Learning, an education and workforce development initiative formed in March 2008 by three coordinating partners.

The Sangamon County Community Foundation, the United Way of Central Illinois and the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce, last week hosted a community roundtable to celebrate the partnerships the initiative has built and the programs it's helped bring about. The three coordinating partners have all pledged support and funding to programs that align with the Continuum's mission – to strengthen the area's education system and workforce, which in turn will bring more economic prosperity.

A project key to the initiative's goals is a kindergarten screening project started last spring. With the help of a \$10,000 grant obtained through the Sangamon County Community Foundation, day care providers and pre-school centers screened about 900 5-year-olds for kindergarten readiness. The information gleaned from the screenings was entered into a database so that the students' new teachers could better meet kindergarteners where they are, bringing the children up to speed where necessary. The

information was also shared with pre-kindergarten teachers and day care providers, who can now better evaluate the areas in which they can help their charges grow.

The Continuum would like to expand the program to screen more children earlier on, first adding 4-year-olds, then adding 3-year-olds, says Carlissa Puckett, executive director of Sparc, an agency that aims to help the developmentally disabled, and the Continuum's stage one co-chair.

The goal is to increase the college-going rate in Springfield and Sangamon County, which in turn will provide a better economic outlook for the area, says Dr. Harry Berman, chair of the Continuum's steering committee. But in order to significantly affect the number of residents who move on to higher education or greater vocational attainment, children must receive help early, Berman says.

The kindergarten screening program is one of the projects initiated by the Continuum of Learning that's furthest along, but the group is also involved or supportive of several other projects throughout the county that address more than just early childhood education. To accomplish its mission, the Continuum is dividing its attention into five parts. Stage one focuses on children from birth until just before kindergarten, making sure they're ready to succeed in their first year of primary school. Stage two, with a goal of all Sangamon County students performing at grade level, focuses on students up through fifth grade. Stage three aims to ensure that every secondary student has a plan for the future, whether vocational or academic, and stage four aims to increase the number of students who go on to some sort of post-secondary training, including college. Stage five programs focus on professional development and ensuring that jobs will be available for the top notch workers Sangamon County will produce should stages one through four succeed.

While the goal of getting today's kindergarteners to attend college at a greater rate is a long way off, other aspects of the Continuum's efforts could be realized much earlier, Berman says. He notes a project implemented by the Springfield community in the early 2000s in which about 700 middle school students, most of whom went on to Lanphier High School, received more college advisement and tutoring than they otherwise would have received. The program is credited for those students' college application rate of 82 percent, compared with the previous class of Lanphier students' college application rate of about 50 percent.

To meet a similar end, the Continuum is supporting programs including the Illinois College Advising Corps, which provides two dedicated college advisors in Sangamon County; a program that will bring health care professionals into area middle school classrooms to get students thinking about possible career options; and MOSAIC (Meaningful Opportunities for Success and Achievement through Service Integration for Children), which focuses on all aspects of a single neighborhood to ensure mental health issues are identified and addressed as soon as they appear.

"It's kind of like a pipeline," Berman says. "We know that kids drop out – it's a leaky pipeline – along the way. We talk about kids who don't think they could possibly go to college, and that idea starts earlier on, that they couldn't go. They have to take the right courses; they have to have the idea. But taking the right courses depends on the advisor they get and their success at the younger stages."

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