

First Steps helps prepare children for first grade

By Jennifer Brown

For The Chronicle 10.17.07

(Sixth in a series about United Way-funded agencies in Laurens County.)

The Laurens County First Steps Partnership serves the mission of the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness of leveraging public and private resources to increase the preparedness of children entering first grade and being successful by targeting children age birth to 5 who are identified as at-risk of early school failure.

In a county where more than 60 percent of kindergarten students are identified for free and reduced lunches and as many as 24 percent of children ages 0-5 are living in poverty, that's a tall mission to carry out.

With a similar mission, the United Way of Laurens County has helped by allocating \$5,000 this year to be used for First Steps' "Countdown to Kindergarten" program to help students who've completed 4-year-old kindergarten be more prepared for starting kindergarten in August.

"It's the largest United Way



allocation we've had and it's what we asked them for," said Laurens County First Steps Executive Director Edith Davis.

Davis said 26 children were served through Countdown to Kindergarten in the School District 56 attendance area over the summer.

Three certified teachers made home visits with the identified students, spending 10 hours with each and loading them up with backpacks full of books and other educational materials.

"Research shows that they forget a lot over the summer, and of course, 5K is not what it used to be. There's a lot more to learn," Davis said.

During First Steps' annual meeting Oct. 8, board members heard one of the Countdown to Kindergarten teachers tell about a student she didn't believe was ready to make the transition between 4-year-old kindergarten and kindergarten.

"But after spending time with

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him in the Countdown program, working with him more intensely to reinforce what he learned as a 4-year-old, she said he was ready for school this fall," said Hal Milam, chair of the local First Steps board.

"That's what First Steps is all about — that child being ready for school. The United Way helped us achieve that with him and many others and we can't thank them enough."

First Steps also conducts a summer program in District 55, as well as family literacy programs in both Laurens County school districts.

With local public schools now receiving state funding for 4K programs through the South Carolina Child Development Pilot Program (CDPPP), First Steps has shifted its focus and funding to the expansion of publicly-funded 4K classes in non-school district settings, like Thornwell Child Development Center in Clinton.

"First Steps cannot supplant what we can expand," said Davis.

"Our mission has always been to work with children 0-5, but the focus of First Steps is moving to 0-3 and we've shifted more funding to family literacy — something that's really needed in Laurens County."

As part of that focus, and with a Center of Excellence designation and accompanying \$300,000 grant, Laurens County First Steps is offering scholarships to eligible families for 4-year-old kindergarten at Thornwell Child Development Center, parent education programs, health screenings and other support for children, as well as training for childcare workers and early education professionals.

First Steps continues to receive the majority of its money from the state, but is also charged with its own fundraising.

With a \$619,280 annual budget this year, Laurens County First Steps can use every contribution it can get.

"Laurens County First Steps is very grateful to the United Way for its contributions to the lives of young children in our community," said Milam.

"First Steps is such a valuable partner to United Way of Laurens County," said United Way Executive Director Caroline Thomas. "Very often First Steps is the connecting point between United Way and its early childhood initiatives like Imagination Library."

"Many of the children and families who are involved in the First Steps' Countdown to Kindergarten programs have reaped the literacy benefits offered through Imagination Library. We are fortunate in this community to have a program like First Steps."