

Progress reported on reading initiative

Reading

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Mayor Lovely Warren's office released a progress report Wednesday on a reading initiative that she made a priority during her first two years in office.

The 3-to-3 Initiative is meant to help children from age 3 to third grade, when research shows it is critical for students to develop literacy skills. The program is based on recommendations from an Early Learning Council that Warren convened in 2014.

That earlier report credited city prekindergarten programs, but pointed to other "serious gaps" in early literacy, including setbacks during summer breaks from school.

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The city has since created new literacy programs and expanded existing ones at city libraries and recreation centers, the report released Wednesday says. It also worked with local foundations and United Way of Greater Rochester to fund health and developmental screenings for 3-year-olds, and it launched efforts to get parents more involved in teaching their children to read.

More specific examples:

- » Close to 2,000 students participated in reading programs at city branch libraries last summer.
- » Teachers operated "learning labs" for children at six branch libraries last year. With support from the city schools, the program expanded during the summer to five city recreation centers.
- » Public libraries expanded a free book distribution program and now give out about 25,000 books a month.
- » The city has begun distributing kids' books and brochures with school preparedness tips to thousands of new parents.

The report notes other milestones, including a \$12 million state grant for city schools to offer full-day prekindergarten to 1,000 3-year-olds, starting this month. The city worked with the school district, community groups and landlords to find space for the program, the report says.

Also noted is Warren's advocacy, along with other local officials, for more state funding for child care subsidies for low-income working parents.

The mayor has followed through on the spirit of the recommendations from her Early Learning Council, said Dirk Hightower, who is executive director at the Children's Institute and was a member of Warren's council.

The health and developmental screenings in particular should allow more careful tracking of which children have issues that need to be addressed and what assistance they receive, Hightower said. That said, it may be too early to gauge the impact of these programs. The city plans to track success by looking at the number of 3-year-olds who go through screening and how children score on both a screening test and state English and math assessments, spokeswoman Jessica Alaimo said. And there's more work to be done, the report acknowledges. Next steps including looking into creating a local fund similar to the Children's Scholarship Fund in New York City or the Bison Fund in Buffalo, which offer tuition scholarships for low-income parents to send their children to private schools. It's also important to start thinking differently about the way we design programs to help children, Hightower said. "We need to focus on what individual kids need," he said. "It's developing on what the child needs, not what the programs provide." Also on Wednesday, Warren's office announced her appointment as co-chairwoman of the National League of Cities' Council on Youth, Education and Families. The council advises the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, which works on similar issues nationwide.

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Jayden Mason, a first-grader, reads during class at School 36 last spring.

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