

## 'Early childhood zones' show promise



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The Dane County budget totals more than \$500 million, with nearly half of that going to human services.

So County Executive Joe Parisi's \$165,000 initiative to create more "early childhood zones" hasn't received a lot of attention.

But it should.

The effort to get more young children — with help from their parents — ready for school is key to long-term academic success. And coordinating more social services around schools is an encouraging trend that should continue.

Credit Parisi and the United Way of Dane County's Leslie Ann Howard for making this happen, with lots of help from other individuals and groups.

The county launched a "birth to three" initiative in 2005 to help the parents of young children with employment and parenting skills. More recently, the United Way began going into homes to teach parents how to prepare children ages 2 to 4 for school.

The programs moved into an office across from Leopold Elementary School in Madison with goals to reduce duplication of services while encouraging smooth transitions for children into 4-year-old kindergarten. Early childhood zones strive to increase 4K attendance and help disadvantaged families secure stable housing and work.

A lot of young families in Madison are headed by single parents who face huge financial, employment and housing challenges that can threaten school success for their children.

The first early childhood zone last year focused on the Madison neighborhood around Leopold, with in-home visits and group "play and learn" events. The school district, a health cooperative, a jobs agency and other organizations are part of the county and United Way effort.

Instead of every service provider doing its own thing, all of these groups are pooling resources and coordinating efforts, which is more efficient and effective.

About 38 percent of Madison children enter kindergarten without the necessary skills to succeed, according to the United Way. And those kids have a hard time catching up with their peers.

The Leopold zone last year helped dozens of families boost learning skills and 4K attendance. Now Parisi and Howard are creating two more early childhood zones aimed at stabilizing

families.

The \$165,000 investment, following last year's \$150,000, represents less than 0.1 percent of the county budget. Yet it's enough to create early childhood zones around Allied Drive on the edge of Fitchburg and around Sun Prairie's Westside Elementary School.

Having a parent with a job, living in a stable home and being ready for kindergarten are key factors for future success, including high school graduation.

More coordination and concentration on that goal deserves applause.

## **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

Is early childhood learning key to future success? Send your views, 200 words or less, to [wsjopine@madison.com](mailto:wsjopine@madison.com) or to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 8058, Madison, WI 53708. Please include your address and phone number. A selection of responses, received by Wednesday, will appear in next Sunday's newspaper and online.