Sooner is better than later for learning

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Madison and most urban school districts are struggling to close stubborn achievement gaps. And the problem starts long before the first day of kindergarten. That's why the United Way of Dane County's Parent-Child Home Program deserves special attention and support, even though — so far — it's serving relatively few families.

The idea is to help more parents give their children a good start at learning by visiting them in their homes each week for 30 to 45 minutes. A trained adult shares a book or educational toy with the child and offers the parent tips for nurturing early childhood development. This includes reading to the child and encouraging critical thinking skills.

The program has been around for decades in other parts of the country. The United Way points to studies that suggest participants were better prepared for kindergarten, had higher test scores in elementary school and were more likely to graduate than non-participating peers.

It's the kind of thing Madison should have been doing long ago, before its achievement gap between white and minority students became so pronounced.

Huge and needed attention has been given to Madison School District's awful four-year graduation rates for black and Latino students of barely 50 percent and 59 percent, respectively.

But the problem starts long before high school. In fact, the years just before children enter kindergarten may be the most important.

Little more than a third of black children are showing up at Madison schools prepared for kindergarten, according to district assessments. And fewer than a quarter of Latino children, some of whom don't speak English well or at all, are showing up with the basic learning skills they need to succeed.

Compare that to the more than three-quarters of white children who are prepared for kindergarten, and it's clear the achievement gap has early origins.

Madison was late to offer 4-year-old kindergarten. That should help. So should the state's new...
rating system that encourages child care providers to improve their educational programming.

So should a host of programs and efforts in the schools and across the community aimed at helping the youngest children get off to healthy, strong starts.

The United Way launched the Parent-Child Home Program last year for 43 mostly low-income and minority families. And thanks to a big donation from Cuna Mutual Foundation, the program is expanding to 119 families.

The Madison School Board should be watching closely for signs of success.

The sooner children start learning in a positive home environment with a parent involved, the more they're likely to achieve.