

Learning Life Lessons

Program: Starting Strong in the Sioux Empire

Partners: Sioux Empire United Way, Forward Sioux Falls, and Governor Rounds' 2010 Education Initiative

Providers: Excel Discovery Center, Kidz Club Preschool, Sioux Falls School District, Volunteers of America, Dakotas, and Youth Enrichment Services.

Service: Starting Strong in the Sioux Empire will provide over 200 three and four year olds the opportunity to attend a quality preschool over the next three years.

Need: There are over 1200 economically disadvantaged three and four-year-olds in Sioux Falls, but there are only about 650 openings in free pre-kindergarten programs. There are 160 children on the waiting list for Head Start programs, and many of them will never receive any kind of preschool services without Starting Strong.

Impact: For every \$1 invested in early childhood education, the community receives a \$7 return. This is because children with quality pre-kindergarten programs are less likely to:

- Need special education
 - Drop out of school
 - Be unemployed
 - Commit juvenile and adult crime
 - Depend on public assistance
- And more likely to:
- Enroll in a 4-year college degree program
 - Have higher earnings

The first few years of a child's life are a pivotal time where they build the foundation for their future education. Unfortunately for some children, they may never get the opportunity for a positive preschool education. For children who are part of the Starting Strong in the Sioux Empire initiative, that opportunity has arrived.

"When I got custody of Matthew, I asked about finding an early-childhood program for him," says Ellen. "I had him screened, and we eventually got a call saying that there was an opening in a pilot program. I said 'we'll take it!'"

Ellen is the guardian and great aunt of Matthew, a three year-old boy who is participating in Starting Strong this year.

"Matthew knows the routine in the morning, and he really likes to come to school," says Ellen. "He's a smart little boy. He's always happy, and he sings and talks non-stop."



Starting Strong in the Sioux Empire is an early childhood education initiative aimed at reaching children who need it most, when they need it most. The program is a community partnership between the Sioux Empire United Way, Forward Sioux Falls and Governor Mike Rounds' 2010 Education Initiative. Starting Strong in the Sioux Empire is a three year program which will serve over 200 children.

"I was so happy when they called to say that there was a place for Matthew," says Ellen. "Before it was only me – there was no one his age to play with. He's more outgoing now."

Significant studies have been done over the years on the critical aspects of early childhood learning. Researchers know that 85% of the brain's core structure has been developed by age 3. This vital development time lays the foundation for language, math, reading, social skills and future success.

And thanks to Starting Strong, Ellen knows Matthew will be ready for school, "Matthew is learning life lessons at preschool. My goal is for him to finish school and go to college."