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First Steps Kent Invites Community to Help Shape the Future of Inclusive Literacy in Kent County

(Grand Rapids, Mich., February 2, 2026)—First Steps Kent is inviting community members to take part in a countywide convening focused on expanding early literacy opportunities for children with developmental differences.

The Inclusive Literacy Alliance (ILA), an initiative of First Steps Kent, is a collaborative group of parents, educators, libraries, healthcare providers, and community organizations that came together throughout 2025 to address barriers to early literacy access, specifically for children who are on the autism spectrum, are blind or have low vision, and are deaf or hard of hearing.

After a year of collaboration, research, and community listening, the ILA will host a community convening to share and gather feedback on four proposed pilot projects designed to improve early literacy access for children with developmental differences. Community feedback gathered at the convening will directly inform next steps and investment decisions.

Join us for Building Inclusive Literacy: A Community Feedback Forum on Friday, February 20, from 10:30 a.m. - 1 p.m. at the Salvation Army Kroc Center. [RSVP here.](#)

“Early literacy is the foundation for lifelong learning, but it doesn’t happen in isolation,” said **Jennifer Headley-Nordman, president of First Steps Kent.** “When our community works together, we can create systems that truly support every child. This collaboration is about listening, learning, and building solutions that reflect the real experiences of families in our community.”

At the upcoming convening, participants will:

- Hear a brief overview of the ILA’s work and key learnings from the past year
- Learn about four proposed pilot projects
- Participate in interactive feedback sessions to help inform pilot design and priorities
- Connect with others committed to building a more equitable literacy system

This work aligns with Governor Whitmer’s announcement, in which she named literacy as her top priority as she enters her final year in office. Michelle Richard, senior advisor to Governor Whitmer, will be at the community feedback forum to speak about how these local literacy efforts align with the governor’s work.

“Literacy is a cornerstone of any state’s success, and when every child reads, we all win,” said **Michelle Richard, senior advisor to Governor Whitmer.** “That’s why Governor Whitmer is prioritizing literacy and betting big on what works, from expanding early learning and training educators on what works to improving curriculum and getting kids the extra help they need. No one can reach all kids alone, which is why valued local partnerships are so critical. Let’s keep doing the work to help every child read.”

First Steps Kent is proud to partner with organizations, educators, parents, and professionals who are committed to improving early literacy outcomes for every child in our community. Whether you’re interested in joining the Alliance, supporting our pilots, or attending the convening, we invite you to connect. Learn more about the Inclusive Literacy Alliance on [this webpage](#).

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About First Steps Kent: First Steps Kent is an independent nonprofit organization that works with parents, service providers, funders, advocates, and other stakeholders to build a comprehensive early childhood system in Kent County. Our community vision is that every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life. First Steps Kent is working with our community partners to make that vision a reality. Learn more at www.firststepskent.org.