

# First Steps receives \$60K Walmart grant

JULIA ALDRIDGE

Staff Reporter

The art of learning begins at the first cry of birth, just as the skill of walking begins with a child's first steps.

The Walmart Foundation understands this concept and recently contributed \$60,000 to Chesterfield County First Steps to help educate children.

Due to a spiraling economy, the First Steps organization was forced to cut programs for children and families. Seeking to make up the deficit, the organization explored other avenues of assistance and applied for a grant from the Walmart Foundation State Giving Program.

The Walmart Foundation responded favorably to Chesterfield County First Steps' application, and last Wednesday approximately



*Contributed*

**Pictured above, Chesterfield County First Steps Executive Director Karen Odom accepts a check from Walmart Distribution General Manager Phil Ingram.**

100 people eagerly gathered in the Pageland Community Center in anticipation of celebrating an astonishingly "Incredible Day for Chesterfield County's Young Children."

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According to prepared statement released by CCFS, "Chesterfield County First Steps is the first agency in this area of the state to receive a grant by the Walmart State Giving program. The grant will allow First Steps to train and employ a cadre of group leaders to expand the evidence-based parenting program, 'The Incredible Years.'"

Having been involved in education for nearly five decades as a student, parent, teacher, business person and husband of an elementary school teacher, I am keenly aware of the importance of early childhood education, health awareness, early model of parents, and the readiness of children to succeed in the classroom," said Pageland Chamber of Commerce President Tony Nolan, who emceed last week's event. "There can be no doubt that success in the classroom can be an indicator of potential success in life. First Steps provides a springboard to that success, which is a straightforward, yet critical mission. Every child will arrive to school healthy and ready to learn. That is a noble mission."

Jameka Gould, a dedicated parent who participated in Chesterfield County's first "Incredible Years" program and mother of two young children, enumerated the many reasons she was so grateful for the First Steps program.

"Everything for children starts with the parent. After going through the classes in order to help my children, I decided to let the class help

me," Gould said. "I became a better parent for my children. We were able to understand each other ... I was able to get my children on a schedule, set limits and routines for them, which really helped with getting them to where they knew what was going on in our daily schedule."

Parenting doesn't come with a book or a manual, and as a result of the 'First Steps Incredible Years program,' Gould encouraged all parents to participate, and she expressed her thankfulness for the opportunity to share her experience.

Introducing Jenny Keefe, a tenured kindergarten teacher at Cheraw Primary School, where two programs have been held, Nolan stated, "Local financial support has been provided by Lynches River Electric Cooperative, United Way, Conbraco Industries and Walmart of Cheraw."

Emphasizing that children should be life-long learners, Keefe said, "Some children arrive at school lacking the tools for success."

She left no doubt that her daily focus is to instill in her children the skills needed to succeed in life.

"Every year the kindergarten teachers are faced with challenges to overcome, and no matter where children come from or what their circumstances are, my expectations for those children are extremely high - I believe that they can do anything they set their minds to do," said Keefe.

Because children are the future, Keefe emphasized

that as a community effort, early intervention is needed through "The Incredible Years" program.

"Preschool and kindergarten is not what it used to be," Keefe said. "They do not play all day. They learn to read, write and you would be amazed at some of the things my 5 year-olds learn. The First Steps programs create a positive learning experience for the children, and it's less of a frustration for parents when they understand the tools needed to assist their child. These children deserve the very best because they are the future of this nation."

Introducing Phil Ingram, general manager of Walmart Distribution Center as "a kind and generous human being, a community and business leader and a friend," Nolan detailed Ingram's credentials through his return to Pageland in October 2005.

Nolan said, "Building on the foundation of values Sam Walton put in place, Phil made people a priority, creating an environment where diversity, innovation and excellence could flourish. Under his leadership, Walmart assembled a strong team of leaders who transformed the business to thrive in a very competitive environment. Walmart Pageland is now recognized as the leading food distribution center in the company."

Ingram assured the group that the celebration was not about him or Walmart.

"It's a celebration of Chesterfield County because that's the people who made it happen," said In-

gram. "Over the years if you were to look at Walmart's staff today, the vast majority of the people on my team are from Chesterfield County or just outside the county. So, the success of that operation is attributed to the people of Chesterfield County."

Last week's announcement originated from Walmart's State Giving Program. Ingram explained that through the state program, The Walmart Foundation supports organizations with programs that are in alignment with their mission to create opportunity so people can live better.

"It is my privilege on behalf of The Walmart Foundation this morning to present to the First Steps and 'The Incredible Years' program this check for \$60,000," Ingram said.

First Steps Executive Director Karen Odom gratefully responded, "It is truly a blessing for us, for the Thanksgiving holidays next week, and this has truly given our organization and the children and families we serve even more cause to be thankful. I am so proud that we have some of our 'Incredible Years' families here to receive this precious gift on behalf of all future Chesterfield County children and families who will be able to benefit from this marvelous investment from Walmart. We can't thank you enough."

For more information about First Steps, visit [www.chesterfieldfirststeps.org](http://www.chesterfieldfirststeps.org) and at [facebook.com/chesterfieldfirststeps](https://facebook.com/chesterfieldfirststeps).