

“If you learn it through play, it’s there to stay”
-Anne Innskeep, 1928

By exploring Innskeep’s philosophy, parents and educators are discovering we can give children a fun and rewarding boost toward learning. United Way of Greater Battle Creek is helping lead the movement to increase learning readiness by funding the TWIST and Jump into Kindergarten® programs. During its June board meeting, United Way’s Board of Directors approved a grant of \$30,000 for Calhoun County Intermediate School District to help the two programs prepare children to learn.

The TWIST & Jump into Kindergarten programs grew out of Project First Step® (PFS), a learning readiness program developed by Thomas R. Johnson, PhD. Johnson began developing PFS in 1991 while working on his first Masters’ degree. He noticed kids labeled “Special Education” or “Academically Talented” received extra learning-related services, but those in the middle (students with C and D grades) fell through the cracks. Realizing physical education was a key part of programs for special needs students; Johnson began researching the connection between physical activity and learning. PFS evolved and grew throughout the 1990s, and more recently, added the TWIST and Jump into Kindergarten® programs. PFS principles teach children to internalize seven fundamental physical skills essential to optimal learning and positive behaviors; balance, general coordination, body image, hand-eye coordination, laterality, tactile touch and audio-expressive/audio-receptive language.

TWIST and Jump into Kindergarten® have three main goals:

- Help children get physically ready to learn
- Help children acquire the social/character skills associated with learning
- Address obesity and health concerns

TWIST (Taught with Internalized Skills Techniques) is a twenty day program for kids entering Kindergarten through age eight. It uses an outdoor, station-to-station course designed to develop the Project First Step® Fundamental Physical Skills as well as the progression of learning sport-specific, social/character, cognitive and health-related skills.

Jump into Kindergarten®, also based on Johnson’s Project First Step®, is a fifteen day program for entering Kindergartners, which focuses on developing skills that help children become successful learners. It uses games and activities to internalize the seven fundamental physical skills, sequencing, spatial development, concentration, etc. and to enable them to jump past the first few weeks of familiarizing them with the behaviors they will need in Kindergarten.

According to Dr. Johnson, physical movement has a profound effect on academic and social ability. For example:

- Children who learn balancing skills are better able to remain on task
- Children who understand spatial order are better able to interact with their world
- Children who develop hand-eye coordination are more successful at sports, games, interacting with others, and performing physical (muscular eye development) and academic tasks necessary to math and reading.

Children attending either of the programs are evaluated for learning readiness both before they begin, and after they complete, the program. Kay Nicholas, principal of Miller Early Childhood

Center in Brighton, Michigan adopted the program techniques, and within five years, consistently saw post-test scores 70-80 percent higher than pre-test scores. “Project First Step has helped us to improve motor development, which in turn has helped our children with brain development and improved academic success,” said Nicholas.

The TWIST and Jump into Kindergarten programs are jointly-funded programs, and thus, fall under United Way’s Project Impact Fund. Project Impact Fund addresses need in three priority areas: Emergencies, Community Projects and Joint-funded Projects. These priority areas attend to changing and diverse needs by assisting with unforeseeable emergencies, one-time community projects and projects involving collaboration among various community partners. Other current contributors to the TWIST and Jump into Kindergarten programs include Battle Creek Community Foundation, Miller Foundation, the Guido A. and Elizabeth H. Binda Foundation and Battle Creek Public Schools. It is anticipated that long-term funding and sustainability for the programs will be obtained from State and Federal governments.