

ARIZONA GOVERNOR'S FORUM:

Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools

Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools Through P-20 Councils

A View from Arizona

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Education Commission
of the States

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

The idea is to make young children ready for school and to make schools ready for them.

The concept is simple, but the challenge is great. It means changing the early childhood education system in this country. It means making sure elementary schools are on board. It means creating an education continuum the likes of which the United States has never seen, a system that would prepare children for a lifetime of learning starting as early as birth and would push them not only to stay in school, but to achieve.

The challenge is to do this faster and more comprehensively than is the norm in this country, and at a time when school systems are under attack for failing to perform.

Despite the obstacles, about six dozen educators, education experts and advocates gathered at the Arizona Governor's Forum: *Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools*, a one-day forum held in Phoenix in late May to map out ways in which they might bring change to Arizona's education system. Already, the state is leading the way. In late 2006, voters agreed to funnel an estimated \$150 million a year from a tobacco tax to a new program known as First Things First, aimed at improving access to quality care for newborns and children through the age of five years old, and at coordinating the efforts of educators, caregivers, families, tribal governments, communities and health care professionals. And a year before the proposition made it on the ballot, Gov. Janet Napolitano created the P-20 Council to improve education from early childhood through the post-secondary years.

The elements essential for reform exist, the governor told the forum. But they must be pulled together.

"It's high time that we did so because the fastest growing population in Arizona are zero to five year olds," Napolitano said. "And that population is, in some respects, an at-risk population. Almost half, 48.5 percent, of these children come from families who are at 200 percent of the federal poverty line or less.

"They are more likely than others to live in a household where none of the parents have a significant amount of educational attainment themselves. And they're more likely to come from a household where

English is not the primary language," she said. "And so we have these challenges in front of us to make sure that these youngsters get every advantage that we can provide, to make sure that they can take advantage of the talents they have, the intellect they have, that they are competitive and ready to go when they enter all-day kindergarten and first grade.

"Looking at this as a system and as linkages is so very, very important."

Because of the steps the state has taken already, Arizona was selected by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) as the first of five states to conduct Governors' Forums to examine practices and policies affecting early learning. The 2008 forums will create a body of knowledge intended to instruct policymakers in state and national government, culminating in a session in Washington in early 2009.

"This is an opportunity to roll up our sleeves and start to make the changes that we know we have to make on behalf of children in this state and in the country," said Gregory Taylor, vice president for programs, at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "We're looking to take the best of what you are doing and partner with you all to inform policymakers at all levels. We're very excited to inform a new administration and inform a new Congress."

The foundation sponsors a program called SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids, that works in eight locations around the country to improve learning for vulnerable children by fostering partnerships among parents, early education providers, elementary school teachers and principals. Although Arizona is not a SPARK site, participants in the forum said many of the goals are the same.

"The Ready Kids, Ready Schools forum will serve as a catalyst, or spark, to ensure that vulnerable children are ready for school and that the schools are ready for the children," said Rufus Glasper, co-chair of the Governor's P-20 Council and chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College District.

"The need for education reform and alignment is real," Glasper said. "Arizona's education statistics include below-average college-going rates, high remediation rates at the post-secondary level, and feedback from business and industry that Arizona students enter the workforce lacking adequate preparedness for success."

The P-20 Council has been working to bring together the education sectors, business and community leaders and elected officials to develop policies to improve the state's education system, starting in the earliest years.

"We all know that the first five years of a child's life are critical in preparing them to be creative, innovative and ready for school," Glasper said.

The council's goals, he said, are to ensure "that every child is safe, healthy and ready to succeed, that every third grader is able to read at grade level, that every eighth grader is prepared to take and pass algebra, that every graduating high school student is prepared to work or [to obtain a] post-secondary education....and [that] Arizona's education system creates a strong pipeline of students who are prepared to build and sustain a knowledge-based economy."

When it comes to the youngest learners, though, the path is not clear cut. Unlike more established elementary and secondary schools, the early childhood system is wide-ranging. Children might be in public or private preschools, in private child care programs, in Head Start, in home-based care or at their own homes with parents, grandparents or sitters. "What this means," Glasper said, "is that children arrive in kindergarten with very different levels of school readiness."

Indeed, only 13 percent of Arizona students are prepared for kindergarten when they get there, reported Sterling Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. And few of them have the tools to catch up on their own. Most disturbing, Speirn and others said, is that the lack of readiness and achievement among young children is one predictor of the prison population some years down the line. "It is a travesty that when we find out that students are unable to read at grade level by third grade...that we use those statistics to determine the number of correction institutions that we will need in the state some 15 years out," Glasper said.

Or, as Speirn put it: "We know what the cost of failure is, but we don't know what the cost of success is."

As a result, he said, the nation needs to create a whole new system, a new paradigm, for educating children before they get to kindergarten, much like it created a community college system in the 1950s. That system needs to link everyone involved in a child's education from the early years on to ensure that he or she has a smooth transition to kindergarten and is put on the path to scholastic success.

"A decade from now, we'll be looking at that paradigm and I think states like Arizona may be some of the first to say we don't even worry about the transition from the early years to the school years," Speirn said. "We look at success by third grade. And we ask ourselves, in a seamless way, what we need to do with a family starting at conception and prenatal right on through to meeting third grade."

Creating a P-20 system is one of four main goals that the Education Commission of the States has for public education in this country, said ECS President Roger Sampson. The difficulty with "just doing it," he said, is evident up and down the line. Teachers, principals, superintendents, commissioners, state officials – all can present obstacles to progress. Further, he said, America's education system was designed to grant access to every child, but not to help every child achieve. While achievement has now become a goal, the nation's school systems have not shifted to meet the challenge.

"The current system that we operate under was never designed to graduate everybody and to make sure everybody achieved," Sampson noted. "There's going to be some huge changes required if, in fact, we're going to meet that mandate...."

"Right now, under our current system, about 10 to 15 percent of our top performing students are competitive. But what are we doing with the other 85 percent? It's going to require some huge system changes for that to occur."

The education system is rife with finger pointing and turf wars, he said, particularly in the face of a 40 percent dropout rate. It is critical for educators and policymakers to see the connection between the

failure to prepare children for kindergarten – and to prepare schools for them – and the widespread lack of achievement among high school students, he said. The current fragmented system of early care, which varies widely in terms of quality, simply does not produce children who are ready for school at age five, and the current school system is not ready to take on its youngest learners.

“The bottom line,” Sampson said, is that “there is no way that they can meet the challenge of preparing our young people to compete globally if they don’t have a steady stream of ready kids going into ready schools.....Many, many principals and superintendents embrace this idea of getting ready kids and making sure their schools are ready to receive kids in the correct manner. But not everybody feels that way and not every principal knows how or wants to.”

Policymakers, he said, need to remove the hurdles and help train educators for the task. And while there need to be changes in upper grades as well, Sampson said the place to start is with the youngest group.

“There is no doubt in my mind that P-3, ages three to eight are the most important and the pieces that must come first,” he said. “They’re also the piece that’s been left out of the P-20 discussion the most. The evidence is overwhelming...If we miss the boat by age eight, the chances of recovery are slim, the costs are huge and we ought to understand where we get the most for the investment, and that’s early.”

Toward that end, the forum’s participants split into groups to come up with recommendations on how to bolster the “P” in the P-20 system. One recurring question was what the “P” stood for – with answers ranging from pre-birth to pre-kindergarten.

The groups recommended:

- Aligning early learning standards with K-3 standards.
- Determining what “ready schools” mean.
- Collecting data on where younger children are receiving care, including organized child care centers, public or private preschools, home-based care and “kin” care.
- Developing an agenda for those early years so that all children will be ready for kindergarten.

- Building a pipeline among educators at different levels so that children learn on a smooth continuum; integrating their care from the earliest years through post-graduate work.
- Educating the public on the P-20 system so that there is a broader understanding of how early learning fits into the whole. Making sure agencies on all levels send the same message.
- Creating unique identifiers for children so that they may be tracked beginning in the early years and, possibly, receive individualized learning plans.
- Improving the “art of communication,” including reading, writing and speaking among all students.
- Investigating how best to certify teachers at all levels.

“The tough work ahead is actually digging into these issues and deciding whether we’re going to nibble around the edges or if we’re going to do the tough work,” said Rhian Evans Allvin, a board member for First Things First, Arizona’s Early Childhood Development and Health Board and the Governor’s P-20 Council.

Aligning programs is critical, she said, illustrating her point by listing some of the disparities within the current system. Preschool children often are watched by caretakers with GEDs or high school diplomas whose earnings are below the federal poverty level, while kindergarteners are instructed by teachers with college degrees and solid wages. Preschoolers are taught through play and experience, while kindergarteners and first graders begin to have more traditional, didactic experiences, to meet school requirements and take tests.

The system splintered in part because state and federal governments haven’t seen the need to intervene in or pay for early child care and learning, said Nadine Mathis Basha, chair of First Things First. It was primarily viewed as a private, family matter, she said. That meant that children whose families could afford quality care were better prepared for kindergarten than those whose families could not.

First Things First is trying to change that with receipts from an 80-cent tax on tobacco products. It is working with communities all across Arizona, including tribes, to improve the quality of early childhood development and health, provide access to health care, foment family support for early education, provide professional development and

training, and increase public information about the importance of early childhood development, explained Mathis Basha.

It's a good start, the experts at the forum agreed. But while encouraging the state to move forward, Sampson offered sobering words that underscored the challenge facing Arizona and other states leading the reform effort.

"I'm going to give you a piece of bad news: The average length of time for a new idea to move from conception to institutionalization in K-12 is 37 years. That's a fact. Isn't that ridiculous?" Sampson said. "I don't have to tell this group that this country can't wait that long for a really good P-3, P-4, P-anything. We've got to move forward. Knowing that, you have a long way to go. Don't get discouraged."

The group also acknowledged that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to early childhood education. In fact, there could be many solutions.

"Remember that there is not an answer out there that is eluding everyone. There are all kinds of right answers to this problem and that's really being creative and thinking outside the box..." said Kristie Kauerz, the Early Childhood/P-3 policy director for Colorado Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien. "P-3 is not a silver-bullet approach; it is a silver-buckshot approach.

"The point being," she said, "there is not just one thing that is going to solve the problem."