

Town Hall advocates for Arizona's youngest children

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES STAFF

The subject was early childhood education when the 103rd Arizona Town Hall met Nov. 3-6 at the Grand Canyon. The recommendations generally went against the grain of state legislative actions over the past several years. Some of the proposals sought to restore programs lost or reduced because of state budget cuts. Others urged more initiatives to help young children, such as First Things First, although the recommendations did not include a source of funding.

Here are highlights of the recommendations:

Create quality through a cohesive vision and consistent standards

- Restore music and arts programs to all K-3 classrooms.
- Require that K-3 pre-service teachers in training complete coursework in early childhood education and brain development, including working with special needs children.
- Provide additional support for unregulated providers such as family, friends and neighbors.
- Expand initiatives such as First Things First, Expect More, BUILD Arizona and Read On Arizona to create best practices and to have a statewide reach including underserved, rural and tribal areas.

Encourage collaboration and coordination across the early education community

- Collaborate with families to develop partnerships among schools, libraries, museums, health services, faith-based and community organizations to provide additional opportunities for children not enrolled in programs
- Continue to support the Arizona Ready Education Council K-3 recommendations, and explore the development of a Governor's Council on the coordination of K-3 education.

Provide sustainable funding sources

- Restore funding for full-day kindergarten, early education and care subsidies, childhood block grants, home visiting programs, family literacy programs and established mandates.
- Expand Head Start programs and comparable initiatives to provide universal, voluntary early care and education.
- Provide tax credits for early childhood education and to equalize public and private school contributions.
- Explore alternative financing such as social impact bonds, endowments, service taxes, national resource taxes, public-private partnerships, and private invest-

- ment in program seeding.
- Create scholarships for families paying for early childhood education and for professional development of educators and caregivers.

Engage in a comprehensive branding and outreach campaign

- Conduct outreach to families and caregivers to explain the availability of programs and provide resources for educating children.
- Develop public relations, social media and media-based campaigns to raise awareness about the nature and importance of early education and create widespread public support.

Recruit, develop and retain qualified early childhood educators

- Increase pay to a livable wage for early childhood professionals.
- Develop apprenticeship programs, lab schools and mentoring opportunities through collaboration between stakeholders.
- Support and expand existing scholarship opportunities for early childhood education, such as T.E.A.C.H. Arizona and PCCP (Career Pathways). ■