

The 3rd Annual Arizona Early Childhood Public Policy Forum

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES – AzAEYC Virtual Community Town Hall

March 6, 2021 – Online via Zoom

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Early childhood education (ECE) creates the foundation for a vibrant community. It all starts with the home, which must be a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment. In the absence of such homes, the community suffers. From infancy and throughout childhood, parents must build trust with their children. A healthy start and a safe environment are essential for children to be able to grow and learn. ECE programs help children to develop trust and a sense of safety by supporting parents in several ways. These programs provide resources and connections for parents that enable them to grow as individuals, parents, and contributors to their community.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are an obstacle to a vibrant and resilient community. ECE is an early intervention that can reduce the negative impact of ACEs, providing a strong foundation for our children's future that allows them to overcome obstacles and contribute to a more vibrant community. The entire ECE community can empower and uplift children to envision themselves as more than their situation, thereby giving future generations the ability to break the cycles of poverty and trauma.

All the people we care for are becoming part of our community. By developing people, we are developing our community. Early educators have the most important role in brain building, helping children develop the skills that are the building blocks of life. These skills include the foundation of ethics, principles, awareness, tolerance, and acceptance. Quality programs and interaction with other peers help children figure things out on their own, become more open minded, and develop social skills and friendships. Critical thinking, interpersonal and communications skills, self-regulation, and overall brain development are all associated with education, childcare, and pre-school. As adults, we want the neighbor with whom we can have a conversation about a barking dog and a clerk who engages in eye contact and says, "Hello, how's your day?" We want kindness and respect, acceptance, inclusion, understanding, and empathy. These are all elements of a vibrant community.

Early childhood educators have information and resources to strengthen family connections, events, and communities. Parents often do not know where to go for help. Parent engagement is important in the education process, and parent education is an important component of the system. Parents can, and must, teach their children important skills at home such as reading, art, and creative play. Parents also need to be informed about opportunities that may help their children's development, such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and developmentally appropriate activities. Working together, parents and educators can create a community of learners.

The early childhood community brings people together. Parents meet other parents and collaborate in the interest of promoting their child's development. They develop friendships and become advocates for the wellbeing of both their children and their community. Early education that focuses on appreciating diversity is one of the best tools to increase vibrancy and resiliency. It is critically important to instill an open and inclusive mindset, to allow children to make messes, and to help them learn creative skills.

In thinking about ECE, it is important to look beyond Head Start programs, and to include other providers. Head Start only serves about 25% of children. We need to find ways to share the great qualities that Head Start brings to early childhood education with the rest of the industry. Programs such as First Things First that seek to improve the quality of early childhood education across the board are a good start.

We are not creating products. We are creating people and people make up our community. By providing greater support to ECE, we can increase the vibrancy of our communities.

CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

ECE is important to our communities because it strengthens families and improves parenting. It helps children develop skills, teaches them how to adapt, become more curious, increase their awareness of the world, and become involved. However, ECE was not appropriately funded before the pandemic, and we cannot allow a return to inadequate funding. It is important that legislators understand the economic and societal impacts of in-person ECE programs. Virtual learning is not effective for young children, so we must get them back in programs that provide in-person learning. To do that, we need well-funded programs.

We need to increase advocacy in the legislature on behalf of young children and those who care for and educate them. Personal stories from constituents provide a powerful message to motivate legislators. We should connect with our own legislators, inviting them to virtual visits or introducing them to families we serve, have our families write letters, send artwork, and otherwise let legislators know we are in their community.

When communicating with legislators, we should tie investment in early education programs to opportunities to improve the health of our communities through outcomes they value, such as decreased crime, less drug use, better high school graduation rates, and increased college attendance. We need to demonstrate that investing in these programs produces a greater return. Elected officials want to see that revenues are well spent and we can demonstrate that through our stories.

The early childhood workforce has continued to be hit hard by the pandemic. The pandemic has shown us the importance of having quality childcare available, and the necessity to fund these programs at an appropriate level now and moving forward. Legislators need to understand that doing so will produce community and economic development benefits. ECE professionals have a huge impact on the economy, both because of their influence on children and their own importance to the economy. They make it possible for parents to go to work and contribute to the economy as consumers and supporters of businesses that employ people in our communities and buy locally. ECE programs need funding to get the state up and running again.

Early childhood education is a career and a profession. We are developing minds and community members. Early education is the foundation for building a strong and vibrant community now and for the future.

We need the investment that matches the importance of the profession. We can't create a group of professionals for this important work if we don't pay them a livable wage. Early childhood educators should not have to take a vow of poverty to serve children.

We need to provide early education teachers access to hybrid programs including online and in-class programs, internships, and continuing education opportunities. Early education degrees should be valued comparably to K-12 degrees in status, pay, and growth opportunities. ECE educators should be treated as equals to other educators, not as glorified babysitters. It is important to recognize ECE educators financially, educationally, and socially and to reduce class sizes to enable more effective learning and to ensure a fair workload for ECE educators.

Funding for early childhood education programs should include support for children with developmental, physical, and learning disabilities.

We also need to ensure that early education honors cultural traditions. The tribal community especially has been negatively impacted by the history of sending children to federal boarding schools. These communities have been resilient despite this historic trauma. Nonetheless, we need to address this and other traumas within marginalized communities to ensure their vibrancy. We should make the necessary systemic changes that honor and incorporate "what was lost."

TAKING ACTION

Several important actions need to be taken to make communities healthier and more vibrant:

- Become trained in trauma-informed care, which is essential to healing our society.
- Give children the tools they need to grow.
- Continue to partner with families and fellow educators to have their voices heard.
- Be prepared to advocate when the opportunity arises.
- Make sure that our families and everyone we encounter knows the importance of this field.
- Begin with educating parents so they understand that behavioral, intellectual, and social skills/growth begins with early education before kindergarten.
- Spread information about ECE within the community. Use your voice to educate and influence your community; it takes just one person.
- Parents voices are powerful and meaningful; share your story, it creates change.
- Support each other—whoever needs help and however you can help (mentor, ambassador, etc.).
- Start parental ambassador programs.
- Reach out to your First Things First community outreach coordinator to help you with the language to communicate passionately.
- Think globally to expand the message of the importance of ECE outside its community.
- Use your voice and get to know your neighbors better; we all have something to share.
- Make parents feel that they belong and give them strength through the information on what their community offers and what they can offer their community.
- Have self-care workshops for parents and practice individual self-care.

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the March 6, 2021 AzAEYC Virtual Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Share my early childhood story.
- Be ready to talk about the needs for funding for ECE educators, centers, communities.
- Continue to get involved in the community, share my story, and practice self-care.
- Be a voice to the underserved communities.
- Be prepared to share why Early Childhood MATTERS!
- Advocate for increased funding for quality programs and pursue continued education and work in family education and social work, with a special focus on trauma informed approach to education.
- Research our legislators and have discussions about the impact of early childhood!
- Continue to have open conversations about supporting education as early as birth. Advocating for children and families in at-risk communities.
- Fight for a healthy wage for early childhood professionals.

- Shine light on the fact that things are pretty bad in early childhood since the pandemic- but that we were in a childcare crisis even before the pandemic.
- Support and encourage parents to find their voice in sharing their stories.
- Continue to try and connect with my Legislative District 11 elected officials to have a conversation about the importance of early care and education as an educational and economic driver to a vibrant community.
- Continue to teach intentionally in my classroom, be a reflective practitioner, and continue to proactively seek out opportunities to advocate for children, families, and educators.
- Continue to develop in my role as a Community Engagement Specialist and learn from our Child Care Resource and Referral Partners and events like these so that I can have a solid foundation of knowledge in this field and can work as a true advocate for children and families.
- Continue to advocate by inspiring and involving fellow educators and their families to have our voices heard and effect much needed change especially as our world changes around us!
- Spread awareness of the importance of a child's first five years.
- Encourage teachers and parents to also feel empowered to grow and learn so that children can have the best opportunity to learn, grow, and aspire!!!
- Join more opportunities like this one today, become more involved, and make more connections with others in our community!
- Become more familiar with my legislators and when appropriate share stories about low compensation and quality in our programs and the importance of building strong communities.
- Message my local and federal representatives regularly on ECE successes and needs.
- Continue to support our early education providers by sharing stories, actively reaching out to our representatives, and attending trainings to stay up to date on shared goals.
- Use the Vitalyst "Elements of a Healthy Community" to organize community conversations to illustrate the importance of early childhood education in contributing to healthy connected communities.
- Continue to get families involved and informed about how we as early childhood educators are just as important as teachers in schools.
- Parents are a child's first teacher! I want to continue to educate parents, which empowers them to create a safe, nurturing, and loving environment for their children. This is what sets those children up in life!
- Continue to help new educators be informed and enhance teaching skills and share ideas from this video as a center for monthly trainings.
- Within the behavioral health research and policy community, I will continue to say if you are only focusing on adult patients/clients, you will never solve complex social issues. A focus of behavioral health must be children and families.
- Continue to concentrate on developing a Parental Ambassador Program to be a voice that can be called upon.
- Get to know my immediate neighbors better and share my passions with them.
- Continue to dedicate my work and efforts towards advocating and elevating the voices of children and their families!
- Stay committed and continue the fascinating work that is being done!!!!