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Apr 8th, 2017 · by Joe Jacquez, Special to the Independent · Comments: 2



Members of the city of Mesa Early Childhood Education Taskforce pose for a photo while visiting an Early Childhood education program in San Antonio, Texas. (Photo courtesy of city of Mesa)

About a year and a half ago, Mesa Vice Mayor David Luna said he and other city officials realized that too many young children in Mesa were coming to kindergarten unprepared.

This realization, Mr. Luna said, stemmed from a conversation that Mesa Public Schools Superintendent Michael Cowan had with Mesa Mayor John Giles about the number of children who were behind on day No. 1 of kindergarten.

"Throughout the country, we have found that many cities are embracing early childhood education," Mr. Luna said. "This is not an issue specific to Mesa or even Arizona; this is a national issue. The superintendent encouraged the mayor to embrace opportunities to support pre-k education in Mesa."

Mr. Cowan and Mr. Giles were unavailable for comment.

Because of Mr. Giles' conversation with Mr. Cowan, Mr. Luna said the mayor created the **Early Childhood Education Taskforce** in November 2015. The taskforce, comprised of society education, business and health leaders and experts, convened in December 2015 and worked for six months.

Today, only 36 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in an early care and education program compared to 48 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds nationally, according to the taskforce's **final report** released in May 2016.

As a result, 31,238 children under the age of 5 in Mesa do not have access to a childcare education program and existing early care and education facilities can currently serve a maximum of 14,886 children under 5, according

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to the report.

Mr. Luna, who chaired the taskforce, said this data, taken from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010-14 American Community Survey Five-year Estimates, convinced him that Mesa needed to lead on this issue.

"That data is really telling of the amount of kids that are not going to a Pre-K setting and not having the skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten," Mr. Luna said. "The younger we begin to offer experiences to kids, then they become more successful and go into kindergarten; it describes the need for a Pre-K program within the city of Mesa."

Financial obstacles, the report indicated, has factored heavily into Mesa's lower-than-average percentage of kids enrolled. Currently, an average family in Mesa would pay \$8,400 to provide care to their 3-, 4- or 5-year old, amounting to 14.39 percent of Mesa median family income. The Department of Health and Human Services has considered 10 percent affordable, according to page 60 of the ["FUN"damentals of Child Care Development Fund Administration](#) report.

The state of Arizona has provided no funding sources for early child learning programs, according to the taskforce report. Councilman Ryan Winkle of District 5 said Mesa must think realistically about the price tag.

"When the state legislature fails to ensure high-quality public education to our students, local communities—especially disadvantaged communities—suffer," Mr. Winkle said. "Given the state's war against public education, it's become necessary for our city to step in and creatively build a plan that works best for real families and real kids with the resources we have locally."

The total cost, including capital, personnel, training, special education, supplies administration, for existing early childcare facilities, including the Mesa Community College Early Learning Center and Mesa Public Schools Jordan Early Childhood Education Center, is approximated at \$4,000 per child in a half-day program and \$7,000 for a child enrolled in a full-day program, according to the report.

The city is exploring different ways of providing early education, Mr. Luna said, including the use of technology and providing a kit containing different tools for parents to educate at home.

Mr. Luna said kids in poverty are at a greater disadvantage because of costs and said for this reason, Mesa needs to find funding. One in four children aged 5 and under live in poverty, according to taskforce data. At the same time, the taskforce found that for every dollar invested in early child development, \$16 will return to the community for the child's later success.

"It's not exclusive to a specific population, but were trying to target kids in poverty," Mr. Luna said. "Some of those kids have never picked up a book. We want to provide them those opportunities, so when they get to kindergarten they know what is expected of them and they are successful."

Community consultant Cynthia Melde served on Mesa's taskforce during her time as regional director for First Things First Southeast, an organization that advocates and provides funding for early childhood education in Arizona.

She said this issue is important because the first five years of a child's life are critical.

"The brain is the only organ that when you're born is still developing," Ms. Melde said. "Experiences that happen to you in your first few years really determines how you will begin to regulate your emotions or use or critical thinking and problem skills. We know that 90 percent of critical brain development happens in the first five years, which is most often before a child steps foot in a formal education system."

Mr. Luna said the city will work to find solutions. He talked about expanding current resources such as programs at Mesa Community College and Jordan Elementary.

Another possibility Mr. Luna said is expanding the [scholarships](#) that First Things First Quality First program provides. He said the city also looked at early childhood education programs in other cities including [San Antonio](#), Texas.

"If you look at Mesa Community College, they are rated five stars by First Things First because of the quality of their program," Mr. Luna said. "There are also several private Pre-K programs throughout the city of Mesa, but there just isn't enough right now to provide opportunities for all."

Joe Jacquez is a journalism student at the [Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism](#) and wrote the article as a class assignment.

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