

# Arizona Daily Star

Estimated printed pages: 1

May 21, 2008

**Section:** TUCSON/REGION

**Page:** B2

## **Forum: Early education is vital** *GEORGE B. SÁNCHEZ, ARIZONA DAILY STAR*

Early education begins long before children arrive at kindergarten, agreed participants in a regional public meeting. More than 400 people packed a ballroom at the Tucson Convention Center Tuesday for an event called Community Conversation on Early Childhood Education. The discussion, which lasted from 8 a.m. to noon, was hosted by Tucson Regional Town Hall.

"We've always known one of the critical issues we have to address in our region is early-childhood education," said Peter Likins, chairman of the Southern Arizona Leadership Council and former University of Arizona president.

The event highlighted the work of First Things First, a voter initiative that funds early-childhood and health programs and is funded by a cigarette tax.

There are 31 regional councils under First Things First working on local early-education programs, said Nadine Basha, board chair of the initiative.

Two representatives from the National Association for the Education of Young Children spoke about building support for early education. It begins with creating awareness for early-childhood education, said Jane Henderson, and breaking the perception that education begins in kindergarten at age 5. Furthermore, support for early education, and responsibility, lies not only with parents.

To that extent, local developer Don Diamond said his role is to educate local businesses and philanthropic groups to support early-childhood programs.

"Youngsters, children, don't have advocates like other people do," he said.

However, good will and speeches go only so far, said one local academic.

"Hope, unrealized, will not do anything for the young children we've talked about today," said Ida Florez, from the UA's College of Education.

Florez, along with others, led the event's panel discussion, which included a short question-and-answer session.

Panelists agreed the sooner babies and children are read to, the sooner they become literate and develop vocabulary. The panel also fielded questions regarding support from local businesses to support pre-school and day-care efforts.

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