

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NOTE: District One Pima County Supervisor Rex Scott has placed the following item on the agenda for the February 16 Board of Supervisors meeting:

Discussion/Action: A measure directing the County Administrator and county staff to include \$10 million in the Pima County budget for Fiscal Year 2021-22 to fund scholarships to wholly or partly cover the cost incurred by parents who wish to enroll their three- or four-year-old child in a high-quality early childhood program. Eligible children will come from families whose income is under 200% of the federal poverty level. These scholarships would be payable only to high-quality early childhood education programs such as those run by public-school districts, childcare centers and family home care providers.

The following is the statement Supervisor Scott will read during the meeting:

The more 3- and 4-year-olds who can attend high-quality preschool, the better, more stable and more prosperous their future and their communities' futures will be. -Editorial in Arizona Daily Star by Sarah Garrecht Gassen on June 23, 2019

Research shows that children who attend preschool are better prepared for kindergarten, and with continued supportive education, these benefits may result in positive longer-term outcomes for those children, their parents, employers and taxpayers. This is particularly the case for economically disadvantaged, minority and dual language children attending high quality preschool. -Excerpt from a report submitted to the Pima County Board of Supervisors by Nicole Fyffe, an executive assistant to the county administrator, on April 23, 2019

We have an obligation to make our voices heard. Standing on the sidelines makes us complicit. We must demand that those we elect to office focus on meeting challenges with a plan to solve the critical problems that confront our community, not make excuses for why they cannot. We must demand that they have the courage to demonstrate their regard for the long-term welfare of the citizens they are entrusted to represent. Anything less is unacceptable. -Guest Opinion in Arizona Daily Star by Dr. John Pedicone on May 26, 2019

Two years ago, we began a conversation in Pima County about the need for all our children, regardless of family income, to enjoy the benefits of quality early childhood education. Then as now, the facts are clear as to how our children and our community will benefit if we do what is needed to make this precious opportunity available to each one of our children. Ample research on brain development, kindergarten readiness and academic success in later grades attests to the importance of every child being able to take advantage of this foundational experience.

We also know that our entire community will enjoy a myriad of benefits if every child who wants to can enroll in preschool. Low-income families often struggle with the costs of early learning, which can exceed \$800 a month per child. Business leaders know that investment in a robust educational system that begins with quality early childhood education will result in a better trained workforce and a more attractive economic climate. Any teacher in our primary grades will tell you that they can see the differences between their students who have enjoyed these benefits and those who have not.

The key difference between now and two years ago is that we are immersed in the worst global health crisis of our times. Those in our community who work hard to address their basic needs even in better times have been affected the most. Their challenges will continue as we emerge from this pandemic and recover from it. We have a solemn duty and an exciting opportunity to make their lives and those of their children more hopeful and promising by taking bold action.

This measure represents a vital first step, but there will be so much more important work to do moving forward. The funds we will authorize for next year's budget will only be able to help approximately 1000 kids. There are over 25,000 three- and four-year-old children in our county and only 20% of them are currently enrolled in quality early childhood education. If we want to meet the necessary goal of all children having access to this benefit, we will need to commit many more resources to this cause and "we" must include more than Pima County government.

Pima County must take the first step because every one of these children is one of our citizens, but we cannot be the only one on this journey. Cities, towns and school districts must be steadfast and contributing partners. Business groups, as well as those in the charitable and service sectors, must also commit to join us in every way they can. All people who can speak to the evidence of the benefits of quality early childhood education must rebut the critics and reach out to the skeptics. The key lesson from other cities and counties that have cultivated this opportunity for their children is that the efforts to do so must be collaborative and multi-faceted.

The measure we consider today merely directs that money for quality early childhood education scholarships be included in the budget for the next fiscal year. There are still decisions that will need to be made about how to get these funds to the children who need them the most. Working with county staff, the early learning centers and the many people in our community who have long advocated for this need, those logistical details will be discussed and addressed. We will also work together to determine how to achieve the goal of enrolling every child in a quality early childhood education program if that is what their families want for them.

There has been a great deal of well-meaning dialogue in our community about quality early childhood education in recent years, but it is now time to act, to walk our talk. When something is so obviously needed and can do so much good, how can we fail to take necessary action? We cannot wait for others to lead. It is our time and our task to bring our community together on behalf of all our children. As Dr. Pedicone said two years ago, "Anything less is unacceptable."