

PEEPS PRESCHOOL INITIATIVE

A Study of Action on Common Community Interests

PEEPS, Pima Early Education Program Scholarships, exists because four communities, Education, Business, Political and Philanthropic, found common cause and commitment.

The Education community and the Business community agreed that:

- (1) A vibrant community requires an educated and vibrant workforce;
- (2) High quality preschools prepare children to be ready, able and excited to learn when they start K-6 and;
- (3) It was important to increase access to high quality preschools to all children but especially in underserved communities where access due to costs of services is virtually unavailable.

All communities agreed upon the need to expand access, but were conflicted on many of the details proposed in a Tucson city sales tax referendum.

After a number of members of multiple community groups, including SALC, successfully opposed the City referendum and it failed, SALC reached out to the preschool education community with a commitment to work together to support and fund countywide high quality preschool opportunities.

To create a transparent and accountable system, members of the community came together in a loosely coupled manner with a common focus to create what came to be known as the Pima Early Education Program Scholarships (PEEPS) committee. This committee included the parties and programs needed to create capacity and identify and deliver high quality preschools to more children.

PEEPS included the experience and expertise of First Things First, Head Start, the Pima County Superintendent of Schools, Superintendents of school districts throughout Pima County, the Center for Economic Integrity, the Southern Arizona Association of Early Childhood Education, strong support from Pima County Government staff, support from the County Manager with the commitment and talent of his high level administrative staff, the Southern Arizona United Way staff, who had strong backgrounds in early education, and the Southern Arizona Leadership Council, which lent both business and educational leadership experience and expertise.

After more than six months of intense private committee work, a modest plan was presented by PEEPS, and supported by all communities involved.

As this was to be a county-wide proposition, the next step toward developing a funding mechanism was critical. At that time, the PEEPS proposal lacked three votes on the Board of Supervisors, the governing body required to approve funds to be expended for this purpose. Spending on preschool was seen by some as reducing money available to pave county roads and other urgent and critical needs.

With the support of the County Attorney's office a funding idea emerged. Could the County Library District contract and spend money for preschools, under the concept of teaching children to read? In order to address this issue, state legislation was needed to authorize spending on this purpose by a Library District, which receives separate funding from the regular County budget. SALC worked with community advocates to draft a bill and submit it to an Arizona State Representative who would sponsor it. It was ultimately passed by the Arizona Legislature and signed by Governor Ducey. The bill specifically authorized a county library improvement district to "provide literacy promotion programs for all age groups, with special emphasis on early literacy, school readiness" as well as to other target audiences.

Significant changes to the Pima County Board of Supervisors brought a shift in leadership and a willingness to make the financial investment in scholarships for county-wide preschools. Criteria for funding required meeting high quality metrics by public and private preschools, including accountability measures built into the concept. This initial funding was supplemented with capital assistance and support from local municipalities, including the City of Tucson and United Way.

Now celebrating three years of Pima County funding \$10 Million dollars per year, supplemented by City of Tucson's \$1 Million dollars, and support from other municipalities and private donors to total approximately \$12 Million dollars annually, 1,411 children are currently enrolled and given a chance to succeed. This is clearly an example of our region's investment in children and families and helps to define who we are as a community.

While we are proud of the work of so many committed individuals to achieve a remarkable community initiative that arguably grew from the ashes of a defeated proposal to become a defining aspect of the character of our Tucson Region, the work is just beginning. Our challenge now has to focus on three and four year-old children beginning Kindergarten with the benefit afforded by high quality preschools. The lack of access to such programs creates an unlevel playing field. Those with resources have a significant

advantage over those with less and we risk leaving thousands of children behind, potentially never able to catch up. The question for today is **“What private and public strategies can be developed to increase access and make Tucson a community that values Literacy, Creativity and Science for all children?”**

A child must have the tools and resources to achieve. With those in place, the courage and confidence to succeed can be cultivated. For far too many the vision for success is hidden behind lack of access and demographic limitations. High quality preschools help to create a world view for each child that builds competence, inspires creativity and curiosity and serves to provide opportunities for success.