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Education advocates pushing for mandatory preschool

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PHOENIX - Momentum is quietly building in the state for the next big thing in education: preschool for Arizona children younger than 5.

Education advocates are pushing for the requirement, citing research that shows very young children can absorb high-level skills much earlier than once believed. They also say mandatory preschool could close the learning gap between rich and poor students, and even raise the state's reputation, brought down by national test scores and a high dropout rate.

The goal is to help every child-care center decrease the time kids spend sitting in plastic swings, listening to music or watching television and increase the time spent on focused lesson plans to recognize shapes and letters and count 1-2-3 crackers for their afternoon snack.

Gov. Janet Napolitano has always made education for the state's youngest children one of her top priorities. But many Republican lawmakers are still debating the merits of the state paying for full-day kindergarten. Preschool isn't even on their agenda.

Critics worry mandatory preschool could put child-care centers out of business and are not convinced lesson plans for babies and toddlers are a good thing.

Both advocates and critics worry about the cost.

Last year, there were 531,000 infants to 5-year-olds in Arizona. Thirty percent of them lived in poverty, and 60 percent of their parents worked.

Wealthier working parents can spend \$700 or more a month to send a child to a private preschool with degreed teachers, small classes and individual learning goals for children ages 1 to 3.

For children whose parents have low incomes, there are government-funded preschools, where teachers are trained to help kids catch up with their peers by the time they reach kindergarten. But only about 37,600 children participate in those programs.

The bulk of Arizona's working families make due with the closest and cheapest child care. For the lucky ones, that means a grandparent. For most, it's a child-care center nearest work or home.

About 91,000 children attend centers in strip malls, commercial parks or homes converted into businesses. Thousands of children also attend child care in private homes, both regulated and unregulated, but state officials do

not know how many.

In the past two years, Arizona policy-makers, academics and state agency workers have been huddling to find creative ways to help upgrade Arizona's fragmented child-care system.

Last year, the Arizona Board of Education approved academic standards in science, social studies, fine arts and math for 3- to 5-year-olds to help guide lesson plans at all child-care centers. And, the Arizona Department of Education offers free regular training in early childhood education.

To help child-care centers find money to improve, Napolitano's office joined the Arizona Community Foundation to establish a private fund in 2003. The foundation has collected \$2 million in donations and is just beginning to request proposals for grants.

Supporters are collecting signatures for a November ballot initiative that, if passed, would add 80 cents to the cost of every pack of cigarettes and generate \$150 million a year toward the cause.

Additionally, Napolitano wants to increase subsidies for lower-income parents, 44,000 of whom now get from \$84 to \$160 a week from state and federal money to help pay for child care.

Advocates want to make sure child-care centers use new money to improve teaching and learning. Toward that end, the state is developing a five-star system to rate child-care centers. The United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona has been piloting the rating system at 46 for-profit and non-profit child-care sites for two years.

The rating system eventually would operate similar to a Better Business Bureau Web site and guide parents looking for the best care they can afford.

Trying to organize better education within Arizona's fragmented child-care system is like balancing on a shaky three-legged stool of quantity, quality and affordability, said Nadine Basha, a former teacher and Arizona Board of Education president.

"Improve the quality, and the affordability falls off," Basha said. "Try to increase the number of sites, and the quality leg falls off."

Requirements for child-care sites emphasize health and safety, but are vague about educational goals, said Lisa Wynn, a licensing director.

"You can go into a licensed center and see primarily a safe baby-sitting service," she said.

Many parents figure that a health and safety license is the only guarantee they need, said LaVonne Douville, heading the five-star program for United Way.

"When you choose a one-star hotel, they are licensed and open for business, but that doesn't mean you'll enjoy the stay," Douville said.

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