



# Why Early Childhood Education Matters to Three Arizona Cities:

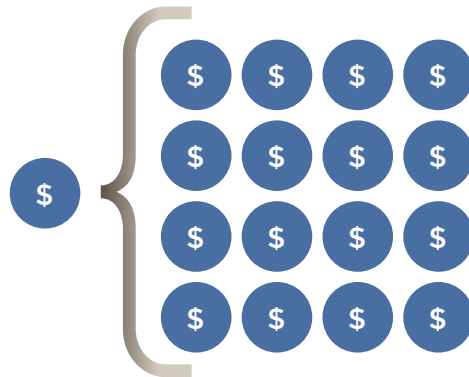
## Efforts to Promote Access, Support Families, and Build Strong Futures in Mesa, Tempe, and Phoenix

Early childhood is a crucial developmental period that can have exceptional implications for the rest of a child’s life. The physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth that occurs during this period—**including 90 percent of a child’s brain development**—are affected by numerous factors, including the quality of a child’s environment and learning experiences. Research findings have consistently shown that quality early childhood education, such as infant care and pre-kindergarten programs, contribute significantly to young children’s development and enable them to gain the experiences and skills they need for success in kindergarten and beyond.

This brief articulates the value of investing to ensure that families have equitable access to quality early childhood education programs. It highlights the positive developmental impacts of early childhood education, as well as the numerous economic and social benefits for families, communities, and municipalities that result from access to early childhood education programs. Additionally, the brief provides snapshots of early childhood education programs in three Arizona cities—Mesa, Tempe, and Phoenix—to illustrate how these cities are supporting their youngest residents in ways that increase educational equity and access to economic opportunity for families.

**\$1** dedicated to early childhood education yields up to **\$16** return on investment

Source: First Things First



## Early Childhood Education Increases Educational Equity and Opportunity

The effect of early childhood education on academic readiness and success is considerable. Young children who participate in quality early childhood education programs are more likely to have the skills and preparation they need to succeed in kindergarten and the early grades. Moreover, the positive effects of early childhood education are typically greater for disadvantaged children, such as those from low-income families. This means that expanding early childhood education programs is a powerful way for cities and states to increase educational equity and set the stage for academic success.

Importantly, the benefits of early childhood education extend far beyond kindergarten readiness and academic success for young children. Longitudinal research shows that investments in high-quality early childhood programs contribute to improved health outcomes, reduced crime and youth involvement with the justice system, and increased cognitive development. Early childhood education also contributes to a stronger workforce and increased household incomes.



### CITY SPOTLIGHT

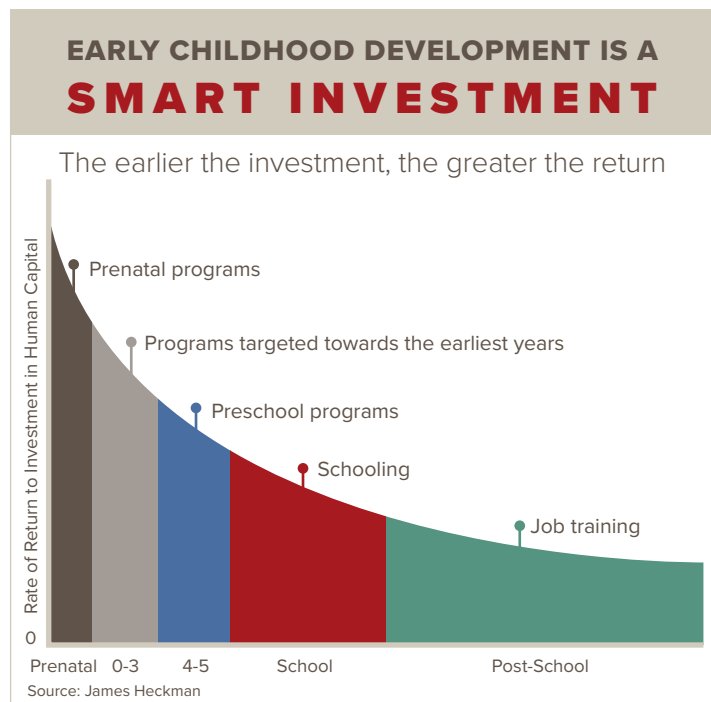
#### **Denver, Colorado Creates a Locally Funded Universal Pre-school Program**

After two failed early childhood ballot initiatives in 2000 and 2001, Denver passed an initiative in 2006 to create the Denver Preschool Program (DPP). Reauthorized in 2014, DPP is funded by a 0.15 percent sales tax. DPP offers pre-school tuition credits to all families in the city and county of Denver with a four-year-old enrolled in a pre-school program. Tuition credit amounts are determined based on family income, pre-school quality ratings, and the length of time the child spends in the program each day. DPP provided upwards of \$80 million in tuition support to more than 41,000 children since it was first authorized. To learn more about DPP, insights from the process of building public support for early childhood education in Denver and developing the structure of the program please visit: <https://dpp.org/about-us/dpp-story>.

## The Return on Investment of Early Childhood Education Is Greater than Program Costs

Researchers and policymakers widely recognize that early childhood education provides an outstanding return on investment. Estimates of the dollar amount or percentage return vary depending on program types and how economic and social returns are calculated, but they consistently demonstrate returns significantly higher than the initial investment. High-quality birth-to-five programs, for example, are estimated to provide as much as a 13 percent return on investment, and preschool programs

that serve three and four-year-olds may provide a 7-10 percent return. This means that for every dollar invested, the return can be as high as \$16. In fact, the return on investment for early childhood education is estimated to be greater than the return on educational investments at any subsequent point in an individual's life (see accompanying figure).



## What **Three Arizona Cities** Are Doing to Provide Early Childhood Learning Opportunities

Mayors in Arizona and across the country have championed early childhood education and played important roles in establishing and sustaining programs that expand access to vital learning opportunities for young children. In Mesa and Tempe, Mayors John Giles and Mark Mitchell led the charge to establish new early childhood education programs within the last five years. In Phoenix, Mayor Kate Gallego has consistently articulated the value of early childhood education, both during her mayoral campaign and since taking office, and is actively exploring how Phoenix can increase the number of young children enrolled in early childhood programs.

The following profiles describe the city-run early childhood education programs in Mesa, Tempe, and Phoenix, highlighting how the programs were created and the resources and services they offer to children and families. These profiles are intended to demonstrate the value of these programs and to outline the context in which they operate. Where available, the profiles also present outcomes data for each program, with respect to gains on measures of key developmental expectations for young children across six domains—mathematics, literacy, cognitive, language, physical, and social-emotional—as well as positive impacts for families.

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## Mesa K-Ready

In 2015, it was clear to Mesa Public Schools that increasing numbers of young children were arriving to their first day of kindergarten still in need of the skills and development experiences essential for success in kindergarten. In response, the city convened an Early Childhood Education Task Force to study the state of early childhood learning in Mesa and develop a recommended strategy for expanding access to early childhood education in the city. The taskforce published a report on its findings in 2016. That report showed that just 36 percent of children under five were enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs, slightly higher than the 34 percent rate for Arizona, but well below the 48 percent national rate.

Based on the taskforce's recommendations—which accounted for the fact that Mesa does not have the funding to establish a full-scale, onsite pre-kindergarten program—the city established its Mesa K-Ready program through a community partnership. Mesa K-Ready is a free, in-home early childhood education program that seeks to meet academic, social and emotional, and family supports. The program offers academic lessons and learning experiences, programming and activities at city museums, parks, and libraries, and connections to support services and resources for families. For eligible families, those whose children will attend kindergarten within the Mesa Public Schools and are considered low-to moderate-income households, the program also offers additional services and resources. These include internet-enabled loaner tablets with online lessons, activities at Mesa's museums, downtown library, parks and recreation, and Mesa Arts Center, weekly communication with a Mesa K-Ready staff member, and food assistance and connections to other available family resources. In these ways, the program serves as an alternative to the city's Head Start program (for families that are not eligible) and pre-kindergarten programs that families may be unable to afford.

Among the challenges Mesa faced in establishing Mesa K-Ready, one of the most prominent was family engagement and recruitment to the program. Identifying the right community partner, Mesa Public Schools, to lead this effort was key to building the trust necessary for families to see the value of the program. While it has improved, family engagement remains a challenge; the program is reaching hundreds of young children in Mesa, but not the thousands it needs to reach in order to meet its goal of equaling the national average for pre-kindergarten participation.

In addition to Mesa K-Ready, the city of Mesa is involved in the Early Learning Network. The network is funded by First Things First and designed to help ensure that families—the target audience is families with children ages zero to five—in Mesa can access the programs and services they need but which no single agency in the city can provide.

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To learn more about Mesa K-Ready, please visit: <http://mesakready.org/>

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## Tempe PRE

In 2015, the city of Tempe began to explore the possibility of creating a universal early childhood education program for all three and four-year-olds in the city. Determining how the city might fund such a program was an obvious challenge, so Tempe undertook a study to assess the feasibility of using a pay for success funding mechanism. That study determined that pay for success was unlikely to work in Tempe, but the city council considered the recommendation to fund a pilot program to collect data that could later inform a pay for success initiative down the road. As a result, the city opened Tempe PRE in August 2017 with an initial 15 classrooms before opening another five classrooms in January 2018. The program is now in year three of four (two pilots of two years each).

Beyond the purpose of establishing a track record and collecting data, the Tempe PRE program is designed to accomplish three goals: expand access to full-time, high-quality early childhood education; empower families to transition from poverty; and to attract and retain Tempe residents.

In building the Tempe PRE program, the city conducted a detailed demographic analysis as part of a needs assessment and found that nearly two-thirds of kindergarten-age children in the city were not ready for kindergarten. Tempe also found that 33 percent of children ages zero to five were living in poverty, a rate higher than both the state and county averages, and that only four pre-kindergarten programs in the city were rated high-quality. The city determined that the pilot program, with a budget of approximately \$3 million, would seek to serve 360 three and four-year-olds—roughly half the needed high-quality program seats in Tempe—at 12 neighborhood schools.

The program has a 9:1 student-to-teacher ratio and all teachers are early childhood education-certified. The curriculum is aligned to the Arizona Early Learning Standards and emphasizes exploration, engagement, and social skills. Fifty-five percent of Tempe PRE classrooms have achieved a four or five-star ranking. What is more, the program has achieved strong results; while most children in the program enter at or below their expected developmental level across six domains, most shifted to meet or exceed developmental expectations in all domains by the end of their first year. Similarly, by the end of year two most students recorded significant positive changes across all domains. Families of children in the program are also benefiting significantly; for example, 40 percent of families in the program reported a 28 percent income increase.

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To learn more about Tempe PRE, please visit: [www.tempe.gov/TempePRE](http://www.tempe.gov/TempePRE)

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## City of Phoenix Head Start Birth to Five Program

At present, the city of Phoenix does not have a locally funded, city-initiated early childhood education program. The city's primary means of expanding access to early learning opportunities, particularly for families that may not be able to afford fee-based early childhood programs, is through its well-established Head Start program, which has been in operation for more than 50 years.

Phoenix's Head Start program offers comprehensive early childhood development and family support services to eligible families (income-based) with children ages zero to five. The program offers three format options for families, including a home-based Early Head Start option for pregnant women and families with children younger than three, Early Head Start at a contracted child care center for children under the age of three whose parents are working or attending school full-time, and preschool programs at Head Start centers for four-year-old children. In 2016-17, the program served 3,451 young children and their families.

Outcomes assessment data show that Phoenix's Head Start program contributes to clear developmental gains for participating children. In 2018-19, children in the home-based program option demonstrated improvement across all six domains measured. For children in the onsite preschool option, improvement across all six domains was even greater. Whereas fewer than 45 percent of all children entering the program met developmental expectations in five of the six domains at least 90 percent of participating children met or exceeded developmental expectations by the end of the year (86 percent met expectations in the sixth domain, mathematics). Similarly, outcomes for parents and families improved across all domains, from access to education and training to transportation access.

Knowing the importance of early childhood education for children and families alike, and the return on investment it provides, city leaders in Phoenix are exploring ways to build on the success of the city's Head Start program and further expand access to quality early childhood education for more families with young children in Phoenix.

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To learn more about the City of Phoenix Head Start Birth to Five Program, please visit:

<https://www.phoenix.gov/humanservices/programs/head-start>

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Funding for the Roundtable is provided by the Helios Education Foundation and the Arizona Community Foundation. The Roundtable is operated by WestEd. The views expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Arizona Community Foundation, Collaborative Communications Group, Helios Education Foundation, WestEd, the Roundtable, or its members.

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