



Adams County Partnership plans to improve quality of preschools

By Taylour Nelson
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"The very best way to close the achievement gap is to prevent it from occurring in the first place."

- Jared Polis,
Vice chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education

The Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County held its second annual Early Care and Education summit Tuesday where Polis spoke about investing in a quality early childhood education program in Adams County and creating tools to measure the outcome for those students 20 years down the road.

"Adams County leaders are part of the growing recognition that early childhood education is central to our society's success and is actually profitable for our society to provide," Polis said.

Polis plans to work with ECPAC to develop a program that would increase the quality of preschools in Adams County which would in turn save school districts money.

He said Adams County seems "well poised as any county in the state to take this on thanks in large part to this council."

That council being ECPAC, a countywide partnership among all school districts and private and public agencies in Adams County. It was founded in 2004 to enhance quality early childhood development opportunities in Adams County. ECPAC also focuses on health, mental health, parent education and family support within the community.

Speaking to a room full of influential education leaders in Adams County, including state representatives, county commissioners, city council members, school board members and district superintendents, Polis outlined the research-based need for such a program.

He pointed to reduced special education needs, closing the achievement gap, a lower dropout rate, a lower crime rate and higher achievement scores as some of the benefits to focusing on quality early education.

"The very best way to close the achievement gap is to prevent it from occurring in the first place," Polis said. "The findings are as clear as any in terms of research. Every study of early childhood education shows that these benefits occur. They are documented and longitudinal studies with clear and convincing results, more than anything I've seen on the K-12 side."

He said providing quality pre-kindergarten through kindergarten education would over time, save school districts and even criminal justice system money.

Adams County District Attorney Don Quick agreed, saying crime prevention needs to start early.

"I started to realize just how far back we have to go to have an effect on our kids lives," Quick said. "I've come to realize the kid that shows up at school with an intensive learning gap is often the one who doesn't do that well in school, is the one that has a truancy issue, is the one that has the drop out issue. That often is the kid that ends up in the criminal justice courts."

Funds for such an initiative would start with the federally funded Head Start program, with the bulk of support coming from private investors, Polis said. He stressed that this initiative would not include a tax increase.

"It's important to not come from a point of a tax increase," Polis said. "Voters might not be interested in savings over a 15-year time, but I guarantee investors are."

However, because this initiative is not yet in place, it is hard to show measurable outcomes to entice investors. Program directors and proposal writers will have to cite previous research on early childhood education to provide encouraging results. Additionally, Polis wants to solve the mobility problem in terms of a measured outcome and keep track of participants if they were to move.

Polis said he expects to implement the program in Adams County in the next few years.

"I would have loved to have done this yesterday, but a year or two to its inception is more realistic," Polis said.