

Tucson Citizen

Business leaders clamor for literacy

Community action plan promised by early '08

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Steve Alley wants Tucson to know that illiteracy is not just an educational issue. Neither, he says, is it an economic issue, although its impact on the state's economy is grave.

"It's a community issue," said Alley, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, "and it takes a community solution."

At least part of that solution lies in the five goals Alley and other members of the Literacy Leadership Council developed to combat illiteracy in southern Arizona.

The council, which has committed \$1 million to the effort over the next five years, presented its goals to about 125 people Tuesday night at the Tucson Convention Center.

The council wants to:

- Focus on "cradle to grave" literacy instead of just focusing on children.
- Build strategic alliances between existing programs and services.
- Launch a public awareness campaign.
- Identify new sources of funding and the best uses for available resources.
- Enlist the support of business leaders to provide funding for local literacy efforts as well as ask the leaders to urge the state Legislature to take a comprehensive approach to illiteracy by looking at it as an economic problem as well as an educational one.

"You have a very frustrated business community here that wants to compete globally and is not finding the quality of employees that they need," Tomás León, vice president of the Community Foundation said before the meeting. "Eighty percent of the new jobs being created require some kind of post-secondary education. You can't get that if you can't read."

Arizona can no longer afford to ignore that about 20 percent of its population is functionally illiterate, literacy advocates said.

Southern Arizona has had literacy groups for nearly three decades, but when the Tucson Regional Town Hall convened in May, the voices around the table spouting illiteracy statistics were no longer coming from educators; they were coming from

company presidents. The town hall brought together dozens of private and public sector leaders to develop solutions to the region's problems.

"The biggest thing in this groundswell is the business end," said Betty Stauffer, executive director of Literacy Volunteers of Tucson. "We've been trying to make noise about this issue for 30 years, but we're a bunch of little nonprofits. When the business leaders are saying this is an issue, people pay attention."

The 27-member Literacy Leadership Council evolved out of the Town Hall process and includes business, education and community leaders. The Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, the Southern Arizona Leadership Council and the Tucson Area Literacy Coalition are joining with the Community Foundation to support the effort.

Illiteracy, Alley told the audience Tuesday, is a complex problem.

After a brief welcome by Peter Likins, a former University of Arizona president and chairman of the Tucson Regional Town Hall, the results of the Community Voices Survey on Literacy were shared with the crowd. Chris Baker, senior research associate with Marketing Intelligence, said 400 people took the online survey.

In general, the results showed that people supported literacy efforts for children at a higher rate than efforts for adults; were more than twice as likely to support a tax increase to fund literacy efforts than volunteer their time to combat illiteracy; and were far less likely to be willing to tutor children or adults in the state illegally than legal children and adults.

Everyone in the audience agreed illiteracy in Tucson is a problem that can no longer be ignored, but there was no agreement on solutions. Some said there are too many side issues that must be dealt with first.

"It's great that we have these literacy groups and options, but there is a great barrier to all this, and it is transportation," said Leondra Price, who works for Tucson government and volunteers in literacy efforts. "How can people even get to these programs when they don't have a car?"

León agreed that there are many obstacles a community might face in trying to fight illiteracy, but said people are "tired of planning."

"They are tired of us meeting, tired of talking," he said. "We need to pick one or two things and get something done."

To that end, audience members were asked to rank the priorities the Literacy Leadership Council presented.

Those will be analyzed, Alley said, and sometime near the start of 2008, a plan will be announced.