

First Things First

A Tri-University Collaboration

by Ana Luisa Terrazas, College of Education
photos by Jen Ryder



UA College of Education Dean and Professor of Educational Psychology Ronald W. Marx

New shoes. New clothes. Even a haircut. That bright-eyed 5-year-old is ready to start her first day of kindergarten. Or is she? What are her sleeping habits? How's her diet? Who are her friends? Does she have healthcare?

The experiences of early childhood — both positive and negative — have a lasting impact and lay the foundation for a child's future success. Recognizing the significance early childhood plays in the development of lifelong learners — and how investment in the earliest years paves the way for success — Arizona's three state universities have joined together to create a premier, early childhood research program, headquartered at the University of Arizona.

Using the state's first large-scale longitudinal study of the impact of a birth-through-age-5 initiative, The University of Arizona, Arizona State University, and Northern Arizona University will examine how improvements in access to and quality of educational and health services impact young children's development. The longitudinal study will track these children for up to 20 years.

"This is the most important investment in young children our state has ever made," says UA College of Education Dean Ronald W. Marx, the principal investigator of the new grant from the state agency, First Things First (FTF). "Children are influenced by social, economic, cultural, and familial factors. Research has confirmed that early relationships have great impact on emotional and cognitive development. And the science of human growth and development tells us that high-quality healthcare and adequate nutrition before and after birth are fundamental to promoting healthy development.

Parents often do not have close relationships with or support from extended family, and community interdependence has disintegrated with increased mobility rates due to employment and economic conditions.

“One of the goals of FTF is to prepare every child entering kindergarten in Arizona for success,” Marx continues. “The funding for this external evaluation will allow us to bring together faculty experts from all three state universities to ensure the goals of the FTF initiative are achieved.

“No other state has ever done a longitudinal study like this. This is a unique piece of research. We have exceptional faculty partici-

pating from the three universities — 11 from the UA College of Education and the College of Public Health, five from ASU’s College of Education, and seven from NAU’s College of Education.”

Under Marx’s leadership, the three universities secured the \$27 million grant, one of the UA’s largest, from FTF. (FTF is a result of the 2006 voter initiative, when Arizona voters passed Proposition 203 — known as the tobacco tax — a citizen’s initiative that funds quality early childhood development and health.)

The program at the UA — called the First Things First External Evaluation (FTFEE) — will serve as a resource and information hub for Arizona families and children, early childhood service providers, educators, researchers, as well as the early childhood community both nationally and internationally.

Associate Professor Iliana Reyes of the UA College of Education Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies is one of the faculty researchers who will collect, analyze, and communicate data. “For the first time in Arizona, families with young children and early childhood service providers are being recognized at the state level to be of significance for the socioeconomic well-being of society. Through our research, we hope to contribute toward the improvement of children, families, and communities by identifying specific areas of ‘readiness’ in a child’s life.

“I see my role as a broker of knowledge, and this position is informed by the various roles I have had in my professional career and personal life as a preschool and kindergarten teacher, developmental and clinical psychologist, professor, researcher, and now as a mother of a 3-year-old and a 9-month-old baby.”

M. J. Demetras, the new executive director of the

FTFEE, notes, “The infusion of FTF investments in Arizona’s children and families may be the catalyst that will encourage various stakeholders to work collaboratively, reduce duplication of efforts, and make the best use of dwindling early childhood resources.”

The dwindling resources come at a time when societal and cultural changes have profoundly impacted familial structures and patterns in the United States, says Marx, especially during the past 50 years. Children are spending longer hours in out-of-homecare as more parents, especially mothers, are in the workforce.

Additionally, parents often do not have close relationships with or support from extended family, and community interdependence has disintegrated with increased mobility rates due to employment and economic conditions. Single parents, foster families, and grandparents who are raising young children are examples of familial structures that



Elizabeth Swadener, ASU professor of policy leadership and curriculum, discusses the tri-university First Things First external evaluation at The University of Arizona.

offer unique opportunities and challenges.

Demetras says she is working with the team to “ensure we are successful in conducting this complex and challenging project that involves more than 250 faculty, staff, and students across the three universities, 14,000 children, and hundreds of families and community stakeholders. We need to know how educational and social policy impacts young children and their day-to-day lives. With that understanding, we can develop research-based educational opportunities for children that will enable them to flourish, not merely survive.”

The next time you look at those bright-eyed children running to their kindergarten classes, you might view them as heading toward a successful future with a little help from the experts at three Arizona universities.