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Preschool providers develop new plan Fresno Co. leaders to meet, set standards for 4-year-olds.

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

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Karen Hill Scott, a child development expert based in Los Angeles, will come to the Valley to help launch a preschool plan for Fresno County children that she calls pivotal.

Educators, preschool providers and community leaders will gather Thursday to begin developing a voluntary master plan that aims at setting standards and increasing the number of 4-year-olds who attend preschool.

Scott, who will lead the meeting, said the county is a prime place to start such a plan.

"Fresno County has strategic importance in the state" because its demographics reflect why preschool is needed, said Scott, who has worked on school programs across the nation.

Poverty, low test scores, children with limited English skills and migrant population -- all educational challenges in the Valley -- often are cited as reasons children should attend preschool, she said.

These factors create an academic gap that can be "almost insurmountable," said Marc Johnson, superintendent of Sanger Unified School District. However, preschool levels the playing field, he said.

That makes preschool "one of the best investments to improve a child's academic success," Scott said.

About 150 educators and leaders of public, private and faith-based preschools have been invited to Thursday's meeting at the Piccadilly Inn Airport. The public also is welcome. However, reservations are requested.

Establishing standards that address what all preschoolers should learn and experience before entering kindergarten is one of the goals of the meeting, said Jim Yovino, a deputy superintendent with the Fresno County Office of Education.

Thursday's meeting is the first of four planned over the next seven months, Yovino said. The goal is to create a comprehensive plan for 4-year-old preschoolers countywide.

The effort to develop a master plan began with the Fresno League of Women Voters, which worked for two years toward a voluntary universal preschool plan for the county. The league conducted research and gathered support from city councils and school boards.

"We were determined that we weren't going to let this go," said Francine Farber, league president.

The development of a master plan is being funded by First 5 Fresno County and the Packard Foundation. The plan will be useful if additional state funding to expand preschool opportunities becomes available in the future, said Kendra Rogers, deputy director of First 5.

Without a master plan, Scott said, those funds could go elsewhere in the state.

A Sanger Unified study supported the benefits of preschool. The district compared the academic progress of 57 children who attended preschool versus 57 children who did not, said Rosemary Sancho, the district's director of infant and child care.

The children were tested at the end of their kindergarten year. Those who attended preschool scored 10% higher in language arts and 5% higher in math than those who didn't go to preschool, Sancho said.

Scott cites a Michigan study of 40-year-olds that found \$15 in government costs is saved for every dollar spent on preschool. Those who went to preschool had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job and graduate from high school, and were less likely to become involved in crime than those who did not, the study said.

About one-third of 4-year-olds in Fresno County attend preschool, Yovino said.

Children of parents who can afford preschool and children whose fees are paid for or subsidized by government funding are more likely to attend preschool, Yovino said.

Another objective of the master plan is to increase the number of preschoolers whose families now can't afford preschool or don't qualify for government assistance, he said.

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