Soroptimist Summit on Education

Soroptimists are passionate about education as one of the most powerful tools for improving the lives of women and girls. In conjunction with the 2017 Soroptimist International of the Americas Golden West Region Spring Conference, held at the Pointe Hilton in Phoenix Arizona, approximately 120 Soroptimists and guests gathered for the first annual Soroptimist Summit to address the topic of Building Access to Education. The program began with informative presentations by four experts on various aspects of the topic of education, and the participants then discussed the topic. The following is a report of their discussions and recommendations.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND HEALTHY AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

The impact of education in creating healthy communities is limitless. Access to education is associated with many qualities and conditions that contribute to healthy and resilient communities. Education contributes to quality of life, and should begin with early education and continue throughout life. Education contributes to networking and the development of community connections, the ability to access resources, personal fulfillment, and development of strong personal and community values. Educated people have more choices in life, and are generally better off. They are better able to provide for themselves, to navigate throughout their lives, and to advocate for themselves and their families. Well educated people vote more, and are more engaged in civic life. They are more likely to be well informed and to make better decisions and choices. Communities that provide good access to education tend to produce better leaders, have stronger infrastructure, more effective economic development, a better educated and more effective workforce, reduced levels of crime, violence, poverty and juvenile delinquency, more pride in the community, and greater affluence.

Access is a multi-faceted concept: it encompasses transportation, funding, language, and every other factor that poses a barrier to education. When considering access to education it is important to consider what kind of education is important, and what kind of barriers may be preventing access. Quality of education is important, as is alignment with business workforce needs. Education can and should take many forms and approaches, as different segments of the community have different needs, and ideally education is a cumulative and lifelong process. It is also important to consider the role of families as part of the process of education.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Improving access to education requires teamwork and collaboration among families, children, and the schools. We need to build better relationships between families and schools, and provide more support for families so that they can fulfill their role in providing education for their children.

Some parents lack the skills and tools needed to support their children and schools. Their effectiveness as part of the team could be increased through mentoring and other support, beginning with early childhood. Because a significant part of children’s development occurs before they enter kindergarten we should focus on efforts on improving the development of young children. In many families both parents work, and children may lack supervision after school and parental help with school-related activities. Enhancing the stability of family life would improve the children’s education. 66% of children in Arizona are born to Medicaid recipients, and these families may lack the financial resources they need to thrive, and to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Instead of focusing on access to education, we should consider paying attention to barriers to education. This may include everything from the need to develop computer literacy skills, to improving soft skills and developing a strong work ethic. There are many programs designed to help parents and children with the development of specific skills, including information hotlines and library-based programs. Child care, transportation, language barriers, and affordable housing may significantly affect the ability of some students and families to learn about and take advantage of educational opportunities.

There are many potential partners who could help improve educational outcomes by focusing on strategies that strengthen families and children. Physicians are generally respected and trusted, and could make good partners in this effort. Businesses may provide mentoring, job opportunities, financial assistance, and training opportunities, and may support education by supporting their employees when they need time off for school activities. Programs such as Girl Scouts teach and mentor children and support families in a variety of ways.

Funding, or the lack of it, also affects access to education. Our school financing system should provide equitable and adequate funding for schools. We need to provide funding that will provide for education from early childhood through college and beyond. It is important that districts be adequately funded, and that charter schools be more accountable. Colleges should be made more affordable, and Arizona should do more to live up to the requirement in its constitution that education be as nearly free as possible. Programs that provide for free or reduced cost college education should be considered.

Too often complex economic, social and educational systems do not support children and families. The school-to-prison pipeline is operating in Arizona, where funds are spent on private prisons that might better be spent on improved education.

State legislators must be held accountable for providing (or failing to provide) an equitable and adequate and fully funded public school system. We all bear the responsibility for lobbying and educating legislators about the importance of an effective educational system.