

New web tool connects parents with resources

LAS CRUCES – A group of nearly 50 people involved in early childhood education gathered Thursday in Las Cruces to discuss ways to better serve the children of Doña Ana County. The Early Childhood Education Convening, organized and facilitated by Ngage New Mexico, brought together representatives from more than 15 agencies and nonprofit organizations.

Frank Lopez, executive director of Ngage New Mexico, unveiled a new website, EarlyChildNM.org, his organization has created to connect families with young children with services that can help them thrive. Families can take a short, eight-question survey, then the site provides customized information about services in Doña Ana County for which they may qualify.

Some of those services include Avance, Head Start, First Teacher parenting classes, La Clinica de Familia's Healthy Start program, home visits by CHI St. Joseph's Children, and early intervention services.

The site is also accessible on mobile devices, and the survey takes less than a minute to complete.

Lopez said a Spanish version will be available soon.

The tool is similar to the "Am I Eligible" feature the state Children, Youth and Families Department launched recently at PullTogether.org. However, the website designed by Ngage is centered more on services specific to Doña Ana County residents, Lopez said.

At the meeting, participants were encouraged to begin using the tool with the families they serve and begin sharing their feedback.

“There are about five Head Start groups that were represented here today,” Lopez said. “They’re going to go back and begin using it with their clients and start giving us feedback. I’d like for the public to compare our web tool with the other one, and help us determine what really works for this community.”



Buy Photo

Maria Artiaga, the Head Start director for Las Cruces Public Schools, presents the Early Childhood Education Plan overview during the morning sessions at the Ngage New Mexico Early Childhood Education Convening at the Ramada Las Cruces hotel and Conference Center, Thursday, February 9, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Maria Artiaga, Head Start director for Las Cruces Public Schools, also updated attendees on a children’s museum and one-stop shop being developed by the Early Childhood Coalition for Doña Ana County. The Early Childhood Learning Hub will be designed to attract children with interactive exhibits, while parents can obtain information about early childhood education resources available.

“The one-stop shop will be a great educational tool for parents — but parents will not come to a one-stop shop,” Lopez said. “But they will bring their children to a children’s museum. That’s the point of combining them.”

Attendees also reviewed pending legislation pertaining to early childhood issues, reaching a consensus that they need to be better advocates for early childhood wellbeing.

Michael Milam, a retired Army colonel, has been involved with Ngage New Mexico as a volunteer since shortly after its inception in 2009. Today, he serves on the organization's board of directors.

“For the first time, corporately, we understand that we have a position and a voice, and we heard it today,” Milam said of the Early Childhood Coalition. “I

like the focus I'm seeing. I like the fact that nonprofits, for-profits and the public sector can talk together now and advocate for each other.”



Buy Photo

During the first part of Ngage New Mexico's Early Childhood Education Convening at the Ramada Las Cruces hotel and Conference Center on Thursday, Feb. 9, 2017, members of various organizations offering family services for Doña Ana County residents take time to meet each other and network before presentations continued. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Those involved in early childhood development say the field had become increasingly “siloeed.” Organizations often compete for grants or state funding, which had led to a very competitive atmosphere. The coalition has helped eliminate that, and communication has improved between agencies.

Amanda Gibson is director of Doña Ana County Head Start, operated by New Mexico State University. Gibson, who has worked in the field for more than 20 years, is also the president of the New Mexico Head Start Association. She said the work group is about building relationships and finding opportunities to collaborate.

“We need to work with all early childhood programs — pre-K, child care, home visiting, Part C — we all are here to help the kids. There’s no reason for us to be competitive,” Gibson said. “We sit across the table and I have conversations with people that I don’t have access to on a daily basis.”

Gibson said, despite living in Las Cruces and working in the field for so long, there were organizations and agencies offering services she didn’t know existed.

“This gives us an opportunity for people who don’t know what they don’t know to find out,” she said.

Damien Willis may be reached at 575-541-5468, dawillis@lcsun-news.com or [@damienwillis](https://twitter.com/damienwillis) on Twitter.