

Fresno-area leaders stress early childhood education

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How can Fresno County close the learning achievement gap? What's the trick to getting all third-graders reading at grade level?

Those were the questions top education, civic and community leaders tackled during a morning education conference Thursday at the Clovis Veterans Memorial building.

Fresno Superior Court Judge Gary Orozco, Clovis Mayor Lynne Ashbeck and nonprofit leader Linda Gleason talked to the crowd of 470 about the upshot of 97,000 Fresno County children living in poverty: infant mortality rates are high, only 37% of children are ready to enter kindergarten and many fall far behind their peers in reading and other subjects by third grade.

"We simply cannot leave behind this growing segment of our population, our children," said Gleason, managing director for The Children's Movement.

Jeff Edmondson, managing director of the Ohio-based children advocacy group StriveTogether, gave the keynote address. His message: schools, businesses and community groups should collaborate to strengthen programs that work now.

"Even though I've heard the Valley is in some ways resource poor, the bottom line is, there are a lot of wonderful things going on," he said. "This is not about starting new stuff, this is about building on what we already have."

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