ASU outlines K-12 program with Valley schools

By Andrea Falkenhagen

ASU is going after younger students - much younger.
Arizona State University plans to open at least two preschool-through-12th-grade schools in Tempe and Mesa as early as fall 2008 as part of the new University Public Schools Initiative. The university also is working with the Scottsdale Unified School District to create technology programs for high school students at SkySong, the joint ASU/Scottsdale project.

Officials there hope a National Science Foundation grant will allow Scottsdale teachers and students to take a two-year program to learn cutting-edge computer programming from university faculty.

These new partnerships between the university and local school districts are a far cry from decades past, when colleges used to offer a "lab school" on campus for the children of faculty, said Eugene Garcia, vice president for educational partnerships at ASU.

"We're not going to be just some school up on the hill that does its own thing," he said, adding he wants the students at the new schools to be economically and ethnically diverse. "We will hopefully help the general education sector, not just us and our kids."

Garcia said the University of California and the University of Washington have started their own schools, though they are generally only high schools, making ASU's plans some of the most ambitious of its kind.

ASU recently hired Larry Pieratt as the director of the initiative. Pieratt, a wellknown innovator in Valley education, is the founder of the Horizon Community Learning Center, an Ahwatukee Foothills charter school.

ASU's schools will be taught by professional teachers hired by each school district. But the curriculum, training, and teaching methods will be directed by ASU faculty. The university's student teachers will also use the schools for training.

Garcia hopes the schools will focus on areas like technology, where school districts are limited by financial constraints. "Their business is to teach the kids. Ours is to teach the kids, and learn from it, and try to scale up what we learn to other schools," he said. "We'll go out and get grants and donors so we can try some new things."

The schools will have connections with many university departments, including music, foreign languages, engineering, math and arts, so they will be able to teach subjects traditional schools can't, such as less common foreign languages.

The schools will probably teach in English and Spanish, and offer other languages, maybe Chinese or other Southeast Asian languages, Pieratt said.
"The idea is to have students early on thinking of themselves as international citizens. In order to be competitive, we have to think that our kids have to understand they're not competing with kids down the block, they're competing with the kids in China and India," Garcia said.

While nothing is set in stone, the new schools will likely open in Tempe, downtown Phoenix and either the Higley, Gilbert or Mesa unified school districts, because officials want them located close to ASU's four campuses. "We did a survey in a radius of five miles of each campus, and asked parents if we have such a school would you come, and the overwhelming response was yes," Garcia said.