Denver’s partnership between the city school district, business and community leaders aimed at improving educational outcomes is launching its first major initiative, an attempt to improve kindergarten readiness and smooth the transition into elementary school for young children in Southwest Denver.

The Denver Education Compact was launched by Denver Mayor Michael Hancock in 2011 as a way to bring together civic and educational leaders to identify new ways to promote improved outcomes for Denver’s children.

Early education emerged as a key component of the compact’s work quickly as the project was developed, and in April the group formally identified several key goals, including increasing the number of children enrolled in early childhood programs and increasing the number of third-graders reading at grade level.

The kindergarten transitions project, dubbed “Countdown to Kindergarten,” is the compact’s first attempt to tackle those goals. Its aim is to educate parents on key school readiness strategies and to bring together staff at nine Southwest Denver elementary schools and four public and private early learning programs to coordinate and develop plans to support students.

“Twas the Night Before Kindergarten”

Students gathered at Pascual LaDoux Academy in Southwest Denver to hear Mayor Michael Hancock read “‘Twas the Night Before Kindergarten.”

“The reality is that every child enters kindergarten at a different place,” said Hancock at the project’s kick-off event Tuesday. But regardless of whether a child has been in a formal pre-school program, a day care or at home with a caregiver, Hancock said, the transition into kindergarten presents challenges for the student.

“They have a new school, and in some cases it’s the first school they’ve ever been to,” said Terry Bower, the director of the compact. “They have a new teacher. They have new rules. They eat in the cafeteria.”

Bower said that the program’s goal is to make sure students arrive to kindergarten ready to meet those academic, social and emotional challenges and help ease their experience into elementary school.

The initiative will hold a series of workshops for parents organized around ideas like navigating the school choice system and preventing summer learning loss. It will also bring together school leaders and staff from the schools and childcare centers together to learn from experts on school transitions and prepare concrete plans to take back to their classrooms.

Early childhood education and kindergarten readiness was in some ways a natural place for the compact to begin its work, Bower said, because pre-school and kindergarten are the first time students enter the educational system and because there were relatively few public and private agencies and organizations to coordinate.
“The ideas is we’re tackling the whole feeder system,” Bower said. The compact eventually plans to introduce more initiatives that widen its focus out to the entire span from birth to when a student enters the workforce.

The nine elementary schools that are participating in the kindergarten transitions program all feed into Southwest Denver’s Kepner Middle School. And the four early learning centers, which include Pascual LaDoux Academy, an early childhood education center run by Denver Public Schools, and community groups including Mile High Montessori, were selected because of the number of students who enter the participating elementary schools from their programs.

All in all, Bower said, the program is targeting about 750 4-year-olds in its initial year.

Although the program eventually hopes to scale out to other parts of the city, Bower said its initial focus on Southwest Denver comes because of both the community work that is already happening in the neighborhood and because of the large achievement gaps that exist between the neighborhood’s students and their more affluent peers.

“The compact has made a very strategic decision to use the resources where they’re most needed,” said Bower.