

MY WORD

Educational
success hinges
on preschool

TWO similar children enter kindergarten on the same day. One quickly learns to read, will graduate from high school and likely go on to college.

The other struggles with reading, will drop out of high school and possibly get in trouble with the law. The difference: The first child attended preschool; the other did not.

A child's individual educational success or failure may not be this cut and dry, but for many students, a solid foundation for life-long learning begins with preschool.

A recent survey of California kindergarten teachers found nine out of 10 say they can tell when an entering student has not attended preschool. That's the student who lacks the social and learning readiness skills essential for today's more rigorous kindergarten programs. This beginning achievement gap can hobble youngsters throughout their school years.

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In California, while there are some state-funded preschool opportunities, there aren't enough, and unfortunately the state's investment into pre-kindergarten for this fiscal year remains flat.

A Rand Corp. study finds that every \$1 invested in preschool returns \$2.62 in reduced remedial education and crime costs while creating a better-educated work force that allows for improved labor recruitment, participation and performance. The study also sees longer-term economic growth and greater competitiveness in the global marketplace.

As national standards mandate accountability and evidence of closing the achievement gap, legislators on both sides of the aisle are increasingly aware of the importance of building a child's educational foundation early on.

The growing interest is reflected in the fact that for this fiscal year, 26 states will increase funding for pre-kindergarten programs, according to Pre-K Now, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., that works with advocates and policy makers to develop voluntary pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Currently, only nine states do not offer some form of state-funded preschool.

The proposed Preschool for All initiative is breathing life into legislation Assemblywoman Wilma Chan (D-Oakland) has for several years worked on, but for which she has lacked a funding source.

The initiative and Chan's related legislation reflect a national movement to provide voluntary preschool for all 4-year-olds. Parents would be able to choose the preschool in their community.

Preschool opportunities in Alameda County, as elsewhere in California, are in short supply. Federal and state preschool programs for low-income children have long waiting lists.

Middle-class parents have too high an income to qualify for public preschool programs but can't afford private ones — which can cost as much as college tuition.

In step with other counties, Alameda County is getting a jump-start on universal preschool.

The Alameda County Office of Education has begun consulting with existing preschool providers, both public and private, and other stakeholders such as Head Start, the county's Child Care Planning Council, the First Five Commission and higher education to develop a plan that leverages and coordinates resources so that no matter what the outcome of the proposed legislation, we are working together to ensure the best possible support for children and parents during these critical first years.

If we want all of our children to reach their full potential, preschool offers a potent strategy. We want our children to be equipped for success when they step into kindergarten. With quality preschool available for all children, that step can be one giant leap toward success.

Sheila Jordan is Alameda County schools superintendent.

This opinion/editorial
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The Contra Costa Times
The Monclarion
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