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Credit all around for full-day kindergarten

In a terrestrial setting plagued by inability at educational achievement, New Mexicans are seeing something of a celestial convergence:

A Republican governor and a Democratic legislature, who rarely agree on the time of day, have come together to approve full-day kindergarten for all our state's school districts.

It might not happen immediately; the bill approved in the recent legislative session, then signed by Gov. Gary Johnson, calls for "phasing in" full-day classes — voluntary to our state's parents.

Given the huge cost of providing classrooms, teachers, transportation and equipment for all our state's five-year-olds, and the time it might take to build new rooms in some locales, "phasing in" might make some sense — although every year's delay does damage to those youngsters' future.

Meanwhile, the mere approval of such an important educational and social step is cause for celebration — and salutes to all who made it happen.

The brains behind this campaign is the aptly, if awkwardly, named Think New Mexico. It's one of those public-policy research institutions often called "think tanks."

But while most of its counterparts limit their work to the cerebral, Think New Mexico was founded last year to develop ideas *and* put them to work.

It's a bipartisan group; boardmembers are Frank Ortiz, Stewart Udall, Garrey Carruthers, LaDonna Harris, Roberta Cooper Ramo, Paul Bardacke, Rebecca Koch, David Buchholtz, Elizabeth Gutierrez, Edward Archuleta and Fred Nathan. Nathan, who served as special counsel to then-Attorney General Tom Udall, is founder and executive director; Carol Romero-Wirth is assistant director, and Susan Fleischmann is the financial officer.

That's it: a small staff, an eminent board.

To Think's way of thinking, there was no better way to begin educational reform than to start where our state's public education does: kindergarten.

It's where kids learn to learn, and learn to get along with others, yet half-day sessions barely give kids time to take off their coats before they're on the way back home.

Selling our legislators on all-day sessions was easy; the hard part was convincing them that the state could afford it.

So Think prepared a report replete with suggestions where our senators and representatives could cut government spending in relatively painless form, thus pay for full-scale kindergarten with minimal damage to the budget.

Those suggestions have yet to be followed — but a big majority of our legislators nonetheless recognized the wisdom of instituting full-day kindergarten.

They were prompted from all sides: Think had gained the support of the state Association of Commerce and Industry, the Hispano Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and the government-affairs committee of the Economic Forum, all influential at the Roundhouse.

When the bill got to Gov. Johnson, he set aside his misgivings about public education and signed the bill. It's a move he should be proud he made — and for which generations of New Mexicans will thank him.

For Think New Mexico, it was an auspicious beginning; staff and boardmembers already are at work on new initiatives for a better New Mexico — and on the difficult job of fund raising to keep the institution going.

The group drew generous support for its founding — from such stalwart community-support organizations as the McCune Charitable Foundation, the Frost Foundation, the Azalea Foundation, the Cudd Foundation, the M.A. Healy Foundation, the Edith Timken Family Foundation, St. Vincent Hospital, the Kids Fund established by author Judy Blume, and Santa Feans Gay and Andrew Ungerleider, who obtained a large grant from a foundation with which they are involved.

This is truly effective philanthropy; an eye-opening example of private generosity filling a gap in public-service initiative. Contributors to Think New Mexico obviously were putting their confidence in a group of proven performers. It was well placed.