

## Governor should sign kindergarten bill

**B**oth chambers of the New Mexico legislature have now passed full-day kindergarten legislation by a combined vote of 91-12.

**FRED NATHAN**

**Commentary**

Gov. Gary Johnson has until noon on March 8 to decide

whether to sign this landmark bipartisan legislation into law.

There is a lot for the governor to like about this full-day kindergarten legislation. For example, it allows parental choice by making student participation in full-day kindergarten voluntary on the part of parents.

Under current law, parents have only one choice: "half-day" kindergarten (a misnomer since it is only 2½ hours). In other words, one size fits all. Under this bill, parents, not the State, will decide what is in the best interest of their children: half-day or full-day kindergarten.

This legislation also provides accountability. In his State of the State Address, Gov. Johnson advocated the need to test children beginning with kindergarten. The bill does just that by requiring "age-appropriate assessments."

The legislation also goes a step further by connecting funding to performance "benchmarks." Specifically, full-day kindergarten programs that do not meet those benchmarks will

risk a "cessation in funding."

The bill phases the full-day kindergarten option in over five years and helps those children most in need by giving priority to elementary schools with the highest proportion of at-risk youth.

The \$5 million appropriation represents a significant down payment for full-day kindergarten, while at the same time it still allows the Legislature and the Governor to balance the State's checkbook.

Full-day kindergarten also will save money for taxpayers in two areas.

First, it will make it possible to eliminate some of the 651 midday bus trips that take place daily across New Mexico to transport half-day kindergarten students between school and home.

The money that's saved can be put directly into classrooms instead of fuel costs, labor, bus operation and maintenance.

Second, because full-day kindergarten teachers have more time with their students, they are more likely to diagnose and treat learning problems earlier.

That translates into less intervention later on, which is generally more costly and often less effective.

Nationally, 54.7 percent of five-year-olds attend full-day kindergarten, while the percent-

age of five-year-olds in New Mexico attending full-day kindergarten is 14.7 percent. (Public schools in New Mexico that provide full-day kindergarten do so with discretionary federal dollars, for which most schools are not eligible.)

This is tragic when you consider that full-day kindergarten students consistently outperform half-day kindergarten students on learning achievement measures.

A three-year study at Lowell Elementary School in Albuquerque, for example, found that their full-day kindergarten students scored above the national average on a nationally norm-referenced pre-reading assessment test, while their half-day students scored below the national average in all three years of the study.

This is consistent with a Council of Chief State School Officers review of 37 separate studies comparing half-day and full-day kindergarten.

Other studies of early childhood education programs have demonstrated that every taxpayer dollar invested returns approximately \$7 in the long-term in significantly higher income rates and significantly lower welfare dependency and arrest rates.

The bottom line, however, is that full-day kindergarten is the

first step toward fewer drop outs and a better educated and a more productive work force.

That is why this legislation enjoys the strong backing of the two leading business organizations in New Mexico: the Association of Commerce and Industry and the Hispano Chamber of Commerce.

Who else supports full-day kindergarten? Among others, the New Mexico chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons, the New Mexico Indian Affairs Commission, the Catholic Conference and the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children have all endorsed this legislation.

Legislators of both parties called a bipartisan cease fire long enough to pass this bill because it will make New Mexico a little bit better place for families and children.

Please urge Gov. Johnson to join this bipartisan effort to make full-day kindergarten accessible to every family in New Mexico.

You can write Governor Johnson at the State Capitol, Room 400, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503, or simply call the Governor's Office at 827-3000.

*Fred Nathan is founder and executive director of Think New Mexico, a non-partisan, solution-oriented think tank serving New Mexicans.*