

A L A M O G O R D O

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Parents should have prekindergarten choice

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In 2000 New Mexico's Democratic legislature and Republican Gov. Gary Johnson approved landmark legislation to make full-day kindergarten available to every child in New Mexico on a voluntary basis within five years.

Fast forward to 2004, and even though the law made full-day kindergarten voluntary to school districts and parents, all 89 school districts in New Mexico have elected to make full-day kindergarten available to their students, and parents across the state have chosen to enroll approximately 25,000 children.

The most recent assessments from the Public Education Department indicate that approximately 99 percent of full-day kindergarten programs across New Mexico are showing significant student gains in acquiring the language and early literacy skills needed to enter first grade and become proficient readers and writers.

The bottom line is that children in full-day kindergarten are better equipped to enter first grade than are children who did not have access to full-day kindergarten.

Now Gov. Bill Richardson and Lt. Gov. Diane Denish, with support from legislators of both parties, are proposing to make high quality prekindergarten available to those parents who choose it for their children.

The Richardson-Denish proposal seeks to phase in prekindergarten over five years in settings that are not limited to public schools, but also include churches and community centers.

The goal of the prekindergarten proposal is to increase parental choice. Under the current system, working middle class parents have very few if any choices for their children when it comes to prekindergarten.

Any private child care organization interested in collaborating with the prekindergarten program would benefit from the partnership. It would receive additional business when parents who cannot currently afford it are able to enroll their children, and it would become more financially secure by tapping into a source of funding that is more steady and reliable than year-to-year tuition payments.

It is true that any private prekindergarten receiving state funding would have to meet generally higher state standards for facilities and teacher training. That is because proponents of prekin-

ergarten are committed to ensuring that prekindergarten classes are of the highest quality.

When a program increases the qualifications of its teachers and the quality of its facility, it will become more attractive to additional families. Moreover, new positions for well-trained prekindergarten teachers will mean more, better-paying jobs in communities like Alamogordo.

This debate, however, should ultimately be decided by what is best for New Mexico's children. Because the environment our children experience during their early years of life lays a foundation that will either improve or impair their ability to succeed in the rest of their lives, studies have repeatedly shown impressive long-term dividends produced by high quality prekindergarten classes.

Research by the RAND Corporation, for example, discovered that low- and middle-income students who had attended public prekindergarten scored about 10 percent higher than their classmates on math and reading tests in fourth and eighth grade.

In addition, RAND and other researchers have consistently found that children who attend high quality prekindergarten experience lower special education needs, lower rates of grade retention, lower rates of juvenile and violent arrests, fewer teen pregnancies, higher rates of high school graduation and college enrollment, and ultimately enjoy higher employment rates and reduced welfare dependency as adults.

Prekindergarten is also a powerful, long-term economic stimulus. Reduced costs for special education, welfare and the juvenile justice system lessen the burden on taxpayers' pockets.

The Perry Preschool study showed a long-term return to society of seven dollars for every dollar invested in prekindergarten. A study conducted in Chicago during the 1980s-1990s showed a net return to taxpayers of \$47,759 per prekindergarten student by age 21.

The future of our state's economic development depends on adequately preparing the next generation of New Mexico's workers and business leaders.

The Richardson-Denish prekindergarten proposal means more choices for parents today, and improved student achievement, greater economic development opportunities and higher quality of life for our children tomorrow.