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Early childhood advocates prepare to make ROI case to legislators

BY MEGAN KAMERICK | NMBW SENIOR REPORTER

New Mexico's early childhood programs lost ground thanks to the state's budget crisis, and advocates are gearing up to retake that ground in the upcoming legislative session, or at least not lose any more funding.

The Pew Center on the States found that New Mexico reduced its funding for pre-kindergarten programs by more than 18 percent in FY 2011, the second-largest percentage cut in the nation. New Mexico was one of 10 states cutting its pre-K investment, Pew found.

Early childhood education is increasingly becoming a focus of business groups and economic development experts, including the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Two of its economists, Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick, have highlighted studies that found the return on investment was as

high as 16 to 1, far outweighing the return on traditional economic development incentives, according to Grunewald.

New Mexico launched its pre-K program in FY2006 with \$5 million. That grew to \$19 million over three years. In FY2010, as the economy worsened, lawmakers grew those investments by about 5 percent, according to Pew. That dropped in FY2011 to \$15.7 million.

Enrollment is expected to drop in pre-K programs by 500, to about 4,400 children, according to the report. New Mexico has relied heavily on federal dollars from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to build and expand the program, and Pew officials said it must find its own stable and reliable source of funding.

A report from a group that conducted dialogue sessions statewide last year found

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- New Mexico Business Roundtable for Educational Excellence 2011 Policy Recommendations
<http://www.ambree.org>
- Report on New Mexico by Pew Center on the States
<http://preknow.org/votescount/nm.cfm>
- Special studies on early childhood by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis
http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/studies/earlychild/
- Our Voices, Our Children - W.K. Kellogg Foundation initiative in New Mexico
<http://ourvoicesourchildren.org/home.html>
- New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership
<http://www.nmecd.org/>

EARLY: 60% of business community felt state does too little to ensure kids enter kindergarten prepared

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widespread support for universal access to pre-kindergarten for all 4-year-olds. The Viewpoint Learning meetings were funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and its findings were presented in December at a convening hosted by New Mexico Voices For Children. Kellogg is also underwriting two other early childhood efforts here, the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership and Strong Starts for Children Initiative. Strong Starts is holding a forum on Jan. 24, the day before the Legislature convenes, to share recommendations with legislators. That group held dialogues in Albuquerque last fall with nonprofits, the University of New Mexico and American Indian groups. Everyday Democracy is sponsoring that effort, although it has not yet released its legislative agenda.

Allen Sanchez, CEO of St. Joseph Community Health and the executive director of the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops, is leading an effort that includes Voices For Children. This push most likely will be the most controversial, because it will propose tapping into the Land Grant Permanent Fund. The idea is to draft a constitutional amendment to expand the definition of education that is funded by that money to include early childhood education, renew a pending sunset on those funds and raise them from 6.8 percent to 7 percent.

Sanchez said they'd like to see the balance shift so 5 percent of that goes to K-12 education and 2 percent goes to early childhood development efforts.

"We need to invest more in the playpen and less in the state pen," Sanchez added.

The Early Childhood Development Part-

nership works with business leaders to advocate for investments in early childhood development and is housed at the United Way of Santa Fe County.



Sanchez

Katherine Freeman, executive director of the United Way, said the group is working with the New Mexico Business Roundtable and its 2011 public policy recommendations.

Larry Langley, executive director of the Roundtable, said the group would like to see the various pieces of legislation come together under an Early Childhood Education Act using the 2010-11 funding. It would outline basic principles of an effective program and define agencies' roles and funding. Langley does not agree with seeking permanent land grant funding.

"The fund was not created for that purpose. It's not a rainy day fund," he said.

A poll done for the Early Childhood Development Partnership by Research and Polling found little support among legislators for using a percentage of proceeds from the state's permanent funds. And while only 37 percent of the legislators polled believe that the state is doing too little to ensure children enter kindergarten with the skills they need to do best in school, 60 percent of the business and community leaders felt the state did too little, and 83 percent of tribal leaders felt that way, too.

Research and Polling surveyed 253 key business and community leaders, 53 tribal leaders and 35 state legislators with roles on finance, education and appropriations committees.

Duane Benson, executive director of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation, which is headed by leaders from top companies in the Twin Cities, spoke at the December event. The Partnership raised \$20 million from private sources for its early childhood pilot project.

Legislators nationwide are besieged by two groups right now, Benson said. One doesn't want taxes increased and/or wants them cut. The other wants more expenditures.

"Those two never talk to each other," he said. "So what legislators are looking for is innovation."

He advised advocates to push the arguments about the return on investment, both to legislators and the business community.

"You can't make this case a social service model," he said. "This is raw economics. This is data-driven, and that's the case you have to make."

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