

# HEADLIGHT

## The Affirmative on Early Learning

By Donald Johnson, M.D.

02/05/2012

State Senator John Arthur Smith of Deming wears the moniker "Doctor No" with pride. The name refers to his oft-used response to legislative attempts to budget more money for various state services like education and health care.

As chair of the Senate Finance Committee - which hears all legislation that impacts the state budget - he's had ample opportunity to make his fiscal views known. Many a legislative request has met its death in the SFC.

For Senator Smith, the role of "Dr. No" has meant responsible fiscal restraint. While there is much to be said in favor of measured state spending, I and many others believe that "Doctor No" needs to say "Yes" to investing more in early childhood education.

Soon, the Senate Finance Committee will be hearing SJR 9, which sends voters a constitutional amendment proposal to invest a small amount of the state's school permanent fund in the early learning programs that prepare children for success in school and in life.

The Early Learning Constitutional Amendment would invest just 1.5 percent of the state's \$10 billion fund in programs that have been shown in numerous long-term studies to improve reading and math scores and graduation rates, and decrease the need for special education.

As a pediatrician I know that early learning is a critical component of healthy child development. Parents readily understand the rapid physical growth that every child undergoes.

What's less understood - perhaps because you can't see it the way you can see physical growth - is the development of the brain. In

the first three years of life your brain grows more than at any other period in your life. In fact, 85 percent of brain development occurs during these years and it is every bit as important as the growth of healthy bones and muscles.

Developing the brain architecture during the first five years lays the foundation for the learning that will take place over the course of your life. The foundation has to be robust to support healthy intellectual, social, and emotional components. Just as the body needs to be fed in order to grow, the brain does not develop without the proper nourishment.

Children's brains feed off of nurturing, interaction, and appropriate stimulation. Children need to be engaged in conversation, be read to, played with, and allowed to explore their world.

Sadly, I see too many young children who aren't getting enough of this critical brain nourishment. Parents want what's best for their children, but don't always have the skills and support available to know what to do.

The Early Learning Constitutional Amendment would fund programs that improve parental engagement, and foster involvement that continues as the child grows and enters school. These programs are already in place in New Mexico and are known to be successful.

We just need to invest more funding in them so they serve more of New Mexico's children.

The amendment also protects the school permanent fund so it is preserved for future generations.

Recent polling shows overwhelming support for this funding solution. That support is both bipartisan and statewide.

Voters have stated very clearly that they want the opportunity to vote on whether to invest their money in early childhood education.

So, as one doctor to another, I respectfully ask Senator Smith to become "Doctor Yes" for New Mexico's smallest residents and most valuable and vulnerable resource.

*Donald Johnson, M.D. is a Pediatrician, Silver  
City, NM*