

MY VIEW: LYDIA PENDLEY

# Prevention in education more effective than remediation

There was a question at the end of last Sunday's story about retaining third-graders ("A hard read") that should have been asked at the beginning: "We need to discuss what is at the core of this problem. Why are our children not reading to grade level?" It's an important question because it considers the cause of the problem. Legislation like that proposed by Gov. Susana Martinez and described in the article looks only at the solution.

Solutions to problems are important, to be sure. But the best way to mitigate a problem is to prevent it in the first place. Too often, however, when it comes to public policy, prevention is the last resort.

RESULTS-Santa Fe is part of a national group working to end poverty. Lack of education is the single biggest hurdle out of poverty for most low-income Americans. It's also a reason

that poverty is cyclical: Children whose parents have low levels of education are more likely to struggle in school themselves than kids whose parents finished high school and attended college.

RESULTS believes that access to high-quality early learning is key to breaking this cycle. In this country, our investment in education doesn't begin until children have reached the age of 5. This means that the five most critical years for brain development — when the architecture that provides the platform for all the learning that is to come is being formed — are already past. Children from middle- and upper-income homes are more likely to get the kind of nurturing and interaction that is needed in the first five years to assure robust brain development. Children from low-income homes are significantly less likely to. The result is that these children are already behind when

they begin kindergarten. Children who start school behind do not catch up. In fact, they tend to fall further behind, which is why dropout rates are higher for students from low-income families.

Numerous long-term studies have shown that high-quality early childhood education programs provide children with the necessary social, emotional and cognitive skills needed to succeed in school. Ensuring that every New Mexico child has access to these programs would make an enormous difference in our educational outcomes because we'd be closing the achievement gap before it has a chance to open.

Bringing our funding levels up to where they need to be to accomplish them will take two things. First, we need to change the way we think about public education. Learning begins at birth, so it only makes sense that we begin our investments in education at

birth as well. The other thing, of course, is money. So far, these highly valuable programs have been paid for out of the state's General Fund budget. While we could certainly afford to fund them fully this way, there are a great many priorities competing for General Fund money. The result has been funding levels that have fluctuated wildly, particularly since the onset of the recession.

There is a better way to fund early learning. New Mexico has a \$10 billion Land Grant Permanent Fund, which was set up by Congress expressly for supporting public education. The fund is fed by both royalties from oil and gas extraction and by income from investments. Because it earns far more than we spend, the fund has grown enormously over the decades. While we want to preserve the fund for future generations, we could easily invest a small percentage of it in early learning

programs. Not only would the fund continue to grow, we also would be creating a brighter future for the generations of children to come.

Two bills — SJR 9 and HJR 15 — would place this funding issue on the November general election ballot for the voters to decide. New Mexicans want to see their children succeed. We also want to see that the public money that supports education is well spent. Making a commitment to investments in early learning would do both. It would also go a long way toward breaking the cycle of poverty in the Land of Enchantment.

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