

School funding reform must include pre-K expansion

M. Teresa Ruiz *Guest Columnist*

New Jersey has been a national leader in providing high-quality preschool education. Nineteen years after the New Jersey Supreme Court required that all 3- and 4-year-olds in the highest-poverty school districts receive it -- including those in my home city of Newark -- we are regarded as a model for producing lasting results.

To build on the success in the 31 urban school districts covered by that Abbott V Burke decision, the landmark School Funding Reform Act of 2008 promised to provide access to quality preschool programs for every New Jersey child, not just those in the poorest communities. Committing to provide quality preschool for all children is an easy decision: Educators and business leaders, child advocates and physicians, Nobel Prize-winning economists and former governors all agree that preschool education is one of the best investments that government can make to ensure the future success of its children and the competitiveness of its economy.

The problem is that nine years after passage of the SFRA, state-supported preschool programs have added just 3,000 new pupils. Today, only one out of four 3-year olds and only one out of three 4-year-olds in New Jersey have access to preschool. That's just 52,000 out of an estimated 185,000 who would benefit.

Every year that we fail to properly fund our preschool programs, these tens of thousands children in cities, suburbs and rural communities miss out on the benefits of preschool -- benefits they will never get back. Children who attend preschool are less likely to be held back a grade, less likely to be placed in special education, and more likely to achieve academic success in high school and to graduate. They are less likely to be arrested as both juveniles and adults, enjoy better health, and are more likely to be employed rather than end up in the government assistance system. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman quantified the results of preschool, finding that students who attend pre-school:

- Have increased earnings over the their lifetime that is 25 percent higher than those who did not attend preschool;
- Cost society less in both transfer payments and remedial educational expenditures - a \$4 savings for every \$1 spent on pre-K
- Are less likely to enter the criminal justice system, resulting in \$3 to \$8 in reduced costs for police, courts and prisons for every \$1 spent.

The bottom line, Heckman calculated, is that society gets back \$7 for \$10 for every dollar invested in preschool education. But it isn't just about numbers - it's about opening new horizons of learning to every child in New Jersey at a critical stage in his or her intellectual and social development. I saw it in the energy and enthusiasm on the faces of children during my time as an educator in a child development center. We saw it in the kids at the early childhood education centers in Newark that Senate President Steve Sweeney and I visited last fall. Senate Democratic leaders, with Republican support, have been pushing to add funding for preschool in recent budgets. Unfortunately, the \$17 million we put in two years ago and the \$25 million we added last June were vetoed. That is why we feel it is urgent that the school funding proposal being put together by the bipartisan Senate Select Committee on School Funding Fairness include funding to expand preschool as part of its recommendations for next year's budget.

Underfunding of our schools isn't limited to preschool, of course. Nine years of virtually flat funding has kept in place enrollment growth caps that underfund 70 percent of school districts and "hold harmless" Adjustment Aid that provides the other 30 percent with more state aid than they should receive. It isn't an urban-suburban issue, but an issue of fairness. In my legislative district, Newark Public Schools are underfunded by \$134 million and Belleville Public Schools are underfunded by \$20 million, which hinders their ability to offer the programs our children deserve. As chair of the Senate Education Committee, I know we can't wait another year to begin the process of restoring equity to our school funding formula. We must increase aid to underfunded school districts, and we must begin expanding funding for preschool until we can fulfill the promise of the School Funding Reform Act that every New Jersey child has access to a quality preschool education.

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