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Pre-K cuts sti

18 percent funding reduction second highest among states

By Robert Nott
The New Mexican

Elizabeth Herrera is one mom who doesn't want the state's pre-kindergarten program to lose funding.

Her 4-year-old son attends Santa Fe Children's Project Early Learning Center next to Aspen Community Magnet School on La Madera Street. Her daughter, now in kindergarten, attended the same pre-K program when it was previously located at Kaune Elementary School.

"With both my children, it's been great in encouraging their natural curiosity," she said. "I've seen them progress in terms of asking questions and showing interest in everything — mostly reading."

Parent Jamie Stevens, who also has a 4-year-old at the center, agrees. Her son

is learning new words — he came home the other day and surprised her by saying, "Mom, I have a hypothesis." Her own hypothesis is that pre-K helps young children adapt socially and learn vital skills.

"Early learning is not just baby-sitting," she said. "It's preparing him for not just kindergarten, but giving him an effective transition between home and school. He's learning skills he will need throughout his entire scholastic career."

National studies indicate that pre-K experiences decrease grade repetition, increase standardized test scores, increase high-school graduation rates, and — further down the line — reduce both juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy rates.

So the news this week that New Mexico had decreased funding for its pre-K program by some 18 percent in fiscal year 2011 — the first significant cut since state legislators passed a pre-K program in 2005 — disappointed and alarmed proponents.

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4,500

Students in pre-K programs statewide

500

Number of children to whom services were reduced because of budget cuts

10

States that decreased pre-K funding, including New Mexico



From left, Lawrence Duran, 5, tells Jarred Trujillo, 4, a secret while Emma St. Peter, 5, looks on Friday at the Santa Fe Children's Project Early Learning Center. State funding for pre-K programs such as this one has been cut by about 18 percent. JANE PHILLIPS/THE NEW MEXICAN





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“We’re very concerned about the report that New Mexico is one of a few that have cut pre-K,” said Myra Segal, deputy policy director for the advocacy organization New Mexico Voices for Children. “And we’re the second highest cut in the country. That’s really troubling.” (Arizona saw the largest cut, at 100 percent.)

“I’m always somewhat hopeful, but I’m also concerned,” said Kathleen Freeman, CEO/president of United Way of Santa Fe County, which administers the funding for the pre-K near Aspen. “I hope that a return on the investment can be demonstrated so we don’t lose ground. That’s what I hope for this year — that we don’t lose ground.”

According to the report, issued by Pre-K Now, a campaign arm of the Pew Center on the States, New Mexico is one of 10 states to decrease pre-K funding because of economic challenges. With the exception of Arizona and New Mexico, those decreases are within the 10 percent mark. Oregon, for instance, decreased support by 9 percent; Kansas by 5 percent.

Dan Haggard, deputy director of the Early Childhood Services Division of the state’s Children, Youth and Family Services Department, confirmed that the report was “pretty close” to the truth for New Mexico, though he said the cut was a little lower than the 18.6 percent cited by Pre-K Now.

He said the funding decreases were due to the fact that the pre-K program was financed in large part from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and that portion of the funding has been redirected to Human Services.

In addition, he said, “All departments have been directed to reduce state funding over the

past year, and this was pre-K’s share of solvency contributions.”

He said the program started with a \$5 million allocation from the Legislature in 2005. Over time the annual investment rose to just under \$20 million. It’s down to about \$15.5 million now, he said.

Haggard said about 4,500 students statewide are enrolled in pre-K programs. Because of the funding cuts, the state had to reduce services for about 500 children at the start of the school year. That number would have been higher had the pre-K fund not saved some money over the years.

Next year, given the state’s budget crisis, the situation could be worse.

“We’re trying to not cut kids out of the program,” Segal said. “We’re trying to tread water with what we have. I’m not worried about this year. What I’m

worried about is next year.”

Marci Young, director of Pre-K Now, which issued the report, said that states are “holding the line on pre-K despite fiscal distress. We saw 26 states and the District of Columbia protect pre-K funding. Fifteen states actually increased funding for the program.

“But certain states — such as New Mexico — started strong but have seen support for pre-K funding wane. Several years of weak budgets are beginning to undermine high-quality early education. Now is the time to take a step back and get state lawmakers to understand that they must expand long-term educational progress by funding pre-K.

“We should invest in what we know works for kids. We know that pre-K works.”

Contact Robert Nott at 986-3021 or rnott@sfnmexican.com.

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