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OUR VIEW

Give voters a say in pre-K investment

For all the hard work Think New Mexico and New Mexico Voices for Children put into their successful campaigns for public pre-kindergartens, legislative passage proved to be the easy part: Our lawmakers seven years ago gave their grudging approval — at least for a start toward educating 4-year-olds. But paying for pre-K statewide? *Poco a poco*, figured the Roundhouse money-mongers; revenue doesn't grow on trees, or words to that effect ...

So early-childhood education remains an orphan — notably when it comes to sharing payouts from the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund. Kindergartens — which, thanks to Think, a results-aimed public-policy institute, went full-day during the 1990s — get money from the permanent fund, most of which goes to elementary and secondary schools and colleges.

But pre-Ks must go hat in hand for every dollar, every year, to the Legislature — which has allowed only slow growth toward their becoming a statewide reality.

It's false economy: Early learning is crucial to our kids' future — which includes becoming adults all too soon. That learning, of course, begins at babyhood — putting educational responsibility on the backs of parents, where it belongs for the first three years. But for all the editorial “our” bridling at sending kids into the institutional mill at such a tender age, 4 is a good time for acquainting 'em with what they'll soon be in for; pre-K has proven to be a crucial building block of youngsters' education.

But unless their families are affluent enough to afford private preschools, or poor enough to qualify for Head Start, they can get lost in the shuffle — and find themselves already behind their peers when they get to kindergarten. In New Mexico, historically a laggard in education, our children need all the help they can get. So, for that matter, does the state.

Early-childhood education can mean lower special-education costs, fewer dropouts, fewer folks on welfare and fewer jailbirds.

So our legislators, and Gov. Susana Martínez, ought to line up behind concerned citizens' efforts at dealing pre-Ks and other early-development programs in for a tiny share of permanent-fund distribution.

It would require yet another amendment to our state's overdue-for-overhaul constitution: If a resolution were approved by the Legislature, it would go to our state's voters in the 2012 general election.

The proposal is certain to attract support from many of New Mexico's senators and representatives — but so far,



there's resistance from the Governor's Office: What if the permanent-fund payout amounts to more than the funds earn in a given year? That's already happening, according to Martínez aides.

To which education advocates might — but aren't likely to — respond: Whittle a little from the institutions getting the most; higher education, for example. Someone should make the case that it's the beginning of the educational process that's most important; put the money where it counts, and let intercollegiate athletics and bloated college administrations do more legislative begging.

At the very least, New Mexico voters should have a say in permanent-fund application to education.

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