

Roswell Daily Record

Vol. 120, No. 237

THE VOICE OF THE PECOS VALLEY

October 2, 2011

50c Daily / \$1 Sunday

www.rdrnews.com

SUNDAY

School press conference focuses on early education

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Nearly 200 parents and early educators from around the state came together Saturday to discuss the dire state of early education and child care in New Mexico in pursuit of forging a plan to save it. The founding convention of People for Kids brought activists and legislative leaders together to save early education. People for Kids, which is an acronym

for Parents, Educators and Owners Partnering for Learning in Early Education, is a coalition of the 3,500 parents of the OLE Working Parents Association, early educators, center owners and directors from 100 child development centers throughout New Mexico.

New Mexico ranks low nationally when it comes to education, according to Myra Segal, deputy policy director for the New Mexico Voices for Children organi-

zation. New Mexico ranks 47th in the nation in terms of the percentage of teens who did not finish high school, Segal said. And only two out of 10 New Mexico fourth-graders are proficient readers.

Segal talked about the various milestones in a child's life such as kindergarten, reading proficiently in fourth grade and graduating high school. "When a child starts behind they stay behind. When you enter school behind, what

happens is unfortunately most kids never catch up. We hear a lot of talk about the achievement gap, and I say the best way to close the achievement gap is to prevent it from happening in the first place. And the best to prevent it from happening in the first place is to do exactly what everybody in this room is doing."

Suggesting a solution to the funding crises early education centers are experiencing, Segal said increasing the distribution

from the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund, which was created for the purpose of educating children, by 1.5% would generate around \$150 million in revenue per year. "The fund will still grow. It is just going to grow at a slower rate," she said. Segal also mentioned that a state auditor would be responsible for looking at the fund every year to make sure the

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money was properly distributed to early childhood education.

The convention also featured testimonies from parents and educators and included a panel which addressed policy solutions for early education funding. Senate Majority Leader Michael Sanchez was a panelist.

Starting his talk on a political note, Sanchez showed his allegiance towards Diane Denish, who served as chair of the Democratic Party of New Mexico and ran for governor of New Mexico against Susana Martinez. "If the state had elected Diane Denish this may not even be an issue because Diane Denish is a person who worked very hard for early childhood education. But the people of the state of New Mexico chose otherwise," he said.

Sanchez then spoke on behalf of the Senate, expressing his and their appreciation for early education teachers. "I want to let you all know, and I will tell you right now, and this goes for all of the New Mexico Senate, that I can speak for, is nobody in that body considers you to be babysitters. I will tell

you right now, it may feel like that, but I'm going to tell you that's not true. We know what you are, we appreciate what you do, sometimes we just don't get the money where it needs to get to show you how much we truly appreciate everything you do. So on behalf of the New Mexico state Senate I want to thank you for everything you do for our children, their parents, grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters."

Sanchez was met with applause when he said he did not think the No Child Left Behind Act should even be in existence. Discussing the idea to use money from the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund in order to help fund early education centers and keep them open, Sanchez cited Texas and its use of its permanent fund. "Totally in New Mexico we have in both Land Grant Funds close to \$16 billion. It's the second largest in the country. We're second to Texas. And by the way just as a point for you all, Texas dipped into its fund to help meet some of the crises they had in the state of Texas."

Speaking very highly of Senate President Pro Tem Tim Jennings, D-Roswell,

who also attended and spoke at the convention, Sanchez said, "Let me just say to the people who are in this room who are from the Roswell and Chaves County area that Tim Jennings is one of the best senators that has ever served in the New Mexico state Senate by far. If for some strange reason they would not choose to send him back it would be a loss not only for Chaves County, it would be a loss for the state of New Mexico, and it would be a loss for the children of this state. Tim is one of those legislators who truly cares about everybody."

Jennings, who has five children, told the audience, "We are in a challenging time right now." Showing his support for the work that early educators do, Jennings said, "The real truth of the matter is when you look at early childhood education it doesn't start at one, it doesn't start at two, it doesn't start at three, it starts at conception. On behalf of our Senate we had some real good battles about what's going on and how we spend our money. If you want to know my honest belief I believe that our whole system in education is somewhat backwards. I

think we really ought to put more and more dollars into lower grades."

Many questions about early childhood education centers were discussed between lawmakers in Santa Fe, according to Jennings, who said, "Children are a challenge to learn and educate all the way through but it's a challenge all the way through, to figure out how to fund things in a state and keep them going. It's a challenge to understand why all of a sudden in Albuquerque a teacher can teach for six and a half hours and can't get paid basically the same salary that teachers make, and the rest of the state works seven hours to get. I don't understand that. And I don't understand when teachers come out and say, 'well it doesn't matter about funding your retirement plan just fund the salaries.' Those are all kinds of questions that we had to answer in Santa Fe."

"We got to start at conception and go up because from conception to those first 30 to 35 months after birth are the most important years for your child and in your child's life."

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