

# EDITORIAL: Top-notch early childhood education is best investment

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By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board

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Oklahoma's public schools have offered access to all 4-year-olds since 1998. Alabama promises to provide access for all 4-year-olds within 10 years.

Where's California?

About three-quarters of preschool-aged kids are cared for by someone other than their parents during the workday. But as anyone with young children knows, finding quality, affordable options is no easy task.

Some lower-income families qualify for California state preschool or child-care programs, but the state has long waiting lists. Higher-income families can afford to pay \$12,000 a year or more. People in the middle experience the "pre-K pinch."

Since the 2012-13 school year, 4-year-olds in California who turn 5 during the first three months of the school year can participate in "transitional kindergarten," a pre-kindergarten grade in public schools. But that reaches only 25% of California's 4-year-olds.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, proposes to expand the state's voluntary pre-kindergarten grade in public schools to all 4-year-olds within five years. His Senate Bill 837 is a good start for discussion on this important issue.

Many details remain to be worked out, not the least of which is how to pay for it.

In Oklahoma, 4-year-olds are included in the state's school funding formula, with school districts getting funding on a per-pupil basis. Steinberg's bill would follow that model. Steinberg also would follow Oklahoma by allowing school districts to contract with private for-profit and nonprofit providers, the same way that California does with state preschool for lower-income kids.

Steinberg wants to build on existing facilities, not launch a new school building boom.

As in Oklahoma, the grade for 4-year-olds would be voluntary. For calculating funding, Steinberg is assuming 70% participation. By 2019-20, he estimates that 350,000 of each year's 500,000 4-year-olds would enroll.

Can California afford this? Adding a grade would increase the share of the state budget that goes to education through Proposition 98 — \$198 million in year one; \$990 million by year five. The money would have to come from some other priority.

Gov. Jerry Brown has shown little interest in early childhood education. But many experts argue that the payoff for investing in the early years is considerably greater than investing in education at any later age. With a commitment to 4-year-olds, the state could spend less at the back end in remedial education or, worse, prisons.

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