

EDITORIAL: Give a boost to early childhood education and everyone benefits



Sarah Fletcher, 4, shows teacher Roberta Nazaroff her counting skills in the transitional Kindergarten class at Norseman Elementary School.

JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

There is a popular poster circulating among schools: "We're not in it for the income; we're in it for the outcome."

In our [Eye on Education special report](#), a wide array of educators are big boosters of early childhood education. They see the outcomes every day, and it is clear to them which little ones are set up for success the moment they set foot in the classroom. Other children are lost, insecure and confused from the get-go, and many of those unprepared students never catch up. We want every child to have confidence that school is a journey designed for them. It is a place they can learn to master their world, experience success and enjoy friendships that may last a lifetime.

Guess who else sees the outcomes of early childhood education every day? Law enforcement. When Congress was slashing the budget a few years ago, more than 600 police chiefs, sheriff's prosecutors and others in law enforcement delivered a letter to their representatives.

"We urge you to reject proposed cuts to early care and education programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant program. Rather than move backward, we must continue to improve these programs.

Under the umbrella of a group called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids these crime fighters cited a study that found at-risk children not enrolled in high-quality preschool were five times more likely to be chronic offenders by age 27 than children who did attend.

Despite their pleas and those of many others, early childhood education funding at every level was cut. Thankfully, however, the economy has improved, demand is strong in California and there is new momentum to restore early childhood education in the state - and in the Valley.

Local studies show that three things most affect a child's success in kindergarten: age of the child, preschool and education of the parents.

Many Valley schools are following the data and investing right there. The Bee's Hannah Furfaro reports today that hundreds of new transitional kindergarten classes are bursting with eager little learners too old for preschool yet too young to be in kindergarten. In Fresno Unified, \$7.4 million has been invested in early learning, money that has helped to provide 53 new preschool classrooms since 2011. In Tulare County, the preschools make house calls. Head Start teachers are teaching children from poor families -- and their parents right in their homes.

There is still a long way to go and here are ways we can improve.

Earlier is better: The evidence supporting education for expectant parents is persuasive. The mother's health, nutrition, awareness of her baby and her mental health and relationship with the father all can affect the unborn child's brain development. When the child is a newborn, programs such as Babies First check in with the young families to teach them the importance of safety in the home, animated conversations with the baby and affection for the child.

Priorities make sense: Research shows that the most dramatic results for early childhood education come with high-risk children. There are not enough seats for all children, so the neediest zip codes should come first. Sadly, some of the most desperate areas are those with the fewest choices in preschool.

Quality is huge: Don't confuse early childhood education with baby-sitting. Evidence-based, best practices should be mandatory. We must support efforts to raise the bar on teacher credentialing and continuing professional development. We are fortunate to have Fresno State at the forefront of such efforts.

Empower parents: While it is nice to have a choice of public, private or in-home preschools, how are young parents to know which will accept them and which are best for their children? Government programs have such complex lists of programs and rules, it's like trying to build a jumbo jet with a Lego set. There is no state rating system, but Fresno County has acquired a grant to create such a guide here. All counties need to have this information available for parents.

Even when that is settled, the challenges of the Valley's demographics with our epic poverty, homelessness, language diversity, health problems, migrant populations and low parental education levels means that everyone will be needed to help.

Parents of young children are often overwhelmed with the demands of providing for the family in our underperforming economy. We support the work of nonprofit groups such as The Children's Movement, Reading and Beyond, Fresno Strive and other groups on the case who let the parents know they are not alone. There are opportunities for everyone to volunteer to read to a child in a library, help with homework at the neighborhood school, or purchase a few school supplies for a neighbor in need.

Don't sit back and think the schools have it covered. Clearly they do not. That kindergarten readiness? Jim Yovino, Fresno County superintendent of schools, says only 37% of children entering kindergarten are prepared to succeed. The situation doesn't get much better with time. He reports that more than 14,000 students enter the third grade every year, and only 45% are proficient readers by summer vacation. Research shows children not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are four to six times less likely to graduate from high school.

And so the circle closes. The outcomes for high school dropouts often lead us right back to law enforcement, prisons and the perils of poverty.

We have a clear choice: We can solve the problem when it's little. Or we can solve it when it's big. We stand for the "littles."

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