

Quality Investments in Our Children and Young Adults Will Pay Dividends

By Senator Pete Campos

Early childhood education, nutrition and well-being programs — those public services provided to children before they even enter school — are critically important to each child's individual success and to our collective success as a state.

The Legislature recognizes the importance of these programs and has invested more than \$500 million over the last three years in pre-kindergarten, child care assistance, home visiting and early childhood literacy and other education programs — all in an effort to give children a fair start in life. The return on that investment will be life changing, as we'll spend less in the future on welfare and public safety programs because our children will be healthy, educated and prepared for the job market.

At the same time we are investing in early childhood programs, we must continue to invest in the legislative lottery scholarship because of the equally dramatic impact it has on young adults. We made a commitment to cover the tuition of New Mexico college students with lottery proceeds, and we must live up to that promise.

We need to invest more, of course, in early childhood programs and in the lottery scholarship. These are complementary, not competing, interests. Despite all of the benefits of living in New Mexico, our state still remains a difficult place to be a child and a young adult. Poverty, abuse and neglect, and hunger still plague our children; and teen pregnancy, high dropout rates and substance abuse haunt older children. All of this puts New Mexico youth at a terrible disadvantage once they reach adulthood, compete for jobs and seek to contribute to their communities and raise healthy, happy families of their own.

The spending plan recommended by the Legislative Finance Committee includes \$239.7 million for early childhood programs — a 17 percent increase over the current year's spending. Even with that significant increase, tens of thousands of New Mexicans will still be waiting for those badly needed services, at a cost of another \$137 million. I and many other legislators are committed to appropriating that money over the next five years so that we can begin to steadily improve the lives of New Mexico's children.

There are also several proposals to make the lottery scholarship program solvent, but we must work to avoid those proposals that limit the number of students eligible for the program and

that siphon money from other programs.

Fortunately, we have a prudent and viable funding source for early childhood programs and the lottery scholarship. An investment over the next 10 years of just one percent of the rolling average balance of the Land Grant Permanent Fund, evenly divided between early childhood programs and the lottery scholarship, will have a dramatic impact on the long-term success of our children and young adults and our state.

This is a moderate and reasonable way to raise the money necessary to solve important health, education and employment challenges. This investment will help prepare future generations to assume a leadership role in New Mexico.

Such a modest investment will not damage our permanent fund over time. To the contrary, if we properly plan for an efficient use of the additional distribution for early childhood programs and the lottery scholarship, we will all benefit as New Mexico youths take productive jobs in the science, technology, engineering, mathematics and health care fields — stimulating the economy, boosting state resources and revitalizing New Mexico.

There's no question that we must continue to heavily invest in children and young adults. We cannot afford to lose the gains we've made, and we must not abandon those children and young adults who still need services and assistance. The question for policymakers is how best to continue funding these investments. Investing a small amount of the Land Grant Permanent Fund ensures that we have both a sustainable funding source and a sustainable rate of growth in early childhood programs and the lottery scholarship.

We're committed to improving the lives of all New Mexicans and especially our children and young adults. Early childhood programs and a college education are a high priority and will remain so as we seek to make sustained, quality investments in programs that will make a difference in children's and young adults' lives both today and tomorrow.