

## Let's Use Fund Money To Help Young Learners

I was impressed to read on the Jan. 23 Journal Business page that the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund earned 14.25 percent last year. This is a remarkable return on our investment and is almost double the original target.

Clearly, the fund is well managed and the returns are high. But sadly, the success of the fund stands in stark contrast to the current state of our children — which, according to Kids Count data, is near rock bottom in almost every category.

Something is clearly not right.

The simple fact: as the fund gets richer, New Mexico's children have gotten poorer. While the fund has grown to \$11.45 billion, New Mexico has ranked at the bottom among the 50 states in important indicators of child well-being. Can we really continue to say to our kids, "Sorry, we can't afford to provide you with the early care and learning that you need to achieve and thrive" while we are sitting on an \$11.45 billion rainy-day fund set up to support public education? This is the equivalent of a parent giving a very sick child just half a dose of their medicine and expecting a quick recovery.

Thankfully, the New Mexico Legislature has an opportunity to let voters decide whether a very small percentage of the returns on this money should be invested in our kids, providing our youngest with expanded opportunities for early learning.

Senate Joint Resolution 3 (SJR3) proposes changing the Constitution to invest in Birth to Five, the years when the brain is being wired and the most learning occurs. Distributing a small portion of this fund for our earliest learners, as suggested in SJR-3, will provide our children with the much needed and proven early learning programs while preserving our permanent fund for future generations. This is a win-win proposition.

In the short term, the investment of an estimated \$150 million in early learning will create thousands of jobs, stimulate our economy and help prepare our youngest children to succeed in school. In the long term, we will improve educational outcomes — in school and in our workforce — and save money on remediation programs like child protection services, juvenile justice and special education.

We're not even asking our legislators to decide if they agree with expanded early childhood education. All we are merely asking is for them to let the voters decide by passing SJR-3 and giving it public debate it deserves.

Investing a small portion of the Land Grant Permanent Fund in early learning is a smart, fiscally sound option to support our children, improve our schools and build our economy for the future. But most important, it's the right thing to do for our kids.

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