

# The Desert Sun

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## State needs to bolster its pre-K education

When an education committee commissioned by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger released its education reform report last week, the governor talked about how we must "give our kids the future they deserve."

The Governor's Committee on Education Excellence's report, "Students First, Renewing Hope for California's Future," recommended significant changes in our education system to improve public schools and close the achievement gap.

It recognized that California must do a better job of preparing our young children for success so that they come to school ready to learn. One of the report's top recommendations is to adopt an early childhood plan



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childhood plan that includes offering pre-kindergarten to all of California's children, starting with those who need it most, and making strategic investments in pre-K quality.

The recommendations mirror those in a report released earlier this year by the California P-16 (Pre-Kindergarten through Higher Education) Council convened by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell.

Both reports cite the benefits of effective pre-K, noting that children who attend a high-quality program have higher standardized test scores. The reports call on California to make a significant investment in expanding access to high-quality pre-K programs so our neediest children can attend. They also recognize that to create effective pre-K programs, the state must offer financial incentives to promote continued improvements in program quality.

Unfortunately, high-quality pre-K is out of reach for many families. Even families who qualify for publicly-funded preschools have trouble getting in — three out of four of those preschools have waiting lists, according to a statewide survey.

Even with the state's challenging budget outlook, we must remember that educating our young children is an investment in California's future.

There is important work to be done this year in laying the foundation so that all of our children have access to the high-quality pre-K system they need and deserve. That way, we will be prepared to make smart investments in pre-K expansion when the fiscal situation improves.

Two pre-K bills, SB 1629 introduced by Senator Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) and AB 2759 introduced by Assemblymember Dave Jones (D-Sacramento), would lay the groundwork for closing the achievement gap by making important reforms to our preschool system. The bills would establish a commission to create a quality improvement system that would reward programs as they meet higher quality standards, and consolidate and streamline existing preschool programs.

Another recommendation in both reports — using data wisely — would help children by improving classroom instruction, empowering parents to make better choices for their children and increasing accountability. For such a system to be effective, it must collect information from early childhood through college and beyond.

Preschool California urges the governor and the Legislature to implement the pre-K recommendations of the governor's committee and the P-16 Council. If enacted, such changes would ensure all children have a strong, early start, the committee report says. California's young children deserve nothing less.

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