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## Op-ed: Our children must have preschool access

By Larry Powell

*Larry Powell is the superintendent of the Fresno County Office of Education.*

Our kids can't wait to learn. Kids who start school behind stay behind, creating a readiness gap that becomes the achievement gap. Education reform begins with preschool.

These are the poignant messages being delivered by a dedicated group of Fresnoans who have spent this past school year meeting to design, if you will, the future. Their focus was singular yet ambitious: to develop a comprehensive plan to bring high-quality preschool programs to all 4-year-olds in Fresno County.

The seven-year plan, slated for release in August, recognizes that high-quality preschool can help us change the next generation of learners, break the repetitive cycle of poverty and reduce the dollars spent on incarceration and juvenile justice programs. The plan calls on the county to invest in quality preschools that prepare 4-year-olds for kindergarten and teach children to learn.

We have effectively forged a groundbreaking partnership that includes a diverse group of private, public, faith-based, state, federal and home day-care preschool programs.

The group's collective wisdom and goodwill was evident in its ability to think outside the traditional lines. They began by agreeing that children who start school behind stay behind, and if that cycle was to be broken, it would have to be done via preschool -- a place where true learning takes place.

As superintendent of schools, I know that timing is everything, and as far as fiscal resources go, now may not seem like an ideal time to invest in preschool. But it is more expensive to delay.

Despite budget shortfalls, nothing will keep us from moving forward with this important endeavor and implementing our action plan to ensure quality preschool for all 4-year-olds in our county. This is possible through the leadership and collaboration of Preschool California, Packard Foundation, First 5 Fresno County, the facilitation skills of child-care consultant Dr. Karen Hill-Scott and a strong team of local parents, school leaders, teachers, community volunteers, business leaders and elected officials.

New preschool data released by the RAND Corporation recently shows just how much we still need to do. It found that the California children who could benefit most are least likely to be in quality preschool.

The research showed that, at best, 15% of them are in high-quality programs that prepare children for kindergarten. This new RAND report confirmed what I already know from my work with children -- a very small percentage of the children who could benefit most are in

high-quality preschool programs that prepare them for success in K-12.

The study concluded that quality falls short across the board. There are few demographic or socioeconomic groups that, on average, are in high-quality programs that prepare them for kindergarten.

The report also found the quality of preschools in California is mixed. While many are engaging and emotionally supportive, they fall short on features that prepare children for kindergarten. We have compelling evidence of this right here in Fresno County. While many programs are exemplary and employ well-trained and qualified teachers, there is room for improvement.

There were also other challenges and opportunities revealed in the study. Just under half of 3- and 4-year-olds in economically disadvantaged families are in center-based preschool programs of any quality, compared with 70% of those in more affluent families.

Furthermore, Mexican-American, African-American and low-income parents reported the most difficulty finding the care they wanted, according to the parent survey.

As your county superintendent of schools, I firmly believe we must close the achievement gap by closing the readiness gap. It is our dream to level the playing field. To do so, we need to raise standards and lay the groundwork now for future investments, so that when more resources do become available, we will have a system that provides access to high-quality preschool for the kids who need it most. Only when we do this will all children start kindergarten ready to learn.

In the meantime, here are a few of the things parents should be looking for when they are shopping for a preschool:

- \* What kind of training and education do the teachers have?
- \* Are the teachers and kids engaged in conversations?
- \* Can teachers tell you not only what they are doing, but why?
- \* Does the program use a curriculum to guide learning?
- \* Does the program welcome and involve families?
- \* Does the space have separate learning centers (reading, art, dramatic play, writing, etc.) and a well-equipped playground?

The Fresno County Office of Education is committed to working with parents and our community to ensure the success of a long-term, voluntary preschool plan for all 4-year-olds. To that end, I am pleased to announce that the county office is adding an Early Care Division to help advance and accelerate our efforts. As the plan is completed and we move forward with the early implementation phases, we look forward to our community's support, feedback and participation.

To those who have so generously served on the planning committee, we say thank you. To those who will join us as we unveil the plan, we say -- welcome to preschool.