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Deborah Stipek: Transitional kindergarten has real value, don't give it up

By Deborah Stipek

Education cuts at any level are foolish in a state in which schools are already starving. While we need to balance California's budget, we also need to avoid cuts that will severely cost the state in the long run. Cutting funding for transitional kindergarten, as the governor proposes, may do just that.

In California, children are now required to enter kindergarten if they turn 5 years old by Sept. 1 rather than the previous date of Dec. 1. California legislators also created a year of transitional kindergarten for children who turn 5 between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2 to address these children's needs. But the governor's budget request eliminates funding for transitional kindergarten, turning a positive legislative decision into one that will harm the academic performance of California's children.

Without transitional kindergarten, children will be delayed access to formal education by three months, and 125,000 will lose a whole year. For a 5-year-old, this is a crucial time for laying the foundation for future learning. Research has shown that experience during the first five years of life have long-term effects on children's brains in ways that affect their learning long into their future. And when children enter school, their skills profoundly affect their ability to take advantage of the curriculum.

The return on early investment in education is substantial. The cost is paid back many times over in reduced grade retentions, special education services and in lower expenditures for incarceration. Returns also come in the form of the increased productivity that results from higher levels of academic achievement and high school completion rates.

What's more, transitional kindergarten produces jobs for teachers and local demands on goods and services, and it gives parents who cannot afford other forms of child care an opportunity to work.

To be sure, children gain some maturity in the three additional months they will have on average in California

before they begin kindergarten. But children make the most progress on academic skills in structured educational settings. Research shows that, on average, children who have been in center-based preschools have greater academic success than children who have experienced less formal early childhood settings. If we want to increase academic success, we need to get children into educational contexts sooner, not later.

For many low-income children who do not have access to quality preschool, transitional kindergarten could make the difference between success and failure. Given the governor's proposed elimination of 71,000 child care positions, removing funding for transitional kindergarten is a double whammy for children living in poverty.

Children from low-income families begin kindergarten, on average, at least a year behind middle-class children in basic academic skills, and most don't catch up. Entering skills are the best predictor of how well students will succeed in high school and their likelihood of dropping out. Moving kindergarten eligibility up by three months without providing children with another educational program is likely to increase the achievement gap between low-income and more affluent children.

California's students are already racing to the bottom in terms of academic achievement. In the 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress, our eighth-graders ranked 47th in math and 50th in literacy; only children in Mississippi and the District of Columbia had lower average literacy scores. But the real problem is that our children are not performing well enough to support an economically viable state. We're not just losing a race; we are losing our future. We should not make a disastrous situation worse by cutting funds that may provide the most benefit in the long run.

Deborah Stipek is former dean and a professor at the Stanford University School of Education. She wrote this article for this newspaper.