

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

OPINION

Investing in young children vital to our economic recovery

By Mark DeSaulnier and Susan Bonilla, guest commentary © 2013 Bay Area News Group

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Fifteen years ago this month, California voters expressed their desire for greater investment in early childhood when they approved Proposition 10, the tobacco tax that dedicates funding for health and education programs for children birth to age 5.

Even back then, the evidence was clear: how children grow and develop during their first five years affects them for the rest of their lives -- as future students, parents and workers.

Research from varied disciplines, including neuroscience, child development and economics, continues to show that children's earliest experiences -- both positive and adverse -- directly influence how their brains develop and whether they grow up healthy, prepared for school and successful later in life.

Thanks to Proposition 10, which created First 5 commissions in every California county to respond to local needs and invest in local solutions, our children are getting a better start at life.

Locally, First 5 Contra Costa has invested more than \$115 million to create a network of effective and essential services for our county's youngest residents.

As former members of the First 5 Contra Costa Commission, we are proud to have helped shape these services which now benefit thousands of Contra Costa children every year, such as:

- High-quality preschool for low-income children who otherwise would start kindergarten socially and cognitively behind their peers.
- Training and education for child care providers to ensure children receive the highest quality early care and education during their most important developmental period.
- Family support programs, including First 5 Centers and home visitation services, designed to prevent child abuse and support healthy child development.
- Intensive services for children at greatest risk for compromised development, including homeless children and those affected by parental substance abuse.

- Regular screening to detect and treat developmental delays or autism as early as possible, when intervention is most effective and least expensive.

We congratulate First 5 for creating a solid infrastructure of critical early childhood education, health, and family support services.

Programs like these not only help children become successful later in life, they also benefit society by leading to better health outcomes, higher earnings, and reduced spending on foster care, teen pregnancy and crime.

It has been widely documented that quality preschool alone is a sound investment, with as much as \$7 saved for every dollar spent.

But to fully realize the great gains to children and society that investments like these reap, we as a state and a nation must do even more to invest in young children and meet their needs.

California, home to one in eight of the nation's children, faces great challenges in the years ahead. One in four children, and nearly half of children age 3 and younger, live in poverty.

The effects of poverty on young children -- when 85 percent of brain development occurs -- can be lifelong, leading to a generation of Californians who may never live to their full potential.

Investing in children to build a more competent and competitive future workforce is every bit as feasible and worthy as investing in infrastructure like transportation or the environment.

President Barack Obama has proposed a significant increase in funding for preschool and voluntary home visiting programs for disadvantaged children. This shift in policy and long-standing federal funding would be transformative. It will produce individuals who achieve more, need less government support, and contribute to society. We encourage Congress to enact it.

First 5 has laid the groundwork in California, but it's time to take this effort to scale. There is too much evidence to ignore. Building a strong, competitive economy starts by investing in our youngest children.

Sen. Mark DeSaulnier and Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla both represent Contra Costa County in the state Legislature.