

Opinion: Time to support early childhood education

By Patrick Stelmach

While stumping across the nation recently in favor of early childhood education, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan discovered something interesting: More Republican governors than Democrats have increased funding at the state level for preschool programs.

Actually, this should come as no surprise. Strong early education programs enjoy majority support from Americans of every ideological bent – Democrats, Republicans, even self-identified Tea Party members support it. Why? Because providing a better, stronger education for our children is not a partisan issue.

Think about it. There is no Republican way to teach children how to read and there is no Democrat way to teach kids how to add and subtract. There is no Blue State way to teach geography and no Red State way to teach Social Studies. Education in America has always been a bipartisan effort.

But here's the problem. Democrat and Republican governors who want to provide expanded access to good childhood education programs face competition and constraints. Human service needs caused by the worst recession in more than a generation remain dire. Health care costs, exacerbated by our aging population, aren't going away. And good, quality pre-K programs – the kind every American would want their kids enrolled in – do not come cheap.

All of this spells the need for a new state-federal partnership. And that's the idea behind legislation filed this month in Congress. The Strong Start for America's Children Act, sponsored in the House by Reps. George Miller, D-

Martinez, and Richard Hanna, R-N.Y., and in the Senate by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, would help states and local school districts improve and expand high-quality, full-day preschool programs for 4-year-olds with the goal of making sure they are ready to learn.

The need for this is now – and any cop, prosecutor, business leader, teacher or economist can tell you why. When children participate in high-quality early learning programs in the first five years of life, they do better in school, get higher-paying jobs, rely less on social programs and contribute more to the economy. Such programs improve health; reduce the need for special education, educational remediation and welfare; reduce high school dropout, juvenile justice and incarceration rates; and increase home ownership, employment and economic productivity.

It's not just about helping children, although for many of us, that would be a desirable outcome by itself. It's also about making our economy stronger and our workers more capable of competing in a global economy. Think of the prosperity that will flow from a strong education system if the U.S. 10 years from now found herself with the world's best and strongest early childhood education programs.

So what can we do? A good place to start is to encourage Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, to climb on board and support the new legislation. It's an opportunity for Rep. McClintock to not only reflect the will of his constituents, but also bypass the partisan gridlock in Washington and do what's right for his district and for our children.

Patrick Stelmach is state organizer for California Fair Share. California Fair Share stands for an America where everyone gets their fair share, does their fair share, and pays their fair share; and where everyone plays by the same rules. Find out more online.