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Govs. Kean and Florio: Pre-K expansion funding should be a priority in state budget

BY STAR-LEDGER GUEST COLUMNIST

By Thomas H. Kean and James J. Florio

New Jersey's school funding formula should be a clear statement of our commitment to quality education, equality, and improving educational outcomes.

It is not.

It should establish our priorities for public education and goals for our children.

It does not.

Now the Legislature and Gov. Chris Christie are considering revising the formula. This debate will not focus on school aid funding levels. Instead it will focus on fairness but we will lose a great opportunity unless we also focus on the expansion of New Jersey's pre-K program for more three- and four-year-old children across the state.

New Jersey's existing high-quality preschool program is a uniquely New Jersey success story.

Experts and researchers agree, New Jersey's preschool program is among the highest -- if not the highest -- quality in the country. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the First Five Years Fund are a few of the organizations identifying real and lasting educational improvements resulting from our program.

The borough of Woodbine in Cape May County is a real-world success story. One of only 35 districts in New Jersey receiving state funding to provide preschool to every three- and four-year old in their community, Woodbine has seen its previously low-performing district turn around with significant school and student performance increases.

While the state's high-quality, pre-kindergarten program is a success, it is still only available to approximately 47,000 kids in only 35 school districts.

In 2008, the Legislature and governor included a provision in the state school aid formula law to expand New Jersey's state-funded, high-quality pre-K to nearly every community in the state. It was never funded.

If funded, 50,000 additional three- and four-year-old children, each year, would be attending the pre-K programs. It is past time to begin state funding for this critical educational investment.

Our youngest citizens are our state's future. No matter where they live or what district they reside, our kids' educational achievement should rise above politics.

That is why we -- a former Republican and former Democratic governor of New Jersey -- have joined together as members of the Pre-K Our Way Leadership Group. We know that expansion of pre-K to more communities will prepare the state's children for school, and get them ready for success.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this effort.

Tens of thousands of New Jersey citizens, the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey Chapter-American Academy of Pediatrics, and more than 50 other advocate organizations representing hundreds of thousands of their members (including all of the United Ways and the YMCAs in our state) have joined us in supporting state-funding for pre-K expansion.

We understand that this investment is critical to our future. As the Legislature and the governor come together to focus on the state school aid funding formula, we ask them to join these community leaders in every legislative district and every county of the state, to address the need for high-quality preschool in New Jersey and to begin to phase in an expansion of our state's high-quality pre-K program.

Let's invest now in our youngest citizens and in the state's future.

Thomas Kean, a Republican, was governor of New Jersey from 1982-1990.

James J. Florio, a Democrat, was governor of New Jersey from 1990-1994.