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4-year-old kindergarten op-ed

A tradition we should hold on to

by **Elizabeth Burmaster**, State Superintendent

We have a long and rich progressive tradition in Wisconsin that has always appreciated the importance of putting our children on the path to success early in life.

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In fact, in 1848 the Wisconsin constitution made a commitment to its people that schools should be as uniform as practical and free for all children starting at age 4.

The first kindergarten in the country was opened in Wisconsin in 1856 and the first public school kindergarten was opened in Wisconsin in 1873.

And today, the success of our public school classrooms is directly linked to the general readiness of all children to learn.

But last week, the Assembly Speaker's State Budget Review Task Force recommended breaking with tradition, calling for the elimination of the 4-year-old kindergarten program (4K) in Wisconsin.

My message to Assembly Speaker John Gard is simple -- balance the state budget with our shared value to put our youngest children first, and don't eliminate the 4-year-old kindergarten program in Wisconsin.

There are 174 school districts in Wisconsin that participate in the 4K program, serving over 16,000 students and 61 additional districts are actively looking at providing this opportunity to children in their community.

With 25 years of experience working in Wisconsin public schools, as both a teacher and administrator at every level, I know firsthand the importance of early childhood education.

Research on brain development has confirmed what parents and people who work with young children have known from experience; the future education and well being of a child is formed very early. In fact, the majority of brain development takes place within the first three years of life. Research has also shown that providing early learning experiences can have a dramatic effect on young children. Moreover, early childhood education and intervention programs may greatly reduce the need for costly additional education services later in a child's school experience.

Recent studies on early childhood education indicate that program



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participation beginning in preschool is associated with higher school achievement, higher rates of school completion through age 20, lower rates of school dropout, lower rates of juvenile arrest for violent and nonviolent charges, and less need for school remedial services.



That is why we must continue to provide our youngest children with every opportunity to reach their full potential. And that is why we must not allow legislative leaders to eliminate our investment in four-year old kindergarten in Wisconsin.

In tough times, priorities do matter and we must protect our priorities.

I believe that we need to increase our efforts as a state to narrow the achievement gap between children of color, economically disadvantaged children and their peers. We can do this by investing in the 4K programs to close the gap before it starts.

As your state superintendent, I will be working with Governor Doyle and the legislature, both Democrats and Republicans, to make sure that we prioritize in these tough times of shared sacrifice and continue to invest in early childhood opportunities.

I remain committed to continuing our efforts to engage communities in strategic planning to shift the community value and culture to prevention based systems that recognize the important role the whole community plays in establishing support to maintain stable families and healthy children.

Wisconsin has long been a national leader in providing early learning opportunities through four-year old kindergarten. In communities across our state we have very exciting public/private collaborations in early childhood education that are helping to ensure the quality of the learning experience.

As a state, we must continue to invest our resources in the front end of the education continuum as it is these early learning opportunities that truly return the most for our investment.

All our children deserve the same chance to make the most of their talents and rise to their dreams. That's the great promise we have always made in Wisconsin.

It is now our job to make sure we keep it.

Elizabeth Burmaster, Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction, is chair of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Task Force on Early Childhood Learning

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