

State schools' chief unveils preschool program during visit to Seaside

O'Connell visits center in Seaside

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State schools chief Jack O'Connell visited a Seaside preschool center Wednesday to push his plan to create the country's largest program serving pre-kindergarten students.

O'Connell, a former high school teacher and state lawmaker in his second term as state schools superintendent, had plenty of help at the Juan Cabrillo Head Start Center in emphasizing the importance of preparing young children well before they start kindergarten.

County Superintendent of Schools Nancy Kotowski and District Attorney Dean Flippo joined O'Connell in stressing the importance of good preschool programs to produce good students and good community members.

"It's just absolutely critical we provide quality preschool access to our children," O'Connell said. "We must close the 'readiness gap.'"

Several studies have shown that children who attend good preschool programs are better prepared to enter school and to make the most of their education opportunities, speakers said.

About 120 parents, students and preschool educators jammed a meeting room at the LaSalle

Avenue preschool to hear O'Connell outline his plan to consolidate all state and federal preschool programs operating in California into one program.

That would save money and streamline the programs, making them serve students better and provide sorely needed room for more students. O'Connell expressed confidence his plan will win legislative approval because it doesn't need additional money.

The programs, which mainly serve low-income parents, are far too few to serve all the children in California who would be eligible.

In Monterey County, about 1,250 children attend preschool programs at 26 sites throughout the county.

But that enrollment represents a small percentage of children who could attend, said county Head Start Director Esther Rubio.

"We can't reach all the children," she said.

As O'Connell visited three classrooms where youngsters were working on art projects, including silver-sparkled Valentine cards, county school board member Harvey Kuffner told O'Connell that between 5,000 and 8,000 county children qualify for preschool programs.

"It begins at the beginning," Kotowski said. She said it is "a moral imperative" to expand preschool access to create the foundation for California students to close the "achievement gap" in later grades.

O'Connell said making preschool programs more available is an economic imperative, too, because learning social and educational skills at a young age helps students continue to learn through their school years.

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Flippo said good preschool programs "are one of the best crime-prevention tools we have."

Children in preschool learn to solve disputes peacefully, Flippo said. The community can't afford long waiting lists on which too many children languish without getting into preschool, he said.

"Quality preschools save lives and money," the district attorney said.

O'Connell acknowledged his consolidation plan wouldn't immediately open up many more slots around the state in preschool centers. But it would streamline programs, eliminate duplication and improve quality, he said.

"Eventually we hope to focus on quantity," he said.

This month, O'Connell released a set of "preschool foundations," uniform benchmarks for preschool programs. They will provide a framework to help guide preschool educators, he said.

The schools chief delivered his annual state of education address Jan 22. In addition to his preschool reform plan, O'Connell called for better partnerships between school districts and communities, a close look at racial and cultural issues affecting education, and higher standards for schools that receive annual distinguished school designations.

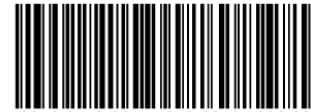
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