Early education a good investment for South Carolina

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If you're sick, you probably go to a doctor for a professional opinion and follow his advice. If you're really sick, you might get a second opinion.

But you don't go around to dozens of doctors seeking the opinion you're looking for. That's just not smart. In the meantime, you get sicker.

With South Carolina's public education system, it sometimes seems the lawmakers who make decisions on education don't listen to the pros -- people who teach every day and who deal with educational challenges every hour. Instead, they keep looking for political solutions they like -- vouchers, charter schools, uniforms, more discipline, later start dates.

But a new ongoing study by Furman University's Riley Institute is powerful evidence that lawmakers need to listen more to the people who are involved daily with education.

According to the Furman study, 49 out of 50 South Carolina superintendents agree with this statement: "The sooner a student gets in a structured education program, the more likely that student will stay in school and succeed."

These superintendents believe it is important or essential for South Carolina to offer full-day kindergarten programs and early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Last year, state lawmakers were on pins and needles about a pending decision in a school equity lawsuit brought by eight poor school districts that said they weren't getting their fair share of school resources to provide a decent education to students. After a highly visible trial of more than 100 days, lawmakers expected a ruling that would force them to do what should have been done years ago -- fund poor school districts at a higher level so they can offer better tools to the mostly rural student population.

Legislators dodged the bullet at the end of 2005 after state Judge Thomas Cooper ruled the state needed to pay for early childhood education for kids in poverty, but didn't give a monetary remedy to the decision. Despite crumbling schools and districts that need better teachers, Cooper also surprised many by ruling the state provided safe facilities and "minimally competent teachers."
Bottom line: Instead of having to come up with a billion dollars to right past public education wrongs, Cooper's ruling kept most things about the same and lawmakers really didn't have to do much at all.

Sure, there was some talk about "doing the right thing" for poor students. But look at what's happened: The state has $925 million in "new" money that it is considering as part of the $6.5 billion state budget. Of that, $383 million is new recurring revenue and $426 million is surplus revenue.

In an amazing display of political arrogance or brazen blindness, the House approved a budget that included $6 million -- yes, a whopping $6 million -- for a pilot project for 4-year-old kindergarten in a handful of poor districts. Talk about ignoring a festering problem.

The Senate, now considering the budget, says it can "find" $24 million to boost 4-K programs, which led a House committee to agree the amount could help 11,361 poor children in 36 districts.

Earth to legislators: There are about 56,000 students in the state who could benefit from a solid 4-K program. About 31,000 of them are considered "at risk." Two-thirds of those aren't in any kind of 4-K program.

To fund a program for all 4-year-olds and really do the right thing, the state would spend about $150 million a year. To fund a program for just those kids at risk who aren't in existing programs, as called for in March by the state Education Oversight Committee, the state would have to spend up to $85 million annually in teaching and accountability programs.

South Carolina has limped along for years with inadequate funding for great public schools throughout the state. Instead of continuing the game of "getting by" and breathing a sigh of relief when Judge Cooper didn't order a billion dollars worth of changes, the state needs to be proactive by fully funding 4-K education. Then, lawmakers need to work on comprehensive 3-K education.

It's time to listen to professionals, such as the superintendents in the Furman study. It's time to really invest in South Carolina's future.

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