

Governor signs early childhood education bill ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Marisol Baird said her young children, 17-month-old Norah and 4-year-old Liam, don't yet understand the significance of a bill the governor signed into law during a news conference the family attended Tuesday at the state Capitol.

"Someday they will see the results pay off," Baird said of House Bill 83, which establishes an endowment to help fund early childhood programs throughout New Mexico. "And hopefully for their children, it will be even better."

Surrounded by Cabinet secretaries, lawmakers, parents and kids as she signed the new Early Childhood Trust Fund, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said, "This is a victory for families and children."

The fund will kick off with an appropriation of \$320 million in fiscal year 2021 and will be sustained in future years by oil- and gas-related revenue sources. It is designed to provide regular distributions to the state's new Early Childhood Education and Care Department to support expansions of public and private programs for New Mexico's youngest residents — from prenatal to 5-year-olds.

In its first years, the fund is expected to provide an estimated \$20 million annually for services such as home visiting for new parents, day care and prekindergarten. Within a decade, as the fund grows, it could distribute as much as \$50 million per year, the governor said.

Lujan Grisham's celebration of the effort to increase investments in early childhood programs — which advocates say have a range of benefits, from child health and education outcomes to economic measures — came as a similar initiative was awaiting approval in the Senate.

House Joint Resolution 1 would raise some \$76 million a year.

But it's unclear if the measure has a chance to survive the session before it ends at noon Thursday.

Similar House proposals — allowing voters to decide whether to approve a constitutional amendment to let the state make further withdrawals from a multibillion-dollar investment fund — have been blocked for years in the Senate. Opponents say more distributions from the Land Grant Permanent Fund, a now nearly \$20 billion endowment that benefits public schools and other institutions, would threaten to erode it.

The Senate Rules Committee approved a slimmed-down version of HJR 1 this week, and it now faces a vote in the Senate Finance Committee, which has one more meeting planned Wednesday.

Lujan Grisham threw her support behind legislation in the 2019 session that would have let voters decide whether to fund early childhood programs using the permanent fund. This year, she has focused instead on ensuring passage of the new trust.

On Tuesday, the governor said, "I'm gonna keep pushing" for that resolution — even if that means waiting until next year's legislative session.

But for now, she said, she's celebrating "getting this one [HB 83] over the finish line early."

While the House and Senate voted by wide majorities to support HB 83, it did face an obstacle. The House cut the early education fund's initial appropriation by \$20 million in the overall state spending bill, House Bill 2, before sending it to the Senate.

State Sen. John Arthur Smith, D-Deming, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and a co-sponsor of HB 83, announced Tuesday the committee had restored the \$20 million.

Smith credited Rep. Doreen Gallegos, D-Las Cruces, the other co-sponsor, with prodding him to introduce HB 83.

Gallegos said she had been terrified of asking Smith, a powerful lawmaker known to be a fiscal conservative, for help with the legislation. Her husband had to push her into Smith's office and close the door behind her to force a debate on the issue, she told the crowd Tuesday.

Smith has been one of the staunchest opponents of the repeated efforts by more progressive lawmakers to draw money from the Land Grant Permanent Fund for early childhood services.

He did not return a call Tuesday seeking comment on whether he would approve the scaled-down proposal the Senate Rules Committee passed Monday.

While the initial proposal sought a 1 percent withdrawal from the permanent fund, the amended resolution calls for annual distributions of 0.5 percent. The measure also calls for suspending distributions if the endowment's balance falls below \$17 billion.

Lujan Grisham has made the expansion of early childhood programs a cornerstone of her education platform.

Baird, who works for United Way of Santa Fe County and sends her two children to pre-K classes at the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe, said she is seeing the results of such programs. Liam knows the letters of the alphabet and is learning simple math concepts such as addition, she said, adding her son also is learning to interact and get along with other children.

"For a working mother, placing my children in an environment with well-trained teachers and a high-quality education makes all the difference," she said. "For me, it's much more than a traditional education. It's nurturing."

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