

Newsom likely to focus on preschools

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Looking for a big difference between incoming Gov. Gavin Newsom and current Gov. Jerry Brown, who will be termed out after 24 years in statewide office?

Look no further than preschool. The need for better, more universal preschool was a constant theme for the two years Newsom spent campaigning for the office he has long coveted. “This is when brains develop the most,” he said in an interview early in his drive for office. “If we want to develop people optimally, we need to start paying attention to children long before they reach kindergarten.”

Newsom sounded a lot like the father of young children as he spoke, and he is — his four kids with actress and second wife Jennifer Siebel are aged 2 to 9. His feelings on brain development may also be influenced by his own dyslexia, which he discusses openly and has made a pet cause.

So devoted is he to the cause of universal preschool that the governor-elect made it the theme of his first TV commercial this fall — his introduction to many voters who had not paid much attention to state politics until Election Day grew near.

It’s not just preschool Newsom says he’ll stress. His vision begins before birth and reaches through high school and college. Some have called his approach “cradle to career,” a phrase he relishes.

It's hard to argue with the notion of making prenatal care and preschool high priorities, especially after a recent analysis by researchers at Stanford University and the Palo Alto-based Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE).

"California's lag in academic achievement arises before children enter the schoolhouse door," wrote the research group. It referred in large part to the fact this state trails others in closing the achievement gap between white and Asian children and those who are black or Latino.

Newsom told the EdSource information group that California and the nation need "a new way of thinking about education as a lifetime pursuit. Our role begins when babies are still in the womb and doesn't end until we've done all we can to prepare them for a quality job and successful career."

So far, Newsom has not proposed any specific programs to achieve his vision, but it's clear government spending on education can change outcomes. The Stanford-PACE report found spending \$1,000 more per student at the high school level produced "significant increases in high school graduation rates and academic achievement, particularly among poor and minority students."

As a candidate, Newsom suggested a data system tracking Californians from early childhood through college, aiming to get school districts and college systems to work together. Newsom also embraces community schools offering health care and social services in addition to the usual academics.

To meet his aims, Newsom might seek a major reorganization of California's educational establishment, with school districts and even preschools somehow combining into one system along with university and community college systems. It's possible this could result in an "education czar," but Newsom has not proposed that and likely would have a tough time getting that notion through the Legislature.

Newsom will surely have to become more specific as his transition staff works on the next budget. But his first commercial laid out a central mission he sees as the key to this state's future. "To renew the California dream, we need to renew our promise to our children, the promise that every single baby will have prenatal care, every toddler can attend preschool, every student has access to high-quality after-school programs, every graduate has meaningful job training and work opportunities," he intoned.

That will not only take reorganization of the education establishment, but also a lot of money. Look to that first budget for clues on how Newsom's ideas might look in the real world.

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