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## Guest view: Early investment in kids ultimately pays dividends

We have more reason to be optimistic about the future of the San Joaquin Valley today than we have in years, as Stockton emerges from bankruptcy and our region's economy revives.

A critical way to ensure we continue this forward momentum? Focus on our preschoolers.

Earlier this week, business and education leaders in our community came together to discuss how we can ensure the health and education of our children. As a mother and a taxpayer, I believe there is no more important single factor in our long-term economic stability.

Neuroscientists and education researchers tell us that early childhood is a period of astonishing brain growth and development, when children build — or fail to build — the foundational skills they need to become successful students.

We can draw a compelling line from children's earliest experiences to their future achievement as citizens and workers. Too often in San Joaquin County, that line has had a bleak trajectory. Only 34 percent of local 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, only one in three of our third graders can read at grade level, and only half of the parents in our region say they read to their kids daily.

If we want more of our young people to earn high school diplomas, graduate from college and get good jobs or launch businesses, this is where we start.

That's because children who don't have access to preschool and other early learning experiences may start kindergarten 18 months behind their peers. And the children who are behind when they start kindergarten become the third graders who cannot read proficiently and the adolescents who drop out of high school.

Investing in our preschoolers is good business. One study found that a \$6,692 investment in preschool resulted in a lifetime societal benefit of \$69,937, factoring in home ownership, salaries, reduced incarceration rates and improved health. That's a 10:1 return on investment.

The savings start immediately. Parents and employers benefit right away when families have access to high-quality child care. Moms and dads miss less work. They're more productive on the job. And they're more loyal to their employers.

There are many ways for businesses to help. Here are three that were explored at the June 15 BizEd Summit, sponsored by University of the Pacific, First 5 San Joaquin and San Joaquin A+, with additional support from Wells Fargo.

- Adopt family-friendly practices
- Provide time, volunteers, expertise and funding to local early childhood programs, such as those listed at [go.pacific.edu/supportliteracy](http://go.pacific.edu/supportliteracy)
- Give employees information about the importance of early childhood and what they can do at home to support healthy growth and development. Working together, we can help all of our children start kindergarten ready to learn to read. It's the surest way to make certain our region will have the high-performing employees and engaged citizens we need to keep our economy healthy.

*— Jennifer Torres Siders is community relations director at University of the Pacific and a children's book author.*



Jennifer Torres, community relations director at University of the Pacific, reads from the children's book she wrote "Finding The Music" at the Cesar Chavez Main Library in downtown Stockton on April 30. CLIFFORD OTO/THE RECORD