

Your Turn: Federal Glover

Picking On The Most Vulnerable – Child Welfare Cuts

By Supervisor Federal Glover

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Nearly one in four students will drop out of high school in California. In some Contra Costa communities, the drop-out rate is as high as 40 percent. That was the alarming news in the Times last week.

The alarming news this week is that one of the most successful state programs addressing the achievement gap is under attack.

Sacramento-area state Sen. Dave Cox has proposed legislation to abolish the First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission and the 57 other such commissions throughout the state by seizing its funding and using it to expand a state entitlement program.

What Cox fails to realize is that children who enter school without the skills they need to be successful run a significant risk of starting behind and staying behind.

As a county supervisor, I represent the county on the First 5 Contra Costa Commission. It was created in 1999, following the passage of Proposition 10, which imposed a 50-cent tax on packages of tobacco products. The revenue funds early development programs for children in the first five years of life. Eighty percent of the money goes to commissions in each county — called "First 5 Commissions" — with 20 percent going to the state commission.

The programs funded by Prop. 10 and First 5 Commissions in every county meet needs that no other state programs can and provide critical services otherwise not available. That's because the funds invested by each county commission are specific to the needs of that county — not state mandates or top-down directives.

Our local Prop. 10 Commission is no exception. It has allocated more than \$64 million in the last eight years to a comprehensive range of services targeting low-income children and at-risk families. Some of these valuable services include in-home parenting support for new mothers, school readiness preschools that help children acquire essential building blocks for learning, and screening and treatment for children with mental health issues and developmental problems. If addressed early, these services can increase children's chances of leading successful lives and prevent the need for costly public health services down the road.

Tobacco revenue is a declining resource. Yet Cox has repeatedly criticized First 5 Commissions for saving to ensure funds are available in the future. The rest of us would call this responsible.

In fact, prudent fiscal planning has enabled First 5 Contra Costa to not only avoid cuts to critically important programs as revenues decline, but to intensify efforts to reach our county's neediest children. Just this month, First 5 Contra Costa launched a new \$1.4 million, three-year program to provide home visiting services to underserved expecting and new parents in Richmond and San Pablo and opened a new family center in Bay Point.

First 5 Commissions are locally accountable and manage their budgets responsibly. To permanently end the only program targeted uniquely to prevention and early intervention programs for children is a mistake, the results of which will be felt for years to come.

With one-quarter of all high-school students dropping out in California, we can't afford to bankrupt our future by eliminating crucial First 5 Contra Costa programs to balance the state's budget.

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