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Editorial: State's little learners have a good year

Finally the Legislature takes early education seriously.

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On state government balance sheets, \$23 million is not a lot of money. But as applied strategically to early childhood learning by the 2006 Legislature, that modest sum stands to make a big impact.

After several disheartening sessions for little learners, a corner was turned this year. Gov. Tim Pawlenty finally found \$10.5 million in early childhood investments he could embrace. The Legislature's bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus swelled to include more than half of both the House and Senate, making the issue among the session's priorities.

Surprisingly, the Republican governor's early childhood bill faltered in the Republican-controlled House. But that was not the end of the story. The persistent and skillful chair of the Senate's early childhood funding committee, retiring Sen. John Hottinger, DFL-St. Peter, wasn't about to leave the Legislature without a win for little kids. He pushed for an investment large enough to undo the child care subsidy cuts of 2003 and 2005 that were forcing day care centers to close in low-income communities around the state.

Hottinger's claim that Minnesotans want government to promote better preschool and child care was bolstered by a good and timely poll commissioned by the Every Child Matters Education Fund and the Minnesota Children's Platform.

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The poll, conducted May 1-3 among 625 likely general election voters, found a widespread sense that children have not fared well in the state in the last four years. The well-being of children and youth easily outpolled high taxes, immigration and homeland security as the most important issue for government to address this year. What's more, 83 percent of those polled said they want access to early care and education expanded.

The measure approved by the Legislature last weekend moves in that direction and sets the stage for more progress. It provides enough support to the existing child care system to stop its deterioration. And it takes preliminary steps to improve the education available to all preschoolers, whether they spend their days at home or elsewhere. The 2007 Legislature should come to the Capitol eager to take the next steps.

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