

## Susan True: Junior Kindergarten builds a bridge to success

As summer draws to a close and families begin preparing for the first day of school, 4-year-olds with late summer and fall birthdays will benefit from a new Junior Kindergarten class that builds a bridge to kindergarten and helps ensure our children will succeed in early elementary school and beyond.

The two-year Junior Kindergarten pilot program at Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary School provides our youngest kindergartners, those born between July 1 and Dec. 2, 2005, with an extra year of preparation.

Junior Kindergarten is an opportunity to make the first five years count, laying an important foundation for our children's future learning and success. First 5 Santa Cruz County is proud to be supporting the program through professional development, facility upgrades and curriculum design.

The new Junior Kindergarten classroom in the Soquel Union Elementary School District is opening at the same time a bill at the state level, Senate Bill 1381 by Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, aims to address a similar challenge. California's children currently begin kindergarten at a younger age -- some as young as 4 years old -- than kids in almost any other state, often before they have the maturity and the social, early literacy and pre-math skills they need to meet the challenges of kindergarten.

SB 1381 would change the kindergarten entry date in California from 5 years old by Dec. 2 to 5 years old by Sept. 1, so all children enter kindergarten at age 5. This would generate savings that could be used to provide 4-year-olds with birthdays between September and December with an additional year of preparation for kindergarten. This transitional kindergarten would provide 120,000 4-year-olds with high-quality early learning.

SB 1381 is sorely needed because California is one of only four states that allow children as young as 4 years old to attend kindergarten, even as we have some of the highest standards for what we expect our children to learn in our kindergarten classrooms.

Additionally, research shows that moving the kindergarten entry date up increases test scores by as much as 27 percent, helping to close the achievement gap. Studies also show children who attend high quality early learning programs are less likely to drop out of high school, be held back a grade or placed in special education, and are more likely to score better on reading and math achievement tests.

Santa Cruz Gardens Junior Kindergarten teacher, Michelle McBride, is an experienced kindergarten teacher with a background in early childhood education, and will offer children an opportunity to explore and further develop their social, emotional and academic skills through hands-on activities. Junior Kindergartners will share a playground with the school's 48 preschoolers, and will regularly interact with kindergartners to help develop their leadership skills and confidence.

With 23 children already enrolled and 16 children on the waiting list for Junior Kindergarten, school officials are looking forward to expanding the program next year to serve more children. At the same time, I urge state policymakers to support SB 1381 so that we can provide more children across California the opportunity to learn and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Susan True is executive director of First 5 Santa Cruz County.