We must invest in our children, even in a time of austerity!

Two years ago I retired from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine as a professor of pediatrics and associate dean. I enrolled in UNM's law school with a goal of helping to improve our health care system when I graduate.

I recently visited New Mexico Voices for Children as part of my child law class. In addition to being reminded of what a positive impact groups like Voices can have on the children of New Mexico, a former colleague from UNM working at Voices suggested I keep in mind the opportunity to comment to the community through venues such as the editorial section of the newspaper.

My comments come with a sense of urgency because I continually read in the newspaper and hear on the news of the hard choices we must make to balance the budget so as to secure our future.

"We must all tighten our belts and do this for the good of society" is the message that is continually made as though a drum was slowly but repetitively being beaten in the background.

Well instead of that message, let us think again about what the investment needs to be so the payoff is sustainable and totally enriching for the population of New Mexico.

Let us invest in our children. The greatest truths need to be repeated in an ongoing and positive fashion.

I am a product of a nation that chose in the 1960s to make greater investments in the education of those who lived in poverty. My family had limited resources, but the U.S. government and public universities invested in me. I attended Purdue University, a land grant university established in 1869 through Congress' Morrill Act to enrich the education of the populous.

My education and the medical service that followed were only possible because in the end, the best way to alleviate poverty is to educate children. The return on investment is beyond measure and it is sustainable.

In addition, we must be patient in expectations of outcomes.

From studies done in the United States, we know that when pregnant mice are placed in a hostile environment, their offspring are greatly harmed as they sense the cruelty of the world they are about to enter. If the harm is removed, it still takes four generations for the negative impact on development, including an increased risk of diabetes, to wash away.

If instead, you enrich the world the offspring come into during the earliest phases of growth and development, the negative effects can be removed during the first generation and healthy generations can follow.

We have the tools to make the world better for our children early in their lives when there will be profound returns on investment.

The huge positive outcomes of spending our money now to prevent long-term negative
consequences must be pushed to the top of our choices rather than going for an immediate return by cutting services.

We know how to support women during pregnancy, how to help children and families flourish and how to educate our children. Let us do for the current and future generations what our forefathers (and mothers) did: Invest in the children.

I will end with two specific facts: It costs 10 times more to incarcerate young people than to invest in them during their early childhood. What a return on investment! And, second, when we know that 1 in 3 children are now on track to acquire diabetes, it is our duty to them to help prevent this from happening.

Let us invest in our children, even in a time of austerity!