

Kara Johnson: Are leaders getting the message?

Recently, in a San Antonio Express News story that ran all across the state, a former head of the U.S. Census Bureau and former State Demographer, Steve Murdock, called on Texas to do more to prepare preschool-age children before they enter kindergarten so they will not drop out later. According to Dr. Murdock, the direction the state is heading in will result in 3 out of every 10 workers not having a high school education by 2040.

Terrifying predictions about the future aside, Texas is facing an education crisis right now. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated that the averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) in every major Texas cities is below 70%. In Dallas the AFGR is 44.4%.

In the article, Bill Hammond, former Texas Workforce Commissioner (TWC) and current President of the Texas Association of Business (TAB) came out definitively on the side of supporting improved education in Texas, saying, "Every kid deserves to be educated, and we're going to figure out what it takes and do it." The Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition applauds Mr. Hammond for his remarks and for his leadership on education in Texas, particularly on early education. We are hoping that his energy and enthusiasm will catch on among other business leaders, as well Texas candidates and policymakers.

With just four months until Election Day, too many elected officials and candidates are silent on this education and workforce crisis. The time for solutions and problem solving is now. Texas voters deserve to hear from candidates on how we are going to solve our problems in education.

Our state has the largest and fastest growing early childhood population in the country. Unfortunately, only half of Texas children entering kindergarten, at all income levels, have acceptable literacy skills as measured through basic screenings. Because research indicates that 85% of human brain development occurs before age 5, we know that skills gaps in the early years can translate to lifelong struggles in learning and behavior for individuals. We cannot solve our educational crisis in Texas without a strong and committed investment in our youngest Texans. For every year that we ignore this fact, we ultimately prolong the problems our public schools are facing now.

Ultimately, Texas taxpayers will pay the largest price tomorrow for a lack of action on early education today. We will pay more dollars later in incarceration, remediation, social welfare, and special education if we fail to invest in young children today.

The business community in Texas is speaking out because they understand the basic concept of investing early for long term success. They know that when starting a long term project, precision, care, and investment are critical elements at the start to ensure a productive future for any idea or venture. Unfortunately public policy does not always follow that model. Although the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University found that for every \$1.00 we invest in high quality early education at least \$3.50 is returned in savings to

our local Texas communities, our state continues to spend three times as much on programs to remediate problems than we spend on effective prevention strategies.

Our coalition hopes that our elected leaders are listening to experts like Dr. Murdock and Mr. Hammond. A leading demographer and a key leader of the business community see where Texas is headed, if we fail to improve our education system. Policymakers will have to make very difficult funding decisions in the upcoming 82nd Texas Legislature, due to a projected \$15-\$20 billion dollar deficit. It is paramount, however, that we protect early education because it works, it saves taxpayer dollars, and without it our greatest challenges will worsen.

Can Texas remain economically viable with less than half of its workforce holding a high school diploma? The answer is clearly, no. The question in 2011 is whether or not leaders will protect early care and education investments in order to prevent this from happening.

More information on high-quality early education is available at www.tecec.org

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