

Investing in Our Youngest Texans Makes Financial Cents

By J.R. Gonzales

In a state that has the fastest growing child population in the country, the 10th largest economy in the world, and a “baby boom” generation about to retire from the workforce, we must ensure Texas remains competitive in the future.

According to state demographers, we are going to see three major changes occur within the next 30 years. First, the population of Texas is expected to double. Second, the Hispanic population will become the majority. Third, child poverty rates are expected to soar.

As a result, we have a responsibility as Texans to prepare the workforce of tomorrow. As a business owner for more than 20 years in Texas, and Past President of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, I have seen these issues firsthand from a national and state perspective and want to see a workforce with the skills to ensure that Texas maintains its competitive edge in the future.

The research is clear. We can get there by investing in high quality early education settings such as child care, Head Start, and public pre-k. According to the Bush School of Government and Public Policy at Texas A&M University, every \$1.00 invested in high quality pre-kindergarten saves Texas communities at least \$3.50.

Where will Texans see these savings? In the short term, we will experience reduced special education costs to school districts and increased income for mothers as they enter the workforce. In the long term, we see decreased dropout rates, savings to the juvenile and adult justice systems, and increased earnings from participants.

These savings are even more compelling when we take into account that the fastest growing population in the state also has the highest dropout rates. In 2005, Hispanic students were 25% more likely than African American students and 350% more likely than white students to drop out of school.

With the overall school age population on the rise and our Hispanic population growing by as much as 400% over the next 30 years, educators must be prepared to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of Texas’ children.

Right now, legislators are in Austin considering multiple bills related to the expansion and enhancement of pre-kindergarten programs. We all need to ask our policymakers to support increased investments in pre-k programs, which are proven to prepare our young children for school success while strengthening the economy of our state.

This investment will return billions of dollars back to the Texas economy over the next 30 years while creating a diverse, highly skilled, and educated workforce.

The good news is that pre-kindergarten is a social and economic issue strongly supported by both Republicans and Democrats in the Texas House and Senate. During the last special legislative session on public school finance, the Texas Legislature passed with bi-partisan support expanded eligibility of the pre-kindergarten program to include military families.

The choice is clear. We can invest our resources in pre-kindergarten programs that are fiscally responsible and prepare the workforce of tomorrow. Or, we can miss this critical window of opportunity. What makes the most financial sense to you? I know my answer.

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