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Kara Johnson: Pre-k is the Solution Policymakers Have Been Asking For

As lawmakers grapple with the largest budget crisis in modern history, programs most important to Texans are disappearing before our very eyes. One of these programs is pre-k. While the half-day program is not on the chopping block, the proven pre-k reform programs that enable school districts to offer full day pre-k are in jeopardy of being eliminated.

Why should taxpayers care about pre-k? Texas has the fastest growing educationally disadvantaged population in the country. In the 2009-2010 school year, the Texas pre-k school population jumped by more than 14,000 students and this increase is expected to continue.

The good news is that in 2003 Texas policymakers found a bipartisan solution to this looming crisis that would have cost millions in taxpayer dollars and impacted the future economic viability of the state. Lawmakers came together to create what is now a nationally recognized pre-k reform program that prepares children to enter kindergarten school-ready and remain successful throughout school and life.

After two federal reviews, multiple peer reviewed journal articles, and a cost-benefit analysis conducted by the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, Texans have proof that these pre-k reform programs are a wise and sound investment. Not only are we seeing a difference in early grade retention rates, but students graduating from these pre-k reform programs score more than 22 percentage points higher than the statewide average on reading assessments administered upon entry into kindergarten.

Now is the time to ask your elected officials where they stand on pre-k. Since the beginning of the legislative session, policymakers have been asking for the most cost-effective solutions to reform the K-12 system in a tough budget year. You can tell them that not only do the per-classroom, per-student costs of the pre-k programs decline every year, but these programs have been proven to lay the foundation for K-12 reforms by reducing dropout rates and closing the growing achievement gap.

Legislators can also rest assured that they are supported by the business community on this issue. The Texas Association of Business and Raise Your Hand Texas are speaking out in support of the continued investment in Texas' pre-k reform programs. According to Bill Hammond, President and CEO of the Texas Association of Business, pre-k reform programs are a prerequisite for prosperity in the state of Texas. Along with his colleagues, Bill recognizes the critical role that pre-k programs play in preparing the Texas workforce of tomorrow.

History demonstrates that economic recovery requires both a reduction in spending as well as an investment strategy. Pre-k is the proven investment strategy that legislators are looking for this session. Now is the time to stand firm in support of pre-k reform programs that drive student achievement, lead to economic development and growth, and ensure accountability of Texas taxpayer dollars.

Kara Johnson is president and CEO of the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition (TECEC).