

A Book a Day Keeps the Doctor Away

By Mindy Gomillion

Studies demonstrate that children enrolled in high quality early childhood education programs are more likely to be healthy, have access to health care, attend annual doctor visits, and report higher rates of physical and mental health later in life than children that have limited or no access to the same quality care. Those same children are also more likely to have better school attendance rates, fewer referrals to special education classes, decreased high school drop out rates, and experience increased college attendance rates.

In a state that contains five of the ten least literate cities in the country, including Garland, Arlington, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and El Paso, Texas cannot delay in addressing the early education needs of its youngest citizens. As the state continues to produce large numbers of unskilled and uneducated workers, Texas continues to lag behind the rest of the nation in the economic development necessary to attract large businesses and secure a competitive workforce.

Currently, approximately one in four adults living in Texas reads below the 5th grade level. In addition, Texas state demographers project by 2040 that 30% of the labor force in Texas will not have a high school diploma. These projections will have negative implications for the future economy of the state, which is dependent upon a knowledge and skills-based workforce.

So, how do we ensure that Texas children are healthier and better educated in the future? Research indicates that children are born learning and that brain development occurs at a faster rate during the first five years of a child's life than any other developmental period. Therefore, we must invest in early education programs that have been proven effective in setting the foundation for later success in school and life, such as Child Care, Head Start, and the Public Pre-k program. Many people may be less familiar with voluntary support programs such as Docs for Tots, Healthy Child Care Texas, and Reach Out and Read, that have a significant impact on the health and literacy skills of many young children.

Reach Out and Read (ROR), for example, is a national pediatric literacy program offered in communities across

the state. ROR trains doctors and nurses to advise parents about the importance of reading aloud, and give books to children at pediatric check-ups from 6 months to 5 years of age, with a special focus on children growing up in poverty. Our mission is to make early literacy a standard part of pediatric primary healthcare in Texas. As a result of ROR's incredible partnerships across the state, healthcare providers distribute more than 350,000 books to children in community health centers, children's hospitals, and pediatric practices across Texas each year.

What we know as a result of our work is that parents are three times more likely to read with their child if a doctor has "prescribed" reading during a routine well check up. Most importantly, children served by the ROR program show an increase of 4-8 points on vocabulary tests. For a two-year-old child, this increase represents an approximate six-month gain, developmentally speaking, preventing the "falling behind" observed and measured in low-income children.¹

Programs that focus on the early developmental needs of children, including their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical health, play a critical role in ensuring that the Texans of tomorrow are healthy and well educated, leading to a strong and productive workforce. We must employ all Texans in this important endeavor, or we will all experience the repercussions of living in a state that produces an unskilled and uneducated workforce that cannot compete in a global economy. I know I want a better future for the children of Texas. What about you?

Mindy Gomillion is the Executive Director of Capital Area Reach Out and Read, an organization dedicated to promoting early literacy via health care settings with a focus on children who have limited access to books. For more information visit <http://www.reachoutandreadtexas.org/>.
