



Kara Johnson: Smart investments will save our schools.

The high school dropout crisis is one of the most important issues facing Texas communities. Research indicates that nearly one-fifth of Texas high schools have graduation rates of less than 60%. As the state with the fastest growing population of children in the country, Texas stands to lose quite a bit if this crisis is not confronted with a clear and effective response.

Throughout Texas, school districts are now facing threats of federal sanctions for failures to meet standards set in place by the No Child Left Behind Act. High school graduation and middle school attendance rates factor into districts' struggles to meet federal accountability standards.

Long-term solutions are required for a problem of this magnitude. With 1 in 3 Texas youth dropping out of high school, we must look to policies that are proven to succeed.

The Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, which includes 250 different Texas organizations, wants leaders to know that when it comes to improving graduation rates, high-quality early education is a proven and effective tool.

Because early education builds a strong foundation for learning later in life, investing in high-quality programs has shown demonstrated gains in high school graduation rates. Major studies on the subject report higher high school graduation rates for children that participated in high-quality education programs when compared to similar groups that did not attend programs.

A Chicago-based, study tracked 1,286 children to age 21. The researchers found that students that received high-quality early education had a 29% higher rate of high school completion than their counterparts did.

Texas-based research is just as promising. It tells us that if we invest in very young children, we will see lower grade retention rates, less special education referrals, and higher scores on standardized tests. These indicators strongly support improved high school graduation rates.

Because of the tremendous impacts high-quality early education has on individuals throughout their lives, the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University reports that for every \$1 we invest in high-quality pre-k programs, \$3.50 is

returned to Texas communities in taxpayer savings. In a period of economic downturn, we can strengthen our schools with this sound investment.

High-quality early education not only gives children a great foundation in reading, math, and science, but it also helps to instill in them a love of learning that continues throughout their educational careers. When children love to learn they are more likely to stay in school.

We are not the only ones who know early education works. Recently, in recognition of the importance high-quality early education, the Texas Education Agency requested \$65 million from the Texas Legislature to improve the state's publically funded pre-k program. The Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition applauds this effort and hopes that our Legislature will continue to increase its investment in our youngest Texans.

There is no doubt that the dropout crisis will require multiple approaches to the problem, but we should continue to strengthen the early years of learning as a key part of our approach. Let's give our children in Texas a great future by investing in the beginning.

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

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