



Kara Johnson: Putting political differences aside for young Texans

When most Americans consider the concept of bi-partisanship in politics, cynicism prevails. Year after year, we are exposed to nasty political campaigns. We live in a world saturated by biased media, frantic talking heads, and undoubtedly, all of us at one time or another has felt disappointed or betrayed by a politician we believed in.

It is important that we remain skeptical of our leadership, and healthy criticism of our government is part of what makes the United States political system enduring and strong. But we should not be so critical as to overlook real, quality, bi-partisan leadership taking place in the political arena.

The 81st Texas Legislature shows a clear, shining example of such leadership. One of the most popular and most discussed legislative efforts this year is the bi-partisan attempt to bring voluntary full-day high-quality pre-k to currently eligible children in our state.

This effort has been led by two effective legislative leaders: Senator Judith Zaffirini—a seasoned Democratic Senator, and Representative Diane Patrick—a rising star in the in the Republican Party. Both legislators filed identical bills in their respective chamber: Senate Bill 21 (SB21) in the Senate, and House Bill 130 (HB130) in the House. The bills call for voluntary full-day pre-k with enhanced quality measures for currently eligible children.

Under this legislation, many school districts would be funded to provide full-day pre-k programs that must maintain high-quality standards. Currently, the state of Texas requires no class size limit or child-to-staff ratio limit for pre-k classrooms. HB 130 and SB 21 limit class sizes to 22 and require schools to maintain a ratio of 11 children to each adult present in the classroom. Additionally, these bills call for pre-k teachers to receive at least nine college credit hours in early learning before working in a classroom; currently Texas requires no specialized training for pre-k teachers.

It is important to understand the motivation for such legislation. It comes from the growing body of research that tells us that high-quality early education leads to lasting benefits for children and communities. An important study conducted by the Bush School of Government & Public Service at Texas A&M University explains that for every \$1.00 invested in high-quality pre-k, at least \$3.50 is returned to Texas communities. Because the most crucial period of human brain development occurs before age 5, children who experience high-quality pre-k tend to have great success in school, higher rates of high school graduation, fewer referrals to special education, and significantly reduced involvement with the criminal justice system. With high-quality pre-k, children grow up with a better chance in the world. Our communities save money because we spend less on expensive special education, criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and dropout recovery efforts.

Senator Zaffirini and Representative Patrick have taken this research to heart and put aside political differences to create effective policy for the state of Texas. They are joined by 112 other legislators from both parties who have signed on as co-authors of either SB 21 or HB 130. It may surprise some that many of the more conservative members of the House have signed on to the bills in support. However, when one comes to understand the importance of early education for our state and our children, it is difficult to make an argument

against full-day pre-k. For instance, Representative Sid Miller, a proud conservative legislator, was recently quoted in a Dallas/Fort Worth news piece (WFAA), saying that with House Bill 130, “We're reaching out to the most vulnerable of our population, trying to give them a hand up, not a handout.”

The entire development of these bills has been one of compromise and cooperation. Concessions have been made on both sides, to produce a final version that most lawmakers and leaders can agree on. The risk now, however, is that time may run out in the legislature before this inspiring bi-partisan effort passes. HB 130 was recently voted out of the House with an overwhelming majority of votes (106-31), but it remains stalled in the Senate Committee on Education. Its companion, SB 21, died in the same Senate Committee. Both Patrick and Zaffrini, have listened intently to the concerns of Committee members and have made significant changes to HB 130. If the democratic process prevails, the bi-partisan spirit behind their efforts will ensure its success in Committee quickly, so that it might have time to be heard on the Senate floor.

It is refreshing and fruitful when our legislative leaders come together to make effective policy for our state, and amidst all the political cynicism around us, we should take time to recognize efforts like these. The right thing to do is to reward our leaders that reach across the aisle to build a better Texas. Let's hope the Senate Committee on Education capitalizes on this key opportunity to do just that.

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

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