

Securing a Better Future: Pre-k Paves the Way

By Dr. Ricardo Romo

In the past few decades Texas has shifted from a primarily industrial economy to one focused more on knowledge and technology. As a result, the workforce demands more highly skilled and educated workers. Unfortunately, Texas has experienced a decline in the number of skilled workers as well as those enrolling in higher education.

The need for change is urgent. On its current path, Texas will see its economy shift from a diverse and strong economy to one leading to increased poverty rates, decreased household incomes, losses in tax revenue, and increases in the demand for health, criminal, and social services.

In addition, the educational gap continues to grow. Ethnic minority groups continue to graduate from high school and college at lower rates. We must do everything we can to ensure all children have the skills necessary to graduate and go on to college. If not, we will have a less educated workforce and a weaker economy in the future.

An upgrade in the Texas education system is one solution to the labor quality problems facing Texas, and high quality pre-k programs such as child care, Head Start, and public pre-kindergarten are one of the most cost-effective educational investments we can make as a state.

A recent study conducted by the Bush School of Government and Public Policy at Texas A&M University concluded that, even under very conservative assumptions, the benefits of voluntary, universally accessible, high-quality pre-kindergarten in Texas greatly outweighs the cost, and for every \$1.00 invested, at least \$3.50 is returned to Texas communities.

By investing early, Texans will save in the long term with reduced special education costs to school districts; less grade retention and decreased dropout rates; savings to the juvenile and adult justice systems; and increased lifetime earnings for pre-k participants.

For the past four years, Texas has been at the forefront of developing a high quality pre-k model for the children and families of Texas. The State Center for Early Childhood Development has implemented the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) in dozens of communities and thousands of classrooms across the state. Child Care, Head Start, and Pre-kindergarten programs work together in an unprecedented collaborative manner in order to improve the school readiness of children. This proven model is expected to once again be expanded this upcoming legislative session in order for more communities to benefit from the model.

As a native of San Antonio, I am proud to call Texas home. As a father of two children, I want to ensure this state continues to be a great place to live, work, and raise a family. We must take bold steps to secure a better future for all Texans, and we can start where we know we can get a large return-investing in a proven, high quality pre-kindergarten model.

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