

# *School Success Begins With Early Childhood Education*

By James D. Calaway

Are Texans making the best decisions to ensure our children are prepared for life? Children who are exposed to activities during their early years that enhance their development are more likely to enter school ready for success. Yet, many Texas children are missing out on quality early education and care programs, leaving them at risk for failure once they enter school.

We, as parents, advocates, and community leaders, must work to ensure that children receive a proper start in life during their critical first five years. According to Dr. Pat Levitt, Director of the Vanderbilt University Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development, experiences in early childhood influence both brain chemistry and brain architecture. Research has repeatedly shown that early childhood represents a unique period of development in which the brain's architecture is assembled. A child's brain is molded and shaped during this very sensitive building phase, determining the way that child will relate to the world around him or her. What happens during these formative years will have an impact upon a child's future success.

Quality early care and education programs play a positive role in a child's development and in ensuring that children are prepared to enter school. So, what does a quality early education and care program look like?

First, if possible, it incorporates parents as first educators and partners in their child's education. Parents are, and always will be, a child's first and most important teacher.

Second, quality programs have well-educated and well-trained teachers. Third, low child-teacher ratios and small group sizes in the classroom are essential, creating an environment that allows for more one-on-one attention with the child to ensure their educational needs are being met.

Finally, a quality early education and care program must focus on the development of the whole child, paying special attention to the child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

Access to quality early childhood programs is particularly important for low-income children. Research shows this population makes the greatest developmental and educational gains by participating in quality preschool programs, whether they are delivered by Head Start, Pre-K or child care. Low-income children who participated in high quality early childhood programs have higher math and reading scores, higher rates of high school graduation, and higher rates of college attendance. Children enrolled in quality early care and education are also less likely to be held back in school or be referred to special education programs. If we are serious about tackling the high school dropout issues facing our schools, we must start with quality preschool programs.

Despite this evidence, the public Pre-K program, federal Head Start, and all sectors of child care remain severely under-funded. We are only able to serve a portion of eligible children, leaving low-income children without access to quality early education and care programs and without the tools necessary to succeed.

Our communities must work to secure the social and economic future of this state through the expansion of quality early education and care programs.

Texas is a national leader in education reform and known for its promise to improve the quality of education for the state's children. But if we have any hope of improving education, we must acknowledge all aspects of a child's education. An adequate education must include the early years in a child's life. Texas must invest in early childhood education and development. All Texas children deserve to have the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life. It's time to give our children the tools they need for success.

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Calaway is the president and CEO for the Center for Houston's Future.  
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