



## **Kara Johnson: As School Begins, Parents have a Major Assignment Due**

Summertime is drawing to a close. Children are now piling into school buses every morning to begin yet another year of school. As Texas children reunite with school friends and meet their new teachers for the first time, their parents are planning for the school year. Already, backpacks, new clothes, lunch boxes and the like have been budgeted for and purchased. However, many parents with very young children are also pouring over their finances, wondering how to pay for or gain entry into high-quality early education programs.

With the fastest growing child population in the country, the struggle to find affordable, high-quality early education has become a common experience in Texas. Parents that do not qualify for state pre-k programs or federal Head Start face an average cost of more than \$5,000 per year for center-based pre-k programs. Naturally, programs with high-quality certifications and curricula cost even more. This year parents will also have to wrestle with the competing costs of rising gas and food prices during their search.

Parents, your elected officials are about to reconvene in January in order to address a number of important issues, including the tough budgeting and financial decisions facing you and your families. The good news is that Texas lawmakers are expecting a budget surplus as large as 10 billion dollars.

With all the import issues needing attention in Texas, Legislators have tough choices to make about how these dollars are spent, and with such a budget opportunity, your Legislators will be eager to seek meaningful investments of public funds. Parents, you shouldn't miss this opportunity to talk with your Legislators and inform them about the importance of investing high-quality early education.

To be well informed, Legislators need to hear from parents about how child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k affects their families and communities. It doesn't hurt to add in the fact that high-quality early education benefits Texas taxpayers too. A recent report by the Bush School for Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University found that every \$1.00 invested in high-quality early education returns \$3.50 to Texas communities in savings. Savings are found in lower special education referrals in schools, lower crime rates in our communities, and higher lifetime earnings for individuals.

As the 2009 Legislative Session draws closer, children are heading to school, but they are not the only ones with homework to do. Parents, your assignment, if you choose to accept it, is as follows: on a single sheet of paper, write in 500 words or less why investments in high-quality

early education are important. Be sure to turn all assignments into your Legislators immediately upon completion. Your voices and stories are powerful tools in the legislative process, so make sure you get the message to your representatives this school year about why high-quality early education matters to you and your family.

To learn more about early care and education in Texas please visit [www.tecec.org](http://www.tecec.org).

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