



Kara Johnson: Time running out for young learners in Texas

Passing legislation in Texas often feels like a long tiresome trek, followed by a sustained and painstaking sprint. Our lawmakers meet for just 140 days every two years, thus a lot of time is spent getting ready for the legislative session. When the session finally begins, it is a challenging and exhausting race to the finish line to ensure bills are passed into law.

The early education movement in Texas knows this process all too well. This year, advocates are supporting Senate Bill 21 authored by Senator Judith Zaffirini and House Bill 130 authored by Representative Diane Patrick. These identical bills would ensure that many school districts are voluntarily able to provide full-day enhanced quality pre-k to their currently eligible four year olds. Additionally, the legislation calls for partnerships between school districts and community child care centers or Head Start programs.

Many parents would be surprised to hear that Texas schools have no requirements for pre-k class size or staff-to-child ratios, key indicators of program quality. Senate Bill 21 and House Bill 130 mandate a class size limit of 22 children and a 1 to 11 staff to child ratio. Participating districts would also observe other quality guidelines, such as ensuring well-trained teachers are in the classroom and that high-quality curricula are being followed.

There is great consensus on these critical pieces of legislation. In addition to thousands of advocates and hundreds of organizations, businesses, and chambers of commerce being in support, currently one-third of the Texas Senate and nearly 100 of the 150 Texas Representatives in the House have signed on in support of the bills.

Never in the history of the early education in Texas has the call for high quality been so loud. Texas Legislators have received over 10,000 letters and emails, witnessed approximately 1,000 advocates visit the Capitol, and heard nearly 100 favorable testimonies all in favor of Senate Bill 21 and House Bill 130. In the face of such support, any lingering questions about consensus on early education in Texas are unsubstantiated.

The research is strong and Texas-specific. The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University conducted a conservative cost-benefit analysis of investing in high-quality pre-k in Texas, and found that every \$1.00 invested in high-quality programs saves Texas tax payers at least \$3.50. Because early education takes place during the most crucial period of human brain development, high-quality programs can reduce the number of referrals to special education, lower the high-school drop out rate, contribute to lower crime rates, and give children the foundation they need to be high wage earners later in life.

We are in the last leg of the legislative race, and it is critical that legislators move to pass these bills. Inaction carries with it a failed opportunity to strengthen our communities and the future

of our children. Let us cross the legislative finish line assured that our state put its youngest learners in first place.

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

Kara Johnson is the Executive Director of the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition

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Contact:

Kara Johnson

Office: 512.476.7939

Cell: 512.659.9372

Email: kjohnson@tecec.org