



EDITORIAL/COLUMNISTS

Why is Statewide Full-Day Pre-K a Problem?

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The Texas Legislature has been struggling over various forms of pre-kindergarten programs for years. The current effort is led by Rep. Diane Patrick, R-Arlington, whose goal is to offer full-day pre-K statewide.

Half-day pre-K is already offered, at least in theory. But Texas has just 185,000 of its 400,000 eligible kids in pre-K.

Some lawmakers argue that all the kids eligible for half-day pre-K should be enrolled before the state goes for full-day pre-K.

What's wrong with doing both?

"It is the best investment we can make for the state," Patrick said. A 2006 Texas A&M University study showed each dollar invested in quality early education brings a return of \$3.50.

The House passed Patrick's HB 130, authorizing \$390 million for full-day pre-K over the next two years -- down from the \$623 million she first proposed.

But, there's a catch. Only as much full-day pre-K money will be spent as budget-writers decide to appropriate. Senate Education Committee Chair Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said the bill will be heard in her committee Thursday. ((5/21)) But Shapiro, also on the Finance Committee, said just \$25 million is budgeted for full-day pre-K -- about enough for a pilot program.

Federal stimulus money to cope with the economic downturn supposedly is aimed at funding some things that otherwise might not happen -- like more for education and health care than the states would have spent otherwise.

But Texas' leaders plan to keep \$9.1 billion squirreled away in a "Rainy Day Fund," cash for future emergencies, and to be sure there's enough money for a promised property tax cut in 2011.

Legislators also are dealing with proposals to help more public universities become Tier One research institutions. Texas has two public Tier One universities -- The University of Texas at Austin, and Texas A&M University in College Station. Houston's Rice University is Texas' only Tier One private school.

By contrast, California has nine Tier One universities, six of them public.

The Tier One effort aims to keep more good students in Texas rather than exporting them to other states. Tier One institutions also are incubators for brainpower that attracts research funds, and cultivates development of innovative products and jobs. But this, too, is contingent on how much tight-fisted budgeters agree to spend.

In our inner cities, where education problems are the most desperate, a significant number of parents, many of them single women, also suffered from inadequate education.

We can say they shouldn't be single moms. But they are. And if we hope to break the cycle of poverty and sub-par education that lead to problems like teen pregnancies, welfare, health costs, criminal behavior and incarceration – for which we all pay – the sooner we get started, the less chance kids will already be behind by the first grade.

It may be in The ninth or tenth grade that a student hits his head and drops out, but he initially tripped in the first or second grade.

In addition to being good, truly conservative social policy, education has other benefits.

A recent study, by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, examined census data and statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and found people with better education have better health.

In the state-by-state breakout, Texas ranked 45th in quality of health. College graduates have the best health, but just 25 percent of adult Texans have college diplomas.

Texas leads the nation in the percentage of children without health insurance. Half of Texas' children live in poor or near-poor homes, and two-fifths live with parents who have no education beyond high school.

"People aren't surprised that getting an education is important in getting a good job," said Paula Braveman of the University of California's Center on Social Disparities, a lead author of the study. "But we now know that no matter what your race or ethnic group, the more education a person has, the better their health is.

"(E)ven the people who started college but didn't graduate have worse health than those who graduate," Braveman said. "Bottom line is, education policy is health policy. We need to have access to good medical care, but that's not enough. We need to pay attention to education. If we don't, our nation will continue to do poorly in health."

And our state.

The pre-K money could be some of the best we'll spend. It's a shame there won't be more of it.

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The full study on education and health, and the state breakouts, are at <http://www.commissiononhealth.org/statedata>.

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