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Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Editorials

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Early Education Focus Missing Critical Ideas

As Texas increases its enrollment of 3-and 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, the Texas Public Policy Foundation is asking some sensible questions about the move, and the thinking behind it.



"In recent years, lawmakers have pursued an increased government role in providing early childhood education to Texas children," the foundation says in a recent report, "Do Small Kids Need Big Government."

"In 2006, the Texas Legislature expanded state pre-kindergarten (pre-k) eligibility - previously reserved for low-income families, non-English speakers, current foster children, and students requiring special education - to children of military personnel," the Foundation says. "In his 2007 State of the State Address, Gov. Rick Perry proposed an increase of \$80 million for state pre-kindergarten programs, noting, '... we still have achievement gaps, and the best place to rectify those gaps is during the earliest learning years.'"

And a push was made in the Legislature.

"While legislation that would have laid the groundwork for vast expansion of government pre-k did not reach the House floor, eligibility was extended to a few hundred former foster children in 2007," the Foundation reports. "In addition, several bills that would have further expanded pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten on the taxpayers' dime were filed by members of the 81st Legislature."

Many lawmakers echoed the governor's contention that early schooling improves academic achievement.

"(Democratic) state Rep. Mike Villarreal of San Antonio explained, 'We know high-quality pre-k gives children a better chance to start school ready to learn,'" the Foundation says. "In a letter to Education Commissioner Robert Scott, Rep. Villarreal cites research out of Texas A&M University finding that in Texas, every dollar invested in high-quality pre-kindergarten returns at least \$3.50 to Texas communities. Some activists claim returns of \$7 or more per dollar invested."

But is there clear evidence to support those oft-cited figures?

"To help determine the efficacy of early education programs, we examined the results of some of the programs considered to be early education models - including Perry Preschool, the Chicago Parent-Child Program, Abecedarian, the Georgia universal pre-k program, and Head Start," the Foundation says.

The conclusion?

"We find the widespread adoption of pre-k is unlikely to improve student achievement," the foundation reports.

Instead, "America's flexible approach to early education gives children a strong foundation."

Like most educational matters, the key is local control and accountability - not a one-size-fits-all system mandated from the state house.

In fact, evidence seems to show that our system fails at a different point in a child's education.

"While United States fourth graders are 'A' students on the international curve, that advantage does not last," the Foundation points out. "By 12th grade, American high school seniors are 'D' students on the international scale. This indicates that it is not a lack of preschool preparation that ails children, but rather a failure in the public k-12 system to capitalize on the existing preparedness of young children."

The lengthy report concludes that a focus on early childhood education is failure to address the real problems.

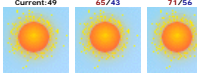
"To the limited degree that the state remains involved in financing early education, the Texas Public Policy Foundation recommends measures for transparency, program assessment, consideration of the private sector, and improved flexibility through individual student funding," the group says.

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