

Federal Pre-K Dollars Wrong For Texas
Meaningful Reforms Put the Student First

By Arlene Wohlgemuth

Recently, it has come to light that Texas is considering participation in President Obama's Preschool for All Program, which would draw an estimated \$308 million in grants to Texas to expand access to pre-kindergarten in the state. But what would this program's impact on Texas really look like?

Any investment in education should be carefully assessed in terms of the gains it would definitively bring to our state. That assessment should begin by asking whether this is something Texas needs in the first place. How much of what we learn at an exceptionally young age truly travels with us through life or even through elementary school?

Late last year, the Texas Public Policy Foundation released a study on San Antonio's pre-K proposed expansion, highlighting the "fade-out effect." The fade-out effect shows that in many cases, academic benefits of pre-kindergarten don't carry past the 3rd grade.

Furthermore, since pre-kindergarten took root in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, overall academic performance of our students has failed to improve. In 1965, only 16 percent of American four-year-olds attended pre-kindergarten. By 2005, that number had jumped to 70 percent. During approximately the same time period, measurable improvement in U.S. average 4th grade N.A.E.P. scores has been minimal, with reading scores in particular virtually stagnant.

The effect of pre-kindergarten on early socialization of a child is also of concern. David Elkind, a professor at Tufts University, has done several studies on the impact of pre-kindergarten programs. He asserted that exposing children to academic instruction too early risks permanently damaging their self-esteem for no apparent gain.

Other research supports Dr. Elkind's claims. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that children who spent more time in non-maternal childcare exhibited more behavioral problems than children who spent less time in childcare. A 2006 study by Stanford and the University of California found that "attendance in preschool centers, even for short periods of time each week, hinders the rate at which young children develop social skills and display the motivation to engage in class tasks, as reported by their kindergarten teachers." Children who had attended preschool were more likely to exhibit aggression and bullying behaviors and to show a lack of cooperation and self-control.

Finally, we must consider whether a substantial expansion of pre-kindergarten in Texas is necessary at all. In 2006, 60 percent of all Texas four-year-olds attended some form of public preschool. As of 2008, when incorporating private care programs, that number came to around 85 percent. These collective factors make any substantial state investment in pre-kindergarten questionable at best.

If we really want to make improvements to Texas education, we must look past the idea that money is the solution to all our problems. Despite what some would claim, Texas has never been shy about increasing education spending. Between 1999 and 2009, Texas increased its education spending by 95 percent. What we have not gotten with that increase in spending, once again, is a measurable improvement in our N.A.E.P. scores.

Further expanding our existing education system will do far less good than meaningful reforms that make an impact at every grade level. Giving all parents the right to select an education that best fits the specific needs of their child will strengthen the Texas education system as a whole through competition and put thousands of Texas students on a path toward a better future. Expanding our pre-kindergarten availability would put us on a path toward having academically stronger first through third graders. The effect of such an initiative beyond those grades is unclear at best.

We will only achieve meaningful reform in Texas education when students are put first. More money to grow the existing system, especially federal money, is not going to measurably improve the Texas education landscape. More money is nevertheless the only thing we have really tried over the last several decades, without results.

Nothing is ever truly free. Texas doesn't need more money for pre-kindergarten, and it certainly doesn't need money covered in Washington, D.C.'s red tape.

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