



High-Quality, Full-Day Prekindergarten in Waco is a Vital Component of Improving Graduation Rates and the Workforce

Introduction

The Waco community is facing a serious situation in early education.¹ Grants funding for prekindergarten was eliminated in the Texas state budget that passed. Losing the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Prekindergarten Early Start (PKES) Grant program statewide will impact McLennan County with a loss of \$910,800 in the Waco Independent School District alone, not counting the loss in other districts. Additionally, Waco Independent School District and other districts are also anticipating major cuts from their **total** annual budgets next year.

Our largest school district, Waco ISD, has provided full-day, high-quality prekindergarten for the past ten years. Waco ISD students have been able to make tremendous progress in kindergarten and first grade because of the full-day prekindergarten program. Twenty-one of the Waco ISD classrooms are certified by the state as being "Texas School Ready" as of 2011. "Once enrolled, 100% of the prekindergarten children complete the program, unless the parent moves out of town," said Dr. Terri Patterson, executive director of elementary education for Waco ISD.

Full-day, high-quality prekindergarten is distinguished from half-day programs in that it includes strong educational components such as these areas of study: Developing Talkers, Literacy, Math, Science, Vocabulary and a Response to Instruction piece. To qualify for Waco ISD prekindergarten, a child must meet *one* of the following criteria outlined by the state Education Code: §29.153, which stipulates that a child of the appropriate age is eligible for a prekindergarten program if that child:

- is unable to speak and comprehend the English language;
- is educationally disadvantaged;
- is a homeless child;
- is the child or stepchild of an active duty member of the armed forces, including state military forces or a reserve component of the armed forces, who is ordered to active duty;

¹ The 2011 Education Alliance Legislative Stakeholder Group meeting and the 2011 Parental Involvement Initiative White Paper are a part of the initial impetus for the Education Alliance's position in support of full-day prekindergarten.

- is the child or stepchild of a member of the armed forces, including state military forces or a reserve component of the armed forces, who was injured or killed while serving on active duty; *or*
- is or ever has been in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services following an adversary hearing under §262.201 of the Texas Family Code.

Waco ISD has between 88-90 percent of district children eligible for prekindergarten each year and currently has 1,088 students enrolled. WISD also collaborates with Jump Start and Head Start programs (T. Patterson, personal communication, June 1, 2011).

Position

A vital component of improving graduation rates and the educational level of the workforce in Waco is providing high-quality prekindergarten. Even without the state's grant program funds, the Greater Waco Community Education Alliance strongly believes that the Waco community must keep our high-quality, full-day prekindergarten programs throughout the county.

Vast research confirms that graduation from high school is highly linked to activities that happen *before* the child enters school. In order to reach the degree of excellence the community desires for its school system, we must have full-day prekindergarten so that our children enter school ready to learn and adapt socially. We cannot change the poverty numbers in Waco if we do not provide our young generation with the best learning opportunities at an early age to ensure their future success both in secondary education, post-secondary education, and the work force.

Additionally, we believe the general public should be educated about the gravity of this situation and about both the importance and components of full-day prekindergarten.

Defense

Barriers to education occur very young. Children develop sensory pathways and language during the first year of life. During the time of pre-natal through age three, children experience brain development, nutrition, parental engagement and physical and mental stimulation. During the time children are in prekindergarten (age four), they then build on this foundation of sensory pathways and linguistic knowledge. These are critical periods of development for children, as well as times when impairments that limit their ability to learn occur, resulting in educational challenges later in life (Shonkoff, 2008). It is a sobering thought that some children arrive in kindergarten and the first grade without knowing the difference between a letter and a number.

Research confirms that students who start behind will stay behind, costing the Waco community more and more money as those students struggle to matriculate through school. In other words, if we want to increase high school graduation rates and reduce dropout rates, we must ensure that full-day prekindergarten is widely available and accessible. Extensive research currently being conducted nationally confirms that a year of full-day prekindergarten is a highly-effective investment and neglecting it has dire consequences that are further compounded as the child develops.

In the state of Texas alone, we spent \$1.3 million every school day during the 2008-2009 academic year re-educating students who already attended kindergarten and first grade.

In fact, kindergarten and first grade are retained more often than any other grade except ninth grade. Additionally, 62 percent of the kindergarten and first grade students retained were economically-disadvantaged (Texas Association of Business, 2011).

A 2006 study by the National Institute for Early Education Research found that children who attended a full-day prekindergarten program experienced greater improvement in test scores compared to peers who attended half-day programs. Additionally, the results of the study indicated that students in high-poverty districts who begin prekindergarten programs far behind can develop vocabulary, math and literacy skills that approach national norms if provided with high-quality, full-day prekindergarten for an extended duration (Robin, Frede & Barnett, 2006).

According to a longitudinal study on the effects of public prekindergarten attendance by Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University, students who attended prekindergarten programs gained 82 percent more in early literacy and math skills than comparable children who did not attend (Hofer 2011).

In identifying the impact of full-day prekindergarten, the Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Public Service (2006) conducted a Cost Analysis of the Benefits of Universal Accessible Full-Day Pre-K in Texas. The study concluded that:

The cost-benefit analysis of universally-accessible prekindergarten in Texas indicates that the combined benefits to the participants, society, and the government exceed the costs of such a program. The analysis shows that for every \$1.00 invested in the proposed high-quality program, a return of \$3.50 per participant is expected, based on the enrollment of seventy percent of four-year-olds in the state. (p. 74)

Investment in high-quality prekindergarten is a strategic investment. Texas could see an increased income of \$19 billion when 3- and 4-year-olds enter the workforce. Additionally, crime-related savings in Texas would amount to \$9.9 billion. If Texas fully-funded high-quality prekindergarten, the increased earner's income, state taxes collected and welfare not paid would result in a financial benefit to Texas of \$850 million per year over the next 45 years (Texas Association of Business, 2011).

Bringing this issue closer to home, we also have local results that validate the wisdom of prekindergarten investments. La Vega ISD, which is comparable to Waco ISD with 85 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, decided in 2003 to switch from half-day to full-day prekindergarten when so few of their children were entering school ready to learn.

In the 2003-2004 academic year, La Vega's TPRI reading assessment scores were at 18 percent. Now after seven years of full-day prekindergarten, they have risen to 98 percent.

In the Waco community, we also have indicators for the desire to attain high-quality prekindergarten. In a 2010 educator in-service survey on the top priorities of teachers conducted by the Education Alliance, we found that “early-childhood efforts before children enter the classroom” was in the top three most-critical items.

Our position on prekindergarten stems out of a desire to support the Waco community, and is in response to a need indicated by local educators. Another facet to our position on prekindergarten is a strong belief that the community understands the components of high-quality, full-day prekindergarten.

Additional Information

In order to be prepared for kindergarten, children must be ready to learn, which means they must be in a program that has an educational component, namely full-day prekindergarten. According to *Developing Early Literacy* (Lonigan and Shanahan, 2008), to be ready for school, all young children must:

- Be able to say most of the alphabet rapidly
- Be able to name objects rapidly
- Be able to write name and letters
- Be able to remember, detect, and manipulate sounds (phonological awareness)

Additionally, for school readiness in terms of math, *Mathematics Learning in Early Childhood* (2009) specifies that children must:

- Be able to count
- Be able to add and subtract
- Be able to measure
- Be able to identify shapes
- Be able to do spatial thinking

School readiness in young children also applies to social skills. Children should know how to form a line, sit still, stop talking and come to attention, listen, follow directions, wait for his or her turn and share. Children should learn these skills before they enter kindergarten. If they begin school without them, we will then pay for teachers to instruct them on the basics while other children wait.

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