

Balthazar & Strama: Giving kids early boost in education pays off in long run

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A recent groundbreaking study by E3 Alliance shows that 48 percent of children in our region are not ready for school when they enter kindergarten. This is significant because children who start out behind stay behind. They are more likely to fail early grades, need intensive education services, drop out and enter the criminal justice system.

It is heartbreaking to think of 5-year-olds failing in school from the moment they start, but that is the reality for many of our children. According to United Way Capital Area Success By 6, the cost to intervene after a child is struggling in school is time-consuming and very expensive. Early intervention programs help even the odds for our most at-risk children. Without interventions, the costs of school failure will keep growing.

As districts and elected officials make very difficult budget choices, they have to consider where to invest in education, not just where to cut. Making good investments in education pays off over time and can support a strong economic future for Texas.

Quality early education is a smart investment. A recent study from the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, gives a conservative estimate that for every \$1 we invest in pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds we get at least \$3.50. This \$3.50 comes back to communities in fewer special education referrals, reduced involvement in criminal activities, increased income and lifetime earnings and improved work performance. This is a return on investment Texans can see every year as children move from grade to grade and from school to career.

The personal payoff for succeeding in education is also huge. A child who graduates from high school earns almost \$350,000 more over a 25-year career than someone without a high school diploma. A person with a college degree earns \$1.3 million more. It's like winning the education lottery — a way to break out of poverty and achieve the American dream.

But a child's education should not be left to chance like a lottery. There should be an even educational playing field, and the best and most efficient way to level that playing field for those children who are disadvantaged by poverty is to provide quality early childhood development opportunities.

In Central Texas, we have seen child poverty grow at an alarming rate in the last several years. More than 63 percent of children in Austin public schools are low-income. In Manor, that figure is 79 percent; in Del Valle, it's 85 percent. The strain on the system is increasing just as funding for education is decreasing.

The E3 Alliance study showed that low-income children who attended any type of a pre-kindergarten program are 3.5 times more likely to be kindergarten-ready than low-income kids who did not attend pre-kindergarten. We like those odds.

We all know that with a structural budget deficit and dim outlook for state revenues, all major state-funded programs will see cuts. But drastic, across-the-board cuts to early education opportunities could irreparably harm our children's future and our collective economic future. Cuts now that add up to big costs later are no way to balance the budget.

We need to invest in student success early, not pay for education failure later.

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