

Nippert: Funding all-day pre-K will help alleviate poverty

By Regina Nippert - Special to the American-Statesman Saturday, April 4, 2015

The Jewish Community Relations Council recently hosted an interfaith Seder in preparation for Passover. We were Jews, Christians and Muslims, all disquieted by the Seder's central theme of confronting poverty.

I spoke my own prayer of gratitude for my extraordinary colleagues in West Dallas who bring in \$35 million every year to help alleviate poverty in their community.

We celebrate our accomplishments, and yet we still go home at night thinking we haven't yet done enough to solve the challenge of children living in poverty. Our nonprofits, school districts and legislators still have work to do.

One of the most important lessons of the past few decades is that the earliest years of a child's life set the stage for that child's future.

Democratic state Rep. Eric Johnson of Dallas proposed House Bill 1100 to fund all day prekindergarten. The bill's primary assumption was that children in poor communities have a lot of catching up to do to overcome the effects of even a few years of living in poverty.

All day pre-K will cost roughly twice as much as we now spend for half-day pre-K.

Instead of HB 1100, the Legislature is moving forward with HB 4 sponsored by Republican state Rep. Dan Huberty of Houston and backed by Gov. Greg Abbott, who campaigned on a promise of quality early childhood education. HB 4 also recommends full-day pre-K.

No one disagrees that full-day pre-K is a good thing, but HB 4 has a key difference. It doesn't fund full-day pre-K.

Nearly 7 million children live in poverty in Texas. Children who attend quality pre-K perform better on both reading and math in third grade, and the impact is greatest for the most disadvantaged children whose families are both poor and non-English speaking.

Data from the Dallas school district show that children who participate in quality pre-K programming are 350 times more likely to be ready to acquire the reading and math foundations they'll need for the rest of their lives.

The Dallas school district has just taken a huge step toward universal pre-K by passing a Bridge Plan opening up 800 pre-K seats and creating an early childhood center that will serve Dallas' low-income early learners and will provide a place for adults to learn best practices.

The district cannot fill these new spaces alone, and its nonprofit partners are joining coordinated early learning campaigns, encouraging moms to register now so classrooms can be ready this fall.

As Dallas prepares classrooms for its youngest learners, and as nonprofits help to fill the them, the Texas Legislature has an important role to play. It must allocate funding for all-day pre-K programs.

We can still fix that. Across the state, nonprofits, faith communities, community coalitions, civic groups, corporations and individual voters must insist on full-day pre-K funding. If we let poverty rob us of our future musicians and poets and doctors and thinkers, our lives will be immeasurably diminished.

An inner-city neighborhood school's poverty can be a bigger barrier than its urban setting or its demographics. Poverty has a terrible impact on young children's brain development, damaging cognitive skills and school performance.

Across the state, nonprofits, schools and faith communities work ceaselessly to alleviate their neighbors' poverty. They do tremendous good, and it is still not enough. Lifting people after they fall will never be as effective as keeping them from falling.

To make a difference in poverty, we have to educate all our children. To do that, we can't accept as a given that some children start school already years behind their higher-income peers.

We have to give school districts and our legislators our outspoken support for fully funded all-day pre-K for every child because a child who starts behind stays behind. A community that opts to kick that can down the road will find itself with a far greater price to pay.

The Seder closed with this admonition: "We have the tools in place to create a poverty-free world. It is our responsibility to use these tools to take action and make a difference."

Do we have the tools? Do we know what to do with them?

We do. What happens now is up to us.

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