

# Texas Institute for Education Reform

"Every child a high school graduate ready for college, the workplace and citizenship."

March 11, 2009

The Honorable Florence Shapiro  
Texas Senate  
P.O. Box 12068 – Capitol Station  
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Chairman Shapiro,

Congratulations on your appointment as Chair of the Senate Education Committee. We look forward to working with you, the committee members, and staff to improve our state's public education system.

As you know, TIER is dedicated to improving the state's accountability system so that every child will graduate from high school ready for post-secondary pursuits. TIER also believes that any new or additional education funding should be specifically targeted to programs that help students meet the goal of postsecondary readiness.

On Thursday, the committee is scheduled to consider Senate Bill 21 by Senator Zaffirini (companion: HB 130 by Representative Patrick). This bill allows the state's school districts to expand prekindergarten from half-day to full-day programs. While we appreciate the effort to provide more early education opportunities for certain at-risk children, we are concerned that the existing program's long-term benefits are unclear, that the bill limits participation and places burdensome regulation on private providers, that there is no accountability for these programs, and that the bill will more than double the existing prekindergarten budget.

There has been a litany of research on the effectiveness of prekindergarten programs. These studies find that early childhood education has long-term academic gains only for the most disadvantaged students. While other small, targeted programs have shown good results, other research shows that many programs have little benefit and that any benefits of prekindergarten programs dissipate by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Secondly, the bill could limit participation by private providers. Districts would only be required to allocate 20% of prekindergarten funds to private providers. Even this participation is subject to district approval of the private provider through the contract process and the ability of the private provider to meet extensive regulations.

Next, the existing statute and the bill do not provide for the type of accountability that research shows is part of successful prekindergarten programs. In *Preschool Puzzle*, researcher Craig Ramey says:

*"The more than a dozen early childhood education programs that produced lasting benefits could point to those results because they held their programs accountable. Following the example these programs set, accountability has been accepted as valuable and been well implemented in a number of large-scale pre-K programs, such as those in Louisiana, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and parts of California. I further want to refute the myth that assessing the progress of individual children is stressful to children . . ."*<sup>1</sup>


As we overhaul the state's accountability system in grades K-12, it is important that we incorporate a strong prekindergarten accountability system before doubling the size of the program.

Finally, expanding prekindergarten is an expensive proposition for Texas—especially in a time of economic uncertainty. In addition, the federal stimulus package includes \$5 billion in early head start and head start grants. If Texas receives 10% of this money—which is a reasonable estimate—the state would receive \$500 million for early education programs. This infusion of federal money, when combined with the state's anticipated budget deficit, causes us to question the wisdom of expanding this program at the present time.

TIER is working with other interested groups to develop a long-term prekindergarten strategy for the state. Before expanding our program, we suggest that the state first develop and implement an accountability system for prekindergarten, use accountability data to identify the most effective programs, curricula, and teaching methods, and encourage partnerships with effective private providers.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Andrew Erben  
President, Texas Institute for Education Reform

cc: Members of the Senate Education Committee  
Members of the House Public Education Committee

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<sup>1</sup> Besharov, Douglas and Ramey, Craig, "Forum: Preschool Puzzle", *Education Next*, Fall 2008 (vol. 8, no. 4), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/27149734.html>