



July 26, 2009

Pre-K funding is investment in future

By state Sen. Charlotte Burks

Tennessee Voices

In Tennessee, we can't afford NOT to continue our pre-kindergarten classes.

That's why some of my colleagues and I in the legislature stepped up this year and said there is no good reason not to guarantee funding for pre-K beyond next year.

Why wouldn't Tennessee want to make an investment that pays dividends and saves us money in the long run? Why wouldn't we want to continue a nationally recognized program? Why would we ignore the advice of education experts about the fertile minds of children under 5?

There is no good reason.

The payoff: For every \$1 invested in a quality pre-K programs, \$7.14 comes back to society in the form of better earnings, increased revenues and savings on costs like remedial education and crime. So says the Chicago Child-Parent Center, which evaluated 989 youngsters from low-income Chicago families who participated in pre-K.

That's a better than 700 percent return on our money.

It's no wonder that the chiefs of police support pre-K, along with the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Business Roundtable and the Tennessee branch of the American Academy of Pediatricians.

Simply put, kids who've had the advantage of pre-K are more likely to stay in school, off welfare and out of trouble.

It adds up: There are 934 pre-K classes serving 18,000 Tennessee children in 94 of our 95 counties.

There were 3,924 youngsters on the waiting list last September to get in Tennessee's pre-K classes, and it is my desire to see them get in.

Nationally, our pre-K program has met nine of the 10 quality standards for three years, according to the National Institute for Pre-K Early Education Research. Only two states did better.

Tennessee is ranked fifth in the nation of "best-chance" states for parents wanting pre-K education for their children.

Walk into a Tennessee pre-K classroom, and you'll see kids reading books. They're learning letters, numbers, shapes and how to interact with others.

This isn't a baby-sitting service. It's a top-notch educational program that produces students who score higher on tests and behave better in and outside of class.

Early education experts tell us that the brain from birth through age 5 is better able to learn than at any other time in life. They also say that what a child learns in these early years sets the stage for how well a child will learn in the years to come.

It makes the biggest difference in the lives of underprivileged children.

For many of them, it's the only chance they'll have to get off to a good start. That's why we should work toward making it available for all of our children.
