

December 06, 2009

Our View: Pre-K is a practical, preventive investment

- Idaho Statesman

About 2 percent of Idaho's ninth-graders will drop out by their senior year.

That is the state Department of Education's best estimate, but it helps drive home a startling point. In 2007-08, 42 percent of Idaho's inmates did not have a high school diploma or GED.

The lesson is clear. Failure in school comes at a heavy cost - for dropouts, but also for society. As taxpayers, we can either invest at the front end, or we can rack up a costly bill at the end of the line. In the case of the prison system, that cost comes to a little more than \$20,000 per year, per inmate - roughly three times as much as the state tax money Idaho spends per year, per student on K-12.

Pay now, or pay later. That's the cold reality, too often lost in the emotional furor over funding early education, such as pre-kindergarten.

All Idahoans should be able to agree on a basic line of logic. If children show up at kindergarten ready to learn, and prepared for the social adjustment, they are more likely to do well. Success in the early grades tends to build on itself; meanwhile, students who struggle risk falling behind and never catching up. Students who succeed in the classroom are more likely to become productive adults; dropouts stand an increased risk of winding up behind bars (among a host of other potential problems).

We must give our children their best chance to succeed in school, and in life. On that point, at least, there should be no disagreement. The only debate, then, is how to get there.

The pre-K debate tends to bog down quickly, when it centers less on the value of early education, and instead on family values. The most vocal critics of publicly funded pre-K argue that parents should take the lead in preparing young children for school.

We agree that a nurturing, stable home environment will help children succeed in kindergarten and beyond. But we don't accept the either-or premise - home vs. preschool. This false dichotomy is a disservice to Idaho children, especially those who live with one parent, or live in a home where both parents work.

At the time when they learn most rapidly and ravenously, young children deserve quality education that supplements the invaluable life lessons they learn at home. Idaho parents deserve access to affordable pre-K - to public, private or faith-based schools that do not supplant parenting, but instead support parents.

Pre-K skeptics might look at an admirably low 2 percent dropout rate and say Idaho's K-12 educational status quo is working. That is less of a rationale than it is a cop-out.

When the connection between dropping out and prison is so strong, it is time to be proactive. We know the exorbitant human and taxpayer costs when students drop out, after struggling in the early years. Why wouldn't we want to build a pre-K system that prepares children, particularly those who are now most at risk?

Sometimes a statistic can provide a call to action. Over several years, a number became a piece of the Statehouse consciousness: the stunning fact that some 85 percent of inmates battle substance abuse problems.

Eventually, the Legislature's collective thinking evolved. Budget-writers became advocates for substance abuse treatment in the prisons, and in 2008, they successfully challenged Gov. Butch Otter's veto of treatment dollars.

Yes, prison drug treatment is reactive in nature - not unlike the in-prison GED programs that have expanded in recent years. But at least these are steps, however belatedly, in the right direction.

Prevention is even better. And almost certainly less expensive. Pre-K is preventive. By giving Idaho's young children their best chance at success, we give ourselves a great chance of stretching taxpayer dollars.

"Our View" is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman's editorial board. To comment on an editorial or suggest a topic, e-mail editorial@idahostatesman.com.