



GUEST COLUMN

How Tennessee can boost pre-K quality

*By Mark White**Posted: 12:00 a.m.*

The Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K program serves about 18,000 4-year-olds. Many parents, educators and experts will tell you that high-quality pre-K helps prepare children for school. We know it works, but the quality must be there.

After a recently released study by Vanderbilt University, some said we should abandon early childhood programs as a waste of money. I'd like to offer some facts about what we know from national experts on pre-K, and what the Vanderbilt study does, and doesn't, tell us.

In my view, the Vanderbilt study pushes us toward the next steps Tennessee should take in pre-K: We need to improve the program's quality, because an array of other research tells us that high-quality pre-K really does work.

What does "high quality" mean? Tennessee now requires pre-K "lead teachers" to have a bachelor's degree, but other states now require teachers to have additional specialized training for early learning. We also may need to step up training for assistant teachers.

We also need to measure results. There are simple, effective ways to see how well young children are learning in early literacy, math and social skills—and more important, to monitor how well our investment is paying off. The Vanderbilt study and others to come will help us do that.

I learned a lot about all of this over the past year while serving on the Southern Regional Education Board's Early Childhood Commission. I joined other leaders from across the South to consult with some of the nation's foremost experts on early childhood.

While no program is perfect, all of us on the commission agreed that high-quality

pre-K makes a difference for children, families and for economic development. We also found that most states can act now to improve their programs.

What can we do in Tennessee? Our commission recommends that states pursue these goals:

Boost the quality of programs: Set high standards for early education from birth to third grade. Evidence-based curricula should be aligned from pre-K into elementary school so children's learning builds over time. Rating systems such as QRIS (Quality Rating Improvement Systems) could help families find high-quality child care options and can support and incentivize providers to raise quality.

Accountability for results: Measure student progress and prioritize funding for early education based on performance and quality.

Greater access: Work toward serving as many children as possible in high-quality programs—especially those at risk for not being ready for school.

Coordinate governance and budgets: Build a statewide policy framework to serve children from birth to age 8. Establish a statewide council to leverage all available public and private funding, which in many cases is spread across many government agencies, nonprofit entities and budgets.

Most people in my part of Tennessee understand the need for high-quality pre-K. Many of our families depend on it.

Without being ready for school, the hard work to improve education in Memphis and Shelby County—which is drawing national attention—will be in vain. Elementary

But if we're going to get back our best investment, now is the time to move forward and make the changes to our pre-K system that we need to ensure quality for every child in Tennessee whose family wishes to enroll them.

The payoff will be clear to all of us.

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Find this article at:

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/opinion/local/how-tennessee-can-boost-pre-k-quality-270b5f0c-5223-0574-e053-0100007fe291-363099391.html>

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