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Business sees the value in pre-K programs

By *NELSON ANDREWS*

Academic standards are rising. Increasingly, a high school diploma is not enough to start a successful career. More workers every year are competing globally for jobs. We live in a time in which every child must show up for kindergarten ready for school.

As the legislature debates whether to begin to expand Tennessee's high-quality pre-kindergarten program to all children on a voluntary basis and as school systems struggle to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law, it is critical that we continue moving toward the goal of all children starting kindergarten ready to learn.

Poor academic performance is not limited to low-income children. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, 49 percent of the children who don't know the alphabet when they begin kindergarten are from families with middle or higher incomes. Twelve percent of children from middle-income families repeat a grade, and 11 percent drop out of high school.

It is a reality that many children from middle-class families are starting school without the social and academic skills needed to succeed. This is because their parents struggle to find and pay for quality preschool. Many low-wage earners are left behind by targeted pre-K programs because their income narrowly disqualifies their families from eligibility.

A widespread concern

Many in the national business and education communities have spoken out in support of voluntary pre-K for all, largely based on the concern that academic underachievement is a widespread problem across the country. The Committee for Economic Development (CED), a national organization of corporate leaders and university presidents, supports voluntary pre-K for all because of these very concerns. The CED recognizes that our children face much tougher standards in our globalized and knowledge-driven world, and that America's competitors in the global economy are investing in early education. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce has also endorsed universally available pre-K as an important education improvement strategy. Business and education leaders realize that without quality early education, our country's competitive edge will be compromised.

In Tennessee, the legislature started in the right place by targeting the pre-K program to those children who are most in need. The demand for more pre-K classrooms is so high that school districts have asked for more than 300 additional state-funded pre-K classrooms for the 2008-09 school year.

The progress we have made in bringing quality early education to more 4-year-olds during the past few years has been astounding, and I applaud the leaders who have made it happen. But it is just a start. Quality early education in Tennessee is currently limited by privilege, income and luck. It is time for Tennessee to move toward a pre-K program that is voluntary and open to all families who would like their children to be enrolled.