

# Gerald Britt Jr.: We depend on early childhood education

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Justifiable outrage at seemingly endless reports of DISD scandals and incompetence often obscures messages about the children whom the district is supposed to serve. One of the most important of those is the need to make greater investments in early intervention.

University of Chicago economics professor James Heckman views early childhood education as a matter of economic survival. Here's how he puts it:

*Ability gaps between disadvantaged and other children open up early, before schooling begins. Conventional school-based policies start too late to completely remedy early deficits, although they can do some good. Children who start ahead keep accelerating past their peers, widening the gap.*

*Learning begets learning and skill begets skill. Early advantages accumulate, so do early disadvantages. Returns are highest for investments made at younger ages and remedial investments are often prohibitively costly.*

*The best way to improve the schools is to improve the early environments of the children sent to them.*

It's estimated that effective early intervention would save \$409 billion in taxpayer, crime victimization and employer costs. Not to mention that we'll be counting on these children as the next generation's workforce. We simply can't afford not to make the necessary investments.

For 40 years, Dr. Heckman says, the declining aggregate birthrate also has produced more children born into homes with what he calls "adverse environments." And the "ability gaps," disparities in childhood learning between those from advantaged environments and those from disadvantaged environments, show up as early as age 5.

Without "blaming the victim" or necessarily calling for greater public investments in Head Start or other social programs, Dr. Heckman recognizes the vital dynamic of family and community. "[There] hasn't really been that creative ... thinking about trying to reach individual families and using some institutions that are outside the normal governmental channels," he says.

Such suggestions don't ignore the need for better schools in poor neighborhoods, more experienced teachers and more resources to help enhance childhood learning, but they do remind us that what we require of public education begins before children get to the schoolhouse door.

Churches, schools, nonprofit organizations, government entities and communities must develop innovative partnerships with families to help safeguard the future of our children. What does that mean?

With 44 percent of children living in areas of concentrated poverty in Dallas and 45 percent of children under 5 living in households characterized as poor, it means addressing poverty through job training and adult education.

It requires code enforcement and effective community policing to provide a safer environment for children on their way to school and on their way back home.

It means greater access to affordable health care because chronic sickness, poor eyesight and dental hygiene inhibit academic performance. Fifty-seven percent of South Dallas residents and 60 percent of West Dallas residents are uninsured.

Parental skills training and after-school enrichment must be increased to creatively and strategically link school curriculum to all areas of life. And it means creating an atmosphere where dropping out of school is unacceptable and attending college becomes a normal expectation, addressing the fact that only 26 percent of South Dallas residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Unfortunately, some parents and guardians are incapable or unwilling to do their jobs. While the help of other individuals and groups is necessary, we must always promote the importance of parents as a child's first teacher, first disciplinarian, primary guardian and the ultimate everyday enforcer of academic rigor.

Continuing to fail our children makes all talk of redevelopment a very expensive, frustrating pipedream for all of us.

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