Pre-K Must be a Texas Priority

It was encouraging to see Greg Abbott make preschool funding a cornerstone of his public education agenda during the gubernatorial campaign, and we remain optimistic his interest will make it a priority for the 84th Legislature.

If Abbott plans to achieve his goal of making Texas the No. 1 education state in the United States within 10 years, it will require a commitment to expanding early childhood education. If children enter the first grade unprepared and on an uneven playing field, their opportunity for success is diminished while the cost to get them back on track escalates.

Texas will not achieve the top high school graduation rates in the nation or top-level math and reading scores if the needs of the youngest Texans are not addressed now. Taking care of the problem at the back end — with high school dropout recovery programs and college-level remedial classes — is not the solution.

There is no clear one-size-fits-all solution. But cutting funding for pre-K programs as was done in 2011 is not wise.
The state provides funding for half-day pre-K for 4-year-olds who are economically disadvantaged, children of active-duty military parents or speak English as a second language.

State and national surveys indicate public support for expansion of early childhood education and that’s understandable. Studies tout the benefits to be gained by such programs. Early childhood education improves the success rates for students and reduces taxpayer costs over the long run. A successful student becomes a successful member of the workforce.

Many school districts across the state, including the Harlandale and San Antonio independent school districts, use local tax dollars to supplement the state’s minimal funding and offer full-day pre-K programs for eligible students.

San Antonians don’t need to be sold on the benefits of pre-K. They approved an eighth-cent sales tax to provide a citywide preschool program. But cities should not be expected to take up the slack because the state is falling down on its job.

Education is an investment in the future that merits bipartisan support. Funding for full-day pre-K would be optimal, but that is an unrealistic short-term goal given the political climate in Austin. Still, we encourage expanding eligibility for the program and setting quality standards that include student-to-teacher ratios.

This issue is not going to be resolved in one legislative session, but much that can be done in the next several months that can get us closer to Abbott’s goal.