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## Tennessee must make a resolution to expand Voluntary Pre-K in 2022

FERRELL HAILE AND MARK WHITE

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Jed DeKalb

The start of a new year is often a time for reflection – a time when Tennesseans look back on the year that’s passed, while simultaneously looking forward to what’s ahead. For us as legislators, it’s no different.

In fact, it's our job to reflect, and then use those reflections to build solutions for a brighter future for Tennessee. As we take stock of 2021, engage in conversations around school funding reform and prepare for the 2022 legislative session, we cannot adequately plan for Tennessee's future without prioritizing the needs of Tennessee children.

Research has repeatedly proven that high-quality early care and education from birth through third grade is the critical foundation for future academic and workforce success with strong returns on investment. Yet 68 percent of Tennessee third graders are not proficient in reading or in math – a dire problem that has worsened due to pandemic-induced learning loss.

The time is now

Tennessee simply must address early education this year as a top priority. The time is now to expand Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program so that any 4-year-old whose parents want them to attend have the option to do so, especially those who are economically disadvantaged or otherwise at-risk.

Why the urgency? Put simply, the need is great, the benefits are clear, and it is long overdue.

Over the past decade, we along with our fellow lawmakers and the administration have taken important steps to improve Pre-K programs, including the passage of the Pre-K Quality Act in 2016. Likewise, our school administrators and educators have made tremendous improvements in our Pre-K classrooms. Last year, efforts resulted in Tennessee being identified as one of only 12 states to meet 9 of 10 nationally recognized quality benchmarks. Despite these gains, Pre-K remains elusive for most Tennessee children and families because the program itself hasn't been meaningfully expanded in nearly 15 years.

Currently, only 22 percent of Tennessee 4-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded Pre-K programs, and more than 75 percent of school districts who reported to the Tennessee Department of Education cite wait lists for Pre-K classrooms.

Pre-K is a proven tool for success

Pre-K is a proven tool that is severely underutilized and underfunded. Those students who are lucky enough to have access are granted a world of educational opportunities.

A recent study found that children who attended Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than those who did not attend.

Moreover, the students who went on to effective schools for kindergarten through third grade maintained their academic advantage in the years that followed. Third grade is a critical benchmark for reading and math proficiency. Additional data shows that children not proficient by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school and 60 percent less likely to pursue a college degree.

It's what Tennesseans want

Tennesseans overwhelmingly understand the need. In a recent survey of Tennessee voters conducted by Tennesseans for Quality Early Education, 89 percent said they believe our state's Voluntary Pre-K program should be available to all Tennessee 4-year-olds, and 87 percent support increasing state funding to make that possible.

A resolution to expand Pre-K

Armed with sound research on the benefits of Pre-K, we should all be ready to roll up our sleeves and find ways to expand Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program so that every 4-year-old has access to the opportunities it creates.

We've made a resolution to come together for Tennessee's children in 2022. We'll use our voices in discussions about school funding reform and in the legislature to make the case for expanding Voluntary Pre-K for the first time in over a decade. It's what Tennesseans want, it's what our children need, and what our state deserves.

*Sen. Ferrell Haile (District 18) serves as the Senate Speaker Pro Tempore and is a member of the Education Committee and the school funding review steering committee. Rep. Mark White (District 83) is chairman of the Education Administration Committee and a member of the school funding review steering committee.*