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My view: High quality preschool closes achievement gap for at-risk children

By Gavin Reese

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Devony Rodriguez is a preschool student in Granite School District's high quality preschool program at Hilldale Elementary School in West Valley City. (Stuart Johnson, Deseret News)

The Education Interim Committee on Sept. 19 heard and discussed research based on Granite School District's high quality Title I preschool program. The research proved the program was successful in addressing school readiness, closing the achievement gap for at-risk children and reducing special education costs.

Sen. Aaron Osmond initially drafted the piece of legislation in 2011 based on research started by Mark Innocenti, director of the Early Intervention Research Institute at the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University, and continued as part of United Way of Salt Lake's Collective Impact partnership with Voices for Utah Children, Granite School District and Goldman Sachs.

During the hearing, Osmond discussed how the study, which began in 2005 and is ongoing, tracked at-risk 4-year-olds through grade school as they participated in quality education programs at 11 Title 1 schools in the Granite

School District. Research shows that these children, many of whom would have been placed in special education classes, were able to close the achievement gap by the time they started kindergarten, and nearly all of the students remained at the top of their class through fourth grade. This reduction in special education resources can save the state millions of dollars, which can then be reinvested into the preschool program to serve more children.

For those looking for effective and efficient ways to close the achievement gap and boost student achievement in Utah, Osmond's High Quality Preschool bill should be a top priority for the 2013 legislative session. Knowing many of the youth in United Way of Salt Lake's, or UWSL, service area lack opportunity at an early age, UWSL is committed to ensuring children have access to early childhood programs proven to close the achievement gap and reduce special education use.

Unfortunately, Utah will be facing another tight budget year, where limited resources must be spread across competing priorities. As Osmond stated, "One of the challenges we have is the reality that funding today's immediate problems will always trump the long-term investment conversation ... [but] we have to start talking about solving long-term problems with short-term solutions that really will impact the growing special education use and that will close the achievement gap moving forward."

As Utah looks at where to invest our precious tax dollars, we must ensure we are putting our money into programs such as high quality preschool that are proven to save millions of dollars down the road and ensure all children enter school ready to learn and have the opportunity to reach their potential.

Gavin Reese is an attorney at Ray, Quinney and Nebeker. He sits on the Board of Directors for United Way of Salt Lake, and is the Chair of United Way of Salt Lake's Young Leaders donor network.

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