

**Remarks of Seattle City Councilmember Tim Burgess
to the Washington State DEL Conference
Hilton Seattle Airport Hotel & Conference Center**

Tuesday, March 3, 2015 11:30 a.m.

Every child deserves a strong and fair start in school and every child can learn. These are core values we believe regardless of where a child lives, their economic status, or the color of their skin.

A few years ago, my colleagues and I set out on a journey to see how we could make these values a reality for our kids. We wanted to know what it would take and where we should invest our limited resources.

Very early on we realized that changing life outcomes would mean investing very early. So, in 2011 we asked Seattle voters to renew the Families & Education Tax Levy so we could add more elementary school programs to our existing middle and high school programs. And to do that, we asked the voters to double the size of this special property tax.

Now, 2011 was not far removed from the Great Recession of 2008-2009. Some hints of economic recovery were emerging, but it was still a tough time for many.

With strong political leadership from then-Mayor McGinn, myself, and community education advocates, we made the case to Seattle voters and they responded.

Did they ever! Sixty-four percent voted “yes” to raise their property taxes to fund earlier investment in our kids.

That experience motivated us to look even deeper, to study the academic literature on what could change a child’s life by giving them a strong and fair start. The answer we found was providing at least one year of high-quality preschool.

So, we started on a new journey to educate ourselves and build a coalition of people and organizations that could help us create a high-quality preschool program for Seattle.

We brought national experts to testify before the City Council. We distributed journal articles and passed out books on early learning. We travelled to the east coast—to Boston, Jersey City, and Washington, D. C.—and met with school principals and teachers. We visited classrooms. We met with officials from the White House and federal departments.

That study mission involved about 40 individuals representing preschool providers, unions, Seattle’s public schools, the Mayor and County Executive. We wanted to see first-hand preschool programs that were making a difference for their kids.

From that experience, we started to develop the Seattle Preschool Program. Modeled primarily after Boston’s experience, we focused on the factors that research showed would actually move the needle in preparing kids for kindergarten and beyond.

Those factors were . . .

- At least six hours a day, Monday through Friday, of play-based learning.
- A teacher-student ratio of 1:10.

- Lead teachers with BA degrees and early learning certification, paid on par with public school teachers.
- Continual in-classroom coaching and mentoring of teachers.
- And, an evidence-based curriculum that would contribute to strong child-led instruction and social-emotional development.

We came away from our study mission and our consultation with the experts with a strong belief that we should proceed slowly; that a focus on quality was more important than quantity.

We developed a ballot measure to launch the initial, four-year phase-in of the Seattle Preschool Program and placed it before voters last November. Unfortunately, a competing ballot measure from a citizen initiative was also advanced and Seattle voters were presented with a complicated choice—should either of the measures—Proposition 1A or Proposition 1B—be enacted into law and, if so, which one.

Sixty-eight percent of voters answered the first question “yes” and Proposition 1B, the city government’s preferred measure, was approved by 69% of voters. The Seattle Preschool Program was on its way to reality.

Under our plan, families earning up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level will learn free tuition; families earning more will pay on a sliding scale; the more you earn the more you will pay.

We will open our first classrooms this September.

Why is this important to my city?

Because nearly a quarter of all schoolchildren in Seattle Public Schools can’t read at grade level in the Third Grade. This statistic is significantly worse for our African American, Hispanic, Native American and immigrant children. Not reading at grade level in the Third Grade is a very strong predictor that a child won’t graduate from high school.

What the evidence shows is that kids who attend high-quality preschool, compared to their peers who do not . . .

- Enter kindergarten better able to learn and with stronger “executive function” skills, like knowing how to perform tasks, play well with other kids, and follow simple directions.
- They have higher graduation rates from high school and lower rates of teen pregnancy.
- They have higher college entrance and graduation rates.
- They earn more as adults and have better health.

Who wouldn’t want these outcomes for their kids?

And if that’s not enough, national research shows that every dollar invested in quality preschool returns five to seven dollars in reduced costs and economic opportunity.

How did we achieve these great results? Here are four key factors.

First, we set specific goals. We did that with the 2011 Families & Education—double the tax to reach back to elementary school with our academic enrichment efforts. And, we set

specific goals to establish what will become Seattle’s universal, high-quality preschool for the city’s three and four year olds. Set specific goals.

Second, we mustered a broad coalition of individuals and organizations to support both of these efforts. Strong community advocates are an absolute must to help spread the message—labor unions, faith-based groups, education leaders, parents, PTSAs, and the media. Build a coalition of advocates.

Third, we pledged to follow the evidence of what works for kids and to remain steadfast in our commitment to focus on the children. The evidence is clear about what makes a difference for preparing our littlest learners; we didn’t deviate from the science. Follow the evidence.

Finally, strong political leadership is essential. Our Mayor and a strong majority of my colleagues on the City Council stood firm . . . business as usual wasn’t working—and hadn’t worked for decades—and we wanted to change course. You must have strong political leadership.

That’s what we did in Seattle and it’s what you can do in your community as well . . . because our children need a strong and fair start.