



**Matt McGue**

GUEST COLUMNIST

## ***Families need access to quality pre-K***

In a matter of weeks, Mississippi lawmakers will have the opportunity to say yes to a request to support an early education program that is having a big impact on children's lives. This opportunity is at the very front of my mind as I consider efforts by my own church to do more for needy kids and families.

While we work on a number of fronts to address problems that affect our community, one of our most visible efforts is our "HOPE Truck." We drive it through apartment communities where we distribute free ice cream, fresh fruits and vegetables, and educational materials. The experience is a great source of joy thanks to the big smiles from kids.

Despite the happy interactions, I often pray for these kids as we drive away. I pray they are going back to safe homes headed by people who love them. But I also pray that they will grow up to create stable homes for their own children and become solid citizens.

To that end, I see the importance of education, because without it, many young people drop out of school and struggle to provide for their families. With it, many good things are possible, including college or vocational training, meaningful careers, and the economic security people need to care for their families and give back to their communities.

Providing low-income families access to quality early education is one of the best ways to achieve these

outcomes. Both parents and teachers testify to the power of preschool experiences for developing a foundation for literacy, math and social skills that are vital for academic achievement. Equally important, research on the impact of Mississippi's Early Learning Collaborative program shows they're right.

So far, 11 communities have participated in the program since it was created through bipartisan legislation in 2013. To gauge the program's effectiveness, the Mississippi Department of Education set a score to determine how many participating children were "kindergarten-ready" when they finished. While all 11 communities saw higher scores, children in eight communities actually met or exceeded this readiness score.

The value of early education programs has also been bolstered by a report from Mississippi State University that showed children who attended were 1.5 times more likely to be proficient in reading by the third grade.

As a pastor, I am compelled by Scripture (Proverbs 31:8a) to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves," and am therefore strongly behind this effort to get children on track for success. I am not alone. Three years ago, the law enforcement community supported the creation of this program because of the connection between early learning and reducing crime. Lawmakers also heard from retired military leaders, who advocate for quality preschool to address the fact about 1 in 5 Mississippi residents who try to join the military cannot do so because they can't pass the entrance exam assessing math, reading and problem-solving skills.

We now have the opportunity to voice our support again. Referencing the program's success, the Mississippi Department of Education has requested an additional \$6 million in funding so the program can serve more at-risk children. It has also asked for \$3 million for the "Excel by 5" program, which prepares communities to qualify for the program.

Heeding these modest requests is the right thing to do because it enables us to give vulnerable children a leg up toward success in school.



It's also the smart thing to do because it directs our resources toward an educational approach with a proven impact on that success. Our children are depending on us to do what is both right and smart for the sake of their futures, and ours.

*Matt McGue is pastor of One Church in Ridgeland.*