BEVERAGE TAX PROVIDES RESOURCES FOR PHILADELPHIANS WHO NEED IT MOST | OPINION

Rev. James S. Hall Jr. | January 22, 2019

Ever since 5-year-old Makayla Grant of Northeast Philly started kindergarten this fall, she has been thriving. She runs to her classroom in the morning and joyfully takes part in conversations with teachers and classmates. She is often her class’ student of the week, and was October’s student of the month. She loves learning to read and write.

Makayla’s instant love for school is a testament to her devoted parents, Eric and Lakesha. It is also a testament to the fact that kindergarten is not her first school experience. You see, Makayla is among 4,000 Philadelphia children — our children — who have been enrolled in quality pre-K funded by the Philadelphia Beverage Tax. Makayla spent two years in PHLpreK, and the benefits, according to her dad, were clear from the first day of kindergarten. This little girl was ready.

Getting children like Makayla school-ready is critical to their long term success. Fewer than half of Philadelphia’s students start kindergarten ready to learn. These children lag behind their peers and unfortunately never catch up. But PHLpreK is changing that, and improving equity across our education system for the kids who need it the most.

The fact is, our city’s children’s ability to reach their potential is being stifled every day by the environment they in which they are being raised. Our communities are suffering from rampant poverty, under-resourced schools, and aging libraries, playgrounds, and recreation centers. The need for significant reinvestment in our neighborhoods has never been more pressing.
Free, quality pre-K doesn’t just help kids. It also alleviates the untenable costs of quality early learning for low-income parents and working families. Before PHLpreK, Makayla’s family had been paying privately every month for child care, but PHLpreK removed the burden. In fact, more than two-thirds of parents and caregivers say they’ve been able to find work, increase their hours, and/or pursue education because of PHLpreK.

Beverage tax impact doesn’t end there. The city also has created 12 community centers to offer more programs and services to students, families, and community members. These schools are located in neighborhoods with pressing needs, such as homelessness, unemployment, and health disparities, and about 75 percent of students come from low-income households. They provide out-of-school time programs, basic necessities, and job training programs. Since 2016, the initiative has distributed more than 100,000 pounds of free and nutritious food to students, families, and residents.

Then there’s Rebuild, also funded by the tax, through which parks, recreation centers and libraries will benefit from hundreds of millions of dollars of upgrades and renovations. Sixty-four sites have been selected so far, each in desperate need of repairs. Among them is the McPherson Square library, which lies at the center of the opioid epidemic, and Vare Recreation Center in Point Breeze, so dilapidated it is literally on the brink of collapse.

With these improvements, our kids will no longer have to play in cold rooms because there is no heat. They’ll soon have more safe places to go after school. And they’ll be given more opportunities to participate in programs that will support their development. But if we let these facilities stay in their current state of disrepair, our youngest and most vulnerable residents are the ones who stand to suffer the most.

For too long, our neighborhoods have been overlooked. Mayor Kenney and City Council are doing the right thing by investing the resources from the beverage tax equitably. It’s never an easy decision to pass a new tax, but when it means providing resources for Philadelphians who need it the most, it’s simply the right thing to do.

Today, Makayla’s little sister Taelor is a proud PHLpreK student, and her parents know that she, too, will thrive once she arrives in kindergarten. The beverage tax will help ensure that Makayla’s success in kindergarten becomes the norm in Philadelphia — that her story becomes so common, we don’t even need to boast about it.

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