

Opinion

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For a better future, approve Best Starts for Kids levy

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Donna Grethen / Op-Art

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As King County voters begin reviewing their ballots for the Aug. 3 primary, one of the choices they will have is the Best Starts for Kids levy. This is a critical program that helps thousands of our most vulnerable families and children in our communities of color, who have to deal with inequities resulting from historical and structural racism.

We fully support this proposition and encourage voters to approve it.

The levy assists families with education, housing and provides interventions for at-risk youth. These challenges, especially those dealing with

racist structures, were generations in the making and will take years to address.

Best Starts for Kids funds ParentChild+, a successful program that has helped thousands of families prepare their children for an education system that is fraught with racial inequities because it was designed for white families.

ParentChild+ supports families by having early learning specialists visit 2- and 3-year-old children and their parents in low-income households twice a week for two years. The program is offered to underserved communities through 16 community-based organizations in King County.

Research over decades demonstrates that children who participate in ParentChild+ are better prepared for kindergarten and are 30 percentage points more likely to graduate.

The program provides living-wage employment for the early-learning specialists, most of whom are from culturally diverse backgrounds. They are effective at supporting families because they are matched with families from similar backgrounds with whom they share language and culture.

The levy supports small, community-based organizations that are led by Black, Indigenous or other people of color. These agencies are closest to the problems their communities face, so they are closest to the solutions.

We at United Way of King County believe strongly that agencies centered in BIPOC communities, working in a culturally relevant way, yield powerful results. ParentChild+ is an example, and so are the hundreds of investments the levy is already making in community-based programs.

Extending the levy will aid these community-based organizations in sustaining the vital work they're doing to support families and their children.

The levy will help families access affordable, high-quality child care, removing a barrier that particularly impacts single parents who work or go to school. It also has provisions for improved access to health care, including mental health.

Many youth in our schools feel left out of the education system because of the racial barriers they face. Black students, for example, have lower graduation rates than their white peers and are disciplined at disproportionately higher rates. They don't receive

the support they need, in many cases because they cannot identify with their teachers, most of whom are white.

The levy will fund agencies that help disadvantaged youth from falling into the school-to-prison pipeline, which too often leads them to leave school and prevents them from getting well-paying jobs and leading a successful life. Early interventions help to keep them in school and out of jail, leading better outcomes for our families.

We could be on the verge of a dramatic increase in homelessness due to the eviction moratoriums, which are expected to expire later this year. The BSK levy can alleviate that impact through its homelessness provisions, which has already helped thousands of families in the county.

While some voters will frown upon the increase to the current levy, it is much more effective and efficient to support families, children and youth now, instead of letting people fall through the cracks of our flawed safety net. The Seattle Times estimates that the average homeowner will pay \$45 in additional annual taxes. This amount will go a long way to pay for improved education, access to health care and homelessness prevention.

Our future and our progress depend on the success of all of our communities, and that success starts with our children. We endorse the Best Starts for Kids levy and encourage all King County voters to approve the measure for a better future for all of our communities.

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