

The Report Card

While states such as Georgia, Florida and Oklahoma move forward progressively and ambitiously with expanded preschool programs in their states, our legislators in the House of Representatives donned blindfolds to the demanding evidence supporting the benefits, immediate and long-term, of more educational inclusion. The governor's proposal to eliminate the 30,000-child waiting list for state-funded child care was the victim of a scalpel in the House's budget plan.



Tom Casey

It is not only the disdain for the preponderance of documented positives that result from engaging kids in such programs at an early age, but the shallow and misguided reasons offered by Speaker of the House Robert DeLeo for not including the funding needed. More on that momentarily ...

The governor's plan has been lauded across many bipartisan civic and business groups as a "potential game-changer" for poor children and their families. One of the most heralded social experiments of the last 50 years was the Perry Preschool Study, and it offers a solid basis for early childhood intervention and education. Comparing a preschooler with others not in a program resulted in significant differences — higher IQs, less grade school retention, fewer dropouts and higher median lifetime incomes. The study showed that fathers who had gone to preschool were 30-40 percent more engaged in raising their children.

Of course, the availability of preschool for all without expense (sometimes very costly) allows the parents to work and with that the chances increase often for a safer and a healthier and more supportive home environment.

A major component of Gov. Patrick's plan is to make the preschool care more educational, rather than just an expansion

of settings that are primarily babysitting services. About one-half of the \$131 million increase would be proposed for boosting salaries, funding professional development and increasing grants for innovation and creativity in program expansion.

The state has introduced a rating system for preschools, and as it builds up to a \$350 million investment by 2017, progress will be monitored and

Please see **REPORT CARD/5** results demanded to assure compliance with funding stipulations. Only 58 percent of the 49,000 children currently enrolled in state-funded care are in programs with an educational component. Only 1 percent possesses a "level four" highest quality rating. We have work to do!

James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, estimates that for every \$1 spent on high quality preschool, the public realizes about \$7 in savings. In Utah, one school district has estimated \$1.7 million in savings over the past few years by decreasing the need for special education and remedial services.

But, really, the commitment to providing an opportunity for every young child a stable, enriching and healthy climate in which to grow and learn with each other is what it's all about.

In defending the decision to nix the pre-school appropriation request, DeLeo expressed concern about the Department of Early Education and Care, which oversees the program, "not managing its money and caseload efficiently." Specifically, he ques-

tioned the sudden rise in the waiting list numbers from 30,000 to 50,000 and then asks, if there is a waiting list, how could the budget for the department end with a surplus last year. Well, Mr. Speaker, in the case of the waiting, your numbers are fallacious (word of the week). The additional 20,000 students you challenge are not preschool, but afternoon program waiting enrollees, which is another issue. And, as Commissioner of DEEC Thomas Weber explained, small surpluses existed in past accounts to avoid running a deficit at the end of the year, which would force removing children from day care. If only others were so cost conscious!

Methinks, Mr. Speaker, more attention should be devoted to getting your own house in order and managing the affairs of the state Legislature. The ethics issues of the past decade have been disgraceful, and the patronage palace that is Beacon Hill is an affront to public service. More transparency and openness in legislative decision-making would also prove to be a welcome and long overdue step toward Democracy as we understand it.

Help us build an infrastructure of safe and prosperous passage for our kids, please.

"I am not afraid of storms for I am just learning to sail my ship." — Louisa May Alcott

