

Starting early [US] ^[1]

Author: Boston Globe

Source: Boston Globe

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Oct 2002

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Imagine a parade of toddlers crowding the State House to demand better preschool education. They might wave toys and chant in child-pitched voices: "Learn the alphabet today; master the world tomorrow."

It won't happen. But this morning at the State House, business leaders, unions, educators, and parents will kick off a campaign for universal early childhood education. It's a wise plea for legislation to create statewide programs for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

What does a preschooler need to know? In 2000, a National Research Council report called "Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers" had some answers. The overall goal is to encourage social, emotional, physical, and cognitive progress.

Specifically, children need to develop skills and learn concepts. Knowing how to count out loud isn't enough. Children need to understand quantities. Similarly, reciting the alphabet is cute, but children should also know that letters are the building blocks of words. They should learn that pictures in books are symbols of real things. And preschool is a chance to master the basics: follow directions, play well with others, and be excited about learning.

There are many ways that education can include activities and conceptual lessons. "Eager to Learn" suggests preschool classrooms with a nature center, an art center, a puppet center, or a "real world" center such as a play kitchen or restaurant. Areas for playing with blocks should also have pictures of buildings and construction toys, so that children make the connection between what they build and construction projects of the adult world.

The obvious benefit of early education is giving more children the academic edge they need in a high-tech economy.

Local advocates hope that in 10 years the state will have a flexible system that would offer full- and part-time programs in cities, suburbs, and rural communities. Four hours a day would be free. A professional development system would ensure that preschool teachers were trained, well paid, and had easy access to continuing professional education courses. The system would use the existing infrastructure of preschools, daycare centers, and Head Start programs, as well as building new programs where they are needed.

A daunting challenge is money. Massachusetts's grim finances have led to drastic cuts, not innovative programs. Nonetheless, Massachusetts can get started, working to raise statewide standards for early education. Margaret A. Blood, the Early Education for All campaign director would like to see six pilot projects started. They could be evaluated by local early-education professors.

Georgia has had a statewide early education program for 4-year-olds since 1993. Massachusetts should catch up, building a child-sized bridge into the 21st century.

-Reprinted from The Boston Globe.

Region: United States ^[2]

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