

MARY L. REED: System keeps youngest learners at disadvantage

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QUINCY — Imagine, if you can, a pre-school teacher in a program that attempts to educate children from low-income families. Though this teacher desperately wants to advance her own education, and thus benefit the children under her care, her pay is as minimal as her opportunity to become a better teacher.

There's a good chance that she will soon move on to a job, probably outside the field, that pays better.

Another novice will take her place, move on before long for similar reasons, and only the children will remain, certainly no better for the experience.

Studies will continue to show that their vocabulary levels are perilously low, especially when compared to children of a similar age from better economic backgrounds.

The lack of consistency in the workforce responsible for these kids guarantees perpetuation of the problem.

We at the Bessie Tartt Wilson Children's Foundation have long championed the cause of increased funding for early childhood education — a long-neglected area burdened by low-paying jobs and an equally low opportunity for members of the workforce to advance their own education.

At a time when this nation's economy has been placed under a record strain, it is up to every educational advocate to ensure that the needs of these children aren't forgotten.

And that's a problem, considering the universal competition for funding and support that is guaranteed to only grow.

Innumerable studies have proven that there is a strong link between compensation and access to higher education. This equation is in turn connected to the quality of early education for our children.

But until this connection can succeed, the men and women in the field have to clear the hurdle of low-income jobs.

They require financial assistance, increased wages, career advisement and mentoring.

Unfortunately, Massachusetts lags well behind the national standard in this area.

As incomprehensible as it might be — especially for a state with such a powerful academic heritage — Massachusetts has fallen well behind when it comes to retaining quality workers in early childhood education.

The state has a 26 percent turnover rate in the early childhood education workforce — a shocking number when compared to the national turnover rate of 9.8 percent.

But there are solutions. There are ways to improve that retention rate.

A loan forgiveness or amnesty program would ease a familiar problem — stultification of those in the field unable to pursue higher education due to previous loan defaults, and a lack of flexibility in funds like the Early Educators Scholarship.

This workforce needs career counseling, which in turn needs funding to be effective.

Educational and professional materials need a wider circulation in languages other than English.

Above all, compensation and benefits have to improve.

If not, the gap between the development of low-income children and those in the middle class will continue to grow.

It's time that more people who can make a difference in Massachusetts take action.

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