

YOUR VIEW: Early education: Funding critical to universal access

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In sounding the alarm recently about the 10,000 young people who drop out of Massachusetts high schools each year, a special state commission wisely recommended looking at elementary school achievement to determine which children are most at risk of not finishing high school.

I would look even earlier: High-quality early education and care is one of the most effective strategies we have to prevent children from quitting school.

One landmark study, for instance, finds that low-income children who attended a high-quality early education program are 30 percent more likely to finish high school than children who did not. The National Early Learning Panel identifies early education — pre-kindergarten and kindergarten — as an important strategy to promote early literacy.

Fast forward to third grade, and research again underscores the point: Almost three-quarters of children who don't read well by the time they finish third grade will continue to struggle in school and are significantly less likely to graduate from high school than classmates who are good readers.

The link is particularly striking in a city such as New Bedford, where 38 percent of third graders were not yet proficient readers on last spring's MCAS, and nearby Fall River, where 35 percent of third graders did not yet read proficiently. In both cities, according to state statistics, only 56 percent of high school freshmen graduate four years later.

We know that high-quality early education makes a difference, and the federal government is on the brink of making unprecedented investments in early education. New Bedford is also poised to make great strides.

The city's schools provide full-day kindergarten. New Bedford is home to a wide variety of private and public early education and care programs, and 56 percent of the city's three- and four-year-olds attend one of them. These programs need the resources to deliver the quality programs we know will make a difference for children. They need resources, for instance, for teachers to obtain post-secondary training and resources to compensate the teachers financially when they do.

New Bedford residents certainly know the harshness of the recession and certainly feel the sting of each round of state budget cuts. Beyond the current crisis, however, is the proven record of early education.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis estimates each public dollar invested in high-quality early education yields a 16 percent rate of return. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman calls investing in young children "America's best economic stimulus."

The state's pilot universal pre-kindergarten program, which provides a modest stream of grants for programs to invest in quality, suffered a 26 percent drop in funding at the beginning of the fiscal year and, thankfully, was spared further reductions in last week's mid-year cuts. Yet we still have far to go to build a statewide system of high-quality programs.

I come to the November 5 panel discussion on early education that The Standard-Times is sponsoring fresh off an inspiring meeting in Springfield, a city similar to New Bedford in both demographics and the challenges facing an urban school system.

A century after learn-to-read pioneer Theodore (Dr.) Seuss Geisel was born there, his hometown is again incubating fresh and exciting ideas about early literacy.

The Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation recently launched Reading Success by Fourth Grade, an innovative, citywide public-private partnership to ensure that Springfield's children make the critical transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

The initiative, members of the Early Education for All Campaign Advisory Committee learned, builds on Cherish Every Child (CHECH), a partnership to ensure Springfield's children are ready for kindergarten. CHECH's accomplishments include working with the city's early education and care providers to develop a plan for high-quality universal pre-kindergarten, creating a program to train early educators, and piloting a home visiting program.

Now the state Department of Early Education and Care and the city's public schools are talking about ways to make children's transition from early education and care programs to public schools as smooth and effective as possible.

New Bedford, too, possesses the community leadership to form similar collaborations, galvanize the city and help build a statewide movement to ensure that all children read well by the time they enter fourth grade.

We will not succeed in that mission unless all children in southeastern Massachusetts and across the state have access to high-quality early education and care and full-day kindergarten.

Editor's note: This essay coincides with The Standard-Times' public forum, "Public Preschool and Full-day Kindergarten: The New Norm?" taking place tonight, Nov. 5, from 7-9 p.m. at Buttonwood Park Zoo. The writer featured here will be part of panel of speakers.

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