

JUNE 03, 2016

The Boston Globe

By Shirley Leung GLOBE COLUMNIST

Putting early education front and center in Mass.

House Speaker Bob DeLeo is done talking about the value of preschool education. It's time to get it right in Massachusetts.

This week DeLeo began meeting with a group of business leaders to develop a turned into legislation or new programs by the next budget cycle.

More than expanding charter schools, reforming preschool could be one of the most important education initiatives for the Commonwealth in decades. Study after study indicates that kids who are schooled at an early age graduate from high school and college at higher rates than those who do not. They are also less likely to abuse drugs, end up in jail, or rely on public assistance.

Yet in the fight for scarce public dollars, early education has been low on the priority list, overshadowed by the needs in K-12 and public colleges.

"We're so worried about kindergarten and up, but we're really not setting forth the foundation for education," DeLeo told me in an interview Wednesday at his State House office. "In talking it through, I found that we really weren't paying enough attention to early education."

Even though Massachusetts was the first state to create a department of early education in 2005, rolling out universal preschool has been more complicated than anyone thought. Of the nearly 225,000 children who are between 3 and 5 years old in Massachusetts, about 30 percent remain unschooled, according to advocacy group Strategies for Children.

Of those in a preschool, only a quarter are in a publicly financed program. That means, by and large, kids in preschool are from families who can foot the bill at a private center, which at an average cost of \$12,800 a year is the most expensive in the country.

DeLeo sought out the business community, knowing they would get it. Good preschools are an investment in the future workforce, and give working parents peace of mind. What he didn't expect was the response.

"The enthusiasm, I have to tell you, was surprising to me," DeLeo said. Business leaders "felt they were missing out on an opportunity to correct something."

Executives have been out front on lifting the state cap on charter schools, pushing for more math and science courses, and creating workforce development partnerships at community colleges. Early education — which encompasses programs and schooling for kids 0 to 5 — hasn't been high on the agenda.

"My experience is that early education and care have been important to the business community, but it hasn't ever been anyone's No. 1 issue," said JD Chesloff, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable. "It takes leadership and a champion."

That's where DeLeo and Jay Gonzalez come in. Chesloff's group began taking a closer look at the issue earlier this year at the urging of Gonzalez, chief executive of CeltiCare Health and a former administration and finance secretary under Deval Patrick. After Gonzalez went into the private sector, Patrick appointed him chair of the

state board of early education and care. Gonzalez served only a year before Governor Charlie Baker appointed a new chair, but Gonzalez's time on the board made a lasting impression.

"This has become my favorite issue," said Gonzalez, who is a member of the roundtable. "This is the most formative point in the person's life — 90 percent of brain development happens before age 5 — yet it's a time in the life when we as society are doing the least."

After reading studies on how early education can close the achievement gap and increase chances of success in careers and quality of life, the roundtable's board voted in March to make early education one of its issues.

The Roundtable was among more than a dozen business groups, including the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, and the Alliance for Business Leadership, that gathered Wednesday in DeLeo's office to strategize about early education.

DeLeo himself got interested in the topic two years ago, intrigued by similar studies that had caught the eye of roundtable members.

"The one that really got to me was the fact of lower incarceration rates," said DeLeo. A study that has been following low-income children in Chicago for two decades found that those who attended preschool and full-day kindergarten experienced a 22 percent reduction in felony arrests and 28 percent reduction in jail time.

The speaker decided he wanted early education to be one his priorities this year, and has already included an extra \$10 million in the House budget to improve programming and help boost the salaries of preschool teachers.

All the buzz about early education has been focused on the concept of preschool for all. DeLeo wants to refocus the idea on quality, which hinges on retaining teachers. Early education primarily consists of private sector and nonprofit providers, and public subsidies are directed to these centers so low-income children can enroll.

Early education teachers are paid on average about \$25,000 a year, while public school teachers earn a starting salary of roughly \$45,000, which explains why the annual turnover rate among early educators is about 30 percent.

"You can have world-class standards, you can have a world-class curriculum, but you want to make sure you have the strongest workforce possible," said Tom Weber, the state commissioner of early education and care. "The early education workforce is the delivery system."

Weber tells me the state has learned a lot in the decade since it created a department of early education. A better preschool system will be about getting providers to increase wages for early educators, while trying to build scale so more children have access.

It won't be easy, but at least everyone knows what's at stake. It's an important moment for early education in the Commonwealth, which makes DeLeo and the business community's timing impeccable.

