

By Jay Gonzalez and JD Chesloff/Guest Columnists

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Gonzalez and Chesloff: Making early education a priority

One of the highest priority issues for the business community in recent years has been improving the workforce pipeline. Surveys have shown that 69 percent of employers across Massachusetts have difficulty finding people qualified to fill open positions. This means our businesses are not achieving their full potential. It also means that people looking for jobs are missing out on opportunities that exist because they aren't qualified for them.

The business community has engaged in different initiatives over time to support the work of universities, community colleges, workforce training programs, vocational technical schools and K-12 public schools to improve the quality and supply of our workforce. However, there has not been sufficient focus on the point in the workforce development pipeline that can have the biggest impact – the very beginning.

That is starting to change.

The Massachusetts Business Roundtable – an organization of CEOs and senior executives from some of the state's largest employers – recently formed an Ad Hoc Committee on Early Childhood Education and added the issue to its policy and advocacy agenda. The Alliance for Business Leadership, which consists of a group of progressive-minded CEOs and other business leaders, has also identified early childhood education as a key priority.

Why are business leaders beginning to see early childhood education as critical to workforce development? Because the data makes clear that it is.

Research shows that participation in high-quality, pre-K programs increases a child's likelihood of graduating from high school, graduating from college and being employed. If children start school ready to learn, they are twice as likely to read at grade level by age 8. If children read at grade level by age 8, they are four times more likely to graduate from high school. Those who participate in high quality early childhood programs are twice as likely to attend college.

In other words, quality early childhood education increases the talent pool available to meet employers' workforce needs. It also gives our children a better shot at succeeding in school and being qualified for good job opportunities that exist.

There are other important benefits as well. High-quality, pre-K programs allow parents who might otherwise have to stay home with the kids the flexibility to participate in the workforce and achieve

financial self-sufficiency for their families. It also yields an attractive return on investment for government and taxpayers by increasing income tax revenue and decreasing government spending on crime, welfare and remedial education.

All of these benefits, however, are only realized if the early childhood programs are of high quality. The most significant determinant of quality is the teacher in the classroom. Developing, professionalizing and retaining the early education workforce is critical.

Yet, in Massachusetts, the typical annual salary for an early educator is only about \$25,000, an estimated 30 percent of the early education workforce leaves each year, and the workforce development infrastructure is insufficient to create a robust pipeline of quality early educators.

Robert DeLeo, the Speaker of the House, has engaged the business community to help. At a recent speech before the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, he announced the creation of a Business Advisory Group on Early Education to make findings and recommendations on how to best support and develop a high-quality early education and care workforce.

The recent engagement of the business community on this issue is encouraging, but more is needed. Improving the quality of our workforce is a business imperative, and improving the quality of early childhood education is critical to achieving that result.

Jay Gonzalez is president and CEO of CeltiCare Health. JD Chesloff is executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable. Both are members of the Business Advisory Group on Early Childhood Education.