

Preschool backers say they mean business

Mass. corporations help fund a glossy campaign touting the economic benefits of early learning

By Patricia Wen, Globe Staff, 10/9/2003

Some of the state's top business and education leaders launched a lobbying effort yesterday to build support for free preschool programs for every child, saying that the future of the Massachusetts work force depends on early education. The legislative proposal, to be touted in a novel campaign employing the language of economics and expensive television ads, is ambitious. It would have the state spend about \$1 billion a year for voluntary half-day programs for all children ages 3 and 4 and for full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds, regardless of their family's income. Given budget cutbacks on Beacon Hill, supporters say they will try to appeal to the public's intellect, rather than pull heartstrings, by emphasizing that the vitality of the state's economy depends on reaching children as early as possible.

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"It's economic development with an extraordinary level of return," said Arthur Rolnick, research director for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. He was the keynote speaker at a gathering of 250 people at Verizon Communications headquarters in Boston to discuss the effort.

The initiative, launched by the nonprofit group Early Education for All, has already received \$2 million in private donations to begin its lobbying strategy, including a \$300,000 media campaign of television commercials scheduled to start yesterday and ads in newspapers around the state. The Boston advertising firm Hill, Holliday, Connors, Cosmopolis Inc. produced for free a 30-second TV spot showing a preschool boy talking to classmates about changing the world. The ad highlights recent research showing that the bulk of a child's intellect and personality are developed by age 5.

The early childhood education bill, which the Legislature's education committee is slated to consider later this month, would be implemented over the next decade.

State figures show that roughly three in every four of the state's 240,000 children ages 3 to 5 attend some kind of early education program, but that the quality varies widely. Unless they choose to bypass early education and keep their 3- and 4-year-olds at home, parents typically pay for pre-school themselves.

Currently, Massachusetts requires communities to provide only half-day kindergarten, and roughly half of the state's cities and towns go beyond that by providing full-day programs.

Margaret Blood, director of Early Education for All, said she knows taxpayers need an intellectually forceful pitch to choose to publicly fund all early childhood education, something now in place only in Georgia.

"We need to make the case that learning starts before the bell rings for first grade," Blood said.

She said her group is also beginning a polling effort to gauge taxpayers' reaction to the early education campaign, including whether they would support a tax hike to pay for the programs.

House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran, who was joined at the forum by Senate President Robert E. Travaglini, said he doubts voters would support a tax hike for this endeavor now, especially when so many programs face cuts.

This year, state grants for early childhood education were cut from \$84 million to \$74 million.

But Finneran said he believes that the Early Education for All ad campaign, combined with grassroots lobbying, could help attract funding. He urged supporters of early childhood education to stress the long-term economic benefits, rather than emotional, feel-good themes.

But he said he could not guarantee funding in light of many competing needs, such as transportation, health care, and higher education.

"When you say yes to this, you're saying no to something else," Finneran said.

In keeping with the day's analytical focus, Rolnick, of the Federal Reserve Bank, cited a study of low-income black families from Ypsilanti, Mich., which started a preschool program in 1962. In tracking the children for more than two decades, researchers found that those who received a half-day of early childhood education, as well as home visits, had far higher high school graduation rates, achievement test scores, and future earnings than those in a control group who did not receive such early intervention.

Rolnick said his cost-benefit analysis shows that for every \$1 spent on children in the study, the government saved \$8 in unneeded future services, such as special education classes and other programs.

Several speakers noted that this campaign will probably be far harder to sell to the public than the Education Reform Act of 1993, which came at a time of state fiscal prosperity and focused on the core years of public education, from elementary school through high school.

Mara Aspinall, president of Genzyme Genetics and cochairwoman of the Early Education for All campaign, said the business community is aware of the difficulties ahead. "The business community sees this as a marathon, not a sprint," she said.

Political leaders said many statistics from yesterday's forum were compelling, but the critical ones involve tangible political support. Travaglini said he cares most about one number: 21, the simple majority in his 40-member Senate body.

"If you can get 21 senators to come to me making this a top priority, that's going to make my job a lot easier," he said.

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