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Article Series

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Massachusetts has historically been the leader in education. We were the first to publicly fund education, the first to provide kindergarten, the first to institute the expanded day movement, and the first to institute a Department of Early Childhood Education.

It was in 2005 that The House Committee on Education, Chaired by Representative Pat Haddad, passed a bill making Massachusetts the first in the nation to institute a Department of Early Childhood Education. Through her efforts, Fall River also received the first state grant for expanded day services.

However the top spot in education is far from assured. Universal Pre-kindergarten (also known as pre-k) and targeted pre-k are words commonly heard by educators, legislators and parents. I can assure you that Speaker DeLeo, our leadership and the majority of us in the legislature are committed to quality full day pre- k education.

In our last legislative session we supported several educational initiatives and made a significant increase in funding for early childhood education. Universal pre-k will take a huge collaborative effort and investment.

Many other states have made the commitment to investing in early childhood education. Education however is much more than Kindergarten thru grade 12. It is a lifelong process. It requires the combined commitment and resources of federal, state, and local governments.

A combined effort will make sure that our children receive a mandatory, high quality, pre-k education. It is essential that we invest in certified early childhood teachers, teacher training, curriculum support, class size and access for all children. This will require a sizable upfront investment. But research proves that it will pay off.

Developed countries like South Korea recently mandated universal access to all children at age 3. China promises to provide access to preschool to 70% of its children by 2020. Japan is doing the same.

It's not just other countries. Several states are also providing universal or targeted pre-k education. Mayor Martin Walsh of Boston, a former colleague in the legislature, stated that within two years all 6,000 4 yr. old children who reside in Boston will be enrolled in the cities universal pre-k program.

The results are clear. Children who attend a pre-k program at age 3 and 4 score higher in language arts, literacy, and math. They had higher grades overall. According to current research, the majority of children who attend pre-k are nearly a grade beyond those who do not by grade 5. These children had

improved MCAS scores. Grade retention within this group was higher and special education placement was substantially lower. This saves money by prevention of school failure and school dropout.

Pre-k provides the foundation upon which further learning can build. Success in school builds confidence, stimulates motivation, improves behavior, and prevents delinquency and crime. When children look forward to attending school, absenteeism decreases.

Academic outcomes are important, but we also need to look at the development of social skills. Many children arrive in kindergarten unable to speak clearly or communicate with others. Some have never seen a book, held a crayon, or used a paint brush.

A child's brain is 80% developed by age 3 and 90% developed by age 4. These are important developmental years. Children who live in poverty are at a disadvantage and will benefit the most from quality full day pre-k.

Economic gains are both immediate and long term. Parents will be able to reenter the work force, support their families, and contribute to the state economy. This will decrease public subsidies.

The benefits to one of our most vulnerable populations, children who live in poverty and their parents are inestimable.

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center reports that an estimated 105,000, 3 and 4 year old children in Massachusetts are not enrolled in a pre- k programs. Of that 105,000 it is estimated that just over 10,000 are paying privately for pre-k programs. That more than 52,000 children, 3 and 4 year olds are enrolled in a publicly supported pre-k program. Taking the giant leap into universal pre-k will take a few years; however targeted pre-k can begin now and start where it will have the most affect.

Gateway cities are the 26 mid-size cities in our state that face social and economic challenges. One third of their residents are under age 5. Half of those children are considered high risk. The majority of these children are not receiving pre- k education versus 60% of children state-wide that are enrolled in a pre-k program. Fall River is one of those cities and our children would benefit greatly by this plan.

The economic development argument for promoting pre-k education is not new. In fact today we have more rigorous social science evidence for expanding preschool than Horace Mann had when he first started public schools in Massachusetts. Who can doubt that America is a far different and far better country because of our past historical commitments to free public education? Early Childhood education today represents a continuation of that past progress. Our state, our city and our children will be brighter with the wise investment in quality pre-school education.

About EdUp

The EdUp Campaign is a production of the Education Committee of the Fall River Area Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Inc. EdUp strives to grow individual and community aspirations through a sustained and multidimensional outreach to students, parents, and other stakeholders throughout the Greater Fall River Area, and by demonstrating the power of education to change the future of the region and each of our roles in it. For more information about the Chamber and the Education Committee, please visit www.FallRiverChamber.com or call 508-676-8226.