

# Menino to Unveil Preschool Program

By James Vaznis | The Boston Globe | March 12, 2008

Mayor Thomas M. Menino is expected to unveil today a 10-year plan to better prepare children for school by focusing on programs that promote the development of a child's brain, starting at birth.

The multimillion-dollar effort will for the first time align many programs offered by a host of social service agencies, day-care centers, hospitals, libraries, and the public schools, as well as establish new programs.

"We talk about an achievement gap; it starts when kids are born," Menino said in a phone interview yesterday. "The first five years of a kid's life are the most important; that's when a kid's brain develops."

The initiative builds upon scientific research that has shown that brain and cognitive development at the earliest stages have long-term individual and societal impacts. The studies have led educators nationwide to concentrate more on offering services to babies and toddlers in hope that doing so will have better success in closing the achievement gap than waiting to tackle academic difficulties after children enroll in school.

The program will include outreach to parents, such as letting them know what services and programs are available at hospitals, libraries, and social service agencies, and informing them about the importance of reading to their children. It will also work with family day-care providers to ensure that they offer high-quality educational programs.

Ultimately, the program will seek to increase the percentage of children who are screened for developmental delays between birth and age 5, the percentage of parents who use hospital services for newborns, and the circulation of books at public libraries, among other indicators.

City officials, along with the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, spent the last year developing the program, taking advantage of a \$1 million in donations, two-thirds of which came from the Barr Foundation in Boston. The city and the United Way are each committing \$750,000 to get the program off the ground, while another \$3 million is expected from public and private funders.

"This is long overdue," Menino said of the program. "We are going to be a model of what other cities could replicate."