

Progress in the First Five Years

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PRESCHOOL children seem to have plenty of happy, leisurely time. But in truth, a developmental clock is ticking, and some of the youngest children are falling behind. They don't have the cognitive, emotional, and physical skills they need. A trained eye can see the difference on day one in kindergarten. Some children are ready to learn. Others, sadly, are beginning a career of trying to catch up.

Mayor Menino has a plan to help. Today he will launch Thrive in Five, designed to help Boston children from infancy to age 5 prepare for school. Menino's 10-year plan builds on existing initiatives to create a citywide system of formal and informal early childhood development. It would turn all of Boston into a resource center.

Whether people are at the hair dresser, the grocery store, or the pediatrician's office, they can find information about early childhood development. It might be a flyer for a high-quality day-care center or a library's reading program. It might be a fact sheet about motor skills or about how children's brain development can be harmed by toxic stress - caused by exposure to multiple injuries such as poverty, physical abuse, and domestic violence. Parents who are paying parking tickets could also see posters about helping children improve fine-motor or pre-reading skills.

It's a huge undertaking that needs to go far beyond promoting public awareness. Thrive in Five has to beef up the quality of existing preschool programs. Home visits that send nurses and other trained staff to visit expectant and new mothers should be expanded.

Fortunately, the mayor has assembled a planning team that includes educators, community and cultural organizations, city and state officials, and, most important, parents.

"No one knows your child like you do," says Gloria Weekes, a Hyde Park mother who is on the team and says that a good preschool environment has to be customer-centered, providing service with a smile to parents who work long hours, home-school their children, or don't know that they can ask about curricula and teaching methods.

The danger is that an effort as ambitious as Thrive in Five could start strong and then lose momentum. To avoid this, the tent poles have to be plunged deep. The program has a good start. An executive director will be hired and placed at the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley. And Menino has raised more than \$3 million, combining city funds with gifts from the United Way, Children's Hospital Boston, Partners HealthCare, and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

But it's informed parents and kindergarten teachers who have a special role, because they can see how children are doing. They'll need a loudspeaker - such as a website or annual report - so that they can alert the entire city if preschoolers aren't getting everything they need to thrive before they get to school.