



Finneran touts state's preschool progress

By Kevin Rothstein

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The prospects for universal preschool became brighter yesterday when the state's legislative leadership showcased the issue for their colleagues from around the country.

"This is a good opportunity to at least share the gospel at least as we see it, if not spread the gospel," said House Speaker Thomas Finneran, who spearheaded legislation expanding early childhood education.

As a result of Finneran's legislation, a new state office of Early Education and Care is being formed. That office will consolidate services from other state agencies and would eventually oversee the expansion of preschool to all 240,000 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts.

Gov. Mitt Romney [related, bio] quietly signed Finneran's bill into law Friday, laying the groundwork for a universal preschool program expected to cost more than \$1 billion a year, which could be in place in 10 years.

Advocates were heartened that Finneran and Senate President Robert Travaglini chose preschool as the topic for yesterday's conference of the State Legislative Leaders Foundation.

"It's significant and very exciting that they chose the issue of early education in young children," said Margaret Blood, president of the early education advocacy group Strategies for Children.

The preschool powwow began with a rallying speech by U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy [related, bio], who vowed to raise the issue on the federal level, especially if the Democrats regain control of the Senate and he becomes chairman of the committee overseeing education.

“I'm very hopeful that we can put that on the national agenda,” he said of early childhood education.