Boston Herald

OPINION

Gaskin and Ferguson: Every child has two classrooms



By Ed Gaskin and Ronald Ferguson

PUBLISHED: July 12, 2026 at 3:54 AM EDT

Massachusetts is having an urgent debate about childcare. But childcare is only part of the challenge.

The larger challenge is child development.

Childcare is about access, affordability, staffing and quality. Providers are stretched by rising costs and workforce shortages. Families face long waitlists and tuition bills that can rival college costs. Many parents are forced to choose between work, income and care.

Massachusetts should expand access to high-quality early education and invest in early educators. They are not babysitters. They are among the first teachers a child will ever know.

But if our early childhood strategy stops at childcare seats, it will still be incomplete.

Every child has two classrooms. One is the formal classroom: the childcare center, preschool, Head Start site or early learning program. The other is the home: the kitchen table, the bedtime story, the grocery store, the playground, the pediatrician's office, the library and the neighborhood.

Public policy has spent years debating the first classroom. We have paid far less attention to the second.

The first five years of life are a once-in-a-lifetime developmental window. A child's brain grows from about 30% of its adult size at birth to roughly 70% by age one, 80% by age three and 90% by age five. During that time, children are shaped by lived experiences.

Even children enrolled full time in high-quality early education spend most of their waking hours somewhere else. Many children are not in formal programs because of cost, waitlists, work schedules, family preference or lack of access.

Those children are still learning. Their brains are still growing. Their parents and caregivers are still doing the developmental heavy lifting, often without enough guidance or support.

Massachusetts needs a broader vision.

We do not need to choose between supporting early educators and supporting families. The classroom matters. So does the kitchen table.

That is the premise behind The Basics, launched ten years ago in Boston from the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard in collaboration with local leaders. The goal was to advance developmental equity by giving families, educators and community organizations a common language for what young children need every day.

The Basics Principles are five simple, evidence-based tenets: Maximize Love, Manage Stress; Talk, Sing and Point; Count, Group and Compare; Explore Through Movement and Play; and Read and Discuss Stories.

A baby learns when an adult responds with comfort. A toddler learns when someone points to a truck and names its color. A child develops language and imagination when an adult reads a story and asks, "What do you think will happen next?"

These moments are the foundation of school readiness.

The Basics does not replace early education. It extends it. It helps parents, grandparents, siblings, childcare workers, pediatricians, librarians and community organizations reinforce the same developmental principles wherever children are.

In East Boston, led by East Boston Social Centers and NeighborHealth, providers engage families around The Principles and about a third of children under five have parents receiving twice-weekly text messages with age-appropriate facts and activity ideas centered on The Basics principles.

Analyses show measurable gains in parenting practices and developmental precursors to kindergarten readiness. One father of a kindergartner wrote that the messages reminded him almost every day what he needed to do during the birth-to-five years to stay on track at being the best father his child could ask for.

Behind debates over funding, staffing, regulation and policy is a father trying to be the best father he can be. There are thousands of parents like him. They need tools, encouragement and a community that reinforces the same message: what you do with your child matters, and you are not alone.

Many of the strongest partners in this work are early education providers themselves. Nurtury Early Education and local Head Start sites use The Basics principles and tools to extend classroom learning into homes. Family Nurturing Center and Families First weave them into parent-child playgroups and parenting classes.

What began in Boston has grown into the Basics Learning Network, reaching dozens of communities around the country, including Lowell, Fall River, New Bedford and Hampden County here in Massachusetts.

The call to action is clear: Massachusetts should adopt a statewide Birth-to-Five Child Development Strategy built around a common set of evidence-based principles such as The Basics.

That strategy should have four parts.

First, continue expanding affordable, high-quality childcare and early education.

Second, treat parents and caregivers as essential partners. Every parent of a child from birth to five should have access to simple, practical developmental guidance in language they can use.

Third, make pediatricians, libraries, employers, faith communities and neighborhood organizations part of the early childhood system. Children do not grow up in agencies. They grow up in families and communities.

Fourth, measure success not only by the number of childcare seats created, but by whether more children arrive at kindergarten developmentally ready.

Massachusetts has long viewed itself as a national leader in education. But real leadership now requires us to begin earlier and think more broadly. We cannot wait until kindergarten to address gaps. We cannot ask early educators to do it all. And we cannot leave parents isolated during the most important developmental years of their children's lives.

The next frontier is not simply childcare policy. It is child-development policy.

Every child has two classrooms: the one they attend and the one they come home to.

Massachusetts should invest in both.

Ed Gaskin is Executive Director of Greater Grove Hall Main Streets and founder of Sunday Celebrations

Ronald Ferguson is Founder and Executive Director of The Basics, Inc.