

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Bringing up parents

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PARENTS ARE their children's first teachers. To emphasize this fact, Governor Romney has called for some parents to attend mandatory preparation classes.

Romney introduced the idea in 2003, along with the possibility of tying the requirement to public education. But because of concerns that the plan might be unconstitutional -- potentially barring children from school -- he developed a different approach. He would require that parents whose children receive state-funded child care attend twice-yearly sessions. The goal is to reach parents in lower-performing school districts, often in low-income communities.

The governor's frustration is understandable. He points to schoolteachers who say that uninvolved parents are an obstacle to educating children. But mandating parent participation is a bad idea. Families need easier access to child care, not more barriers. A better approach is offering voluntary, high-quality parenting programs that are naturally attractive.

Several strategies should underlie new and better statewide parenting resources. A key step is to begin early. The Welcome Baby program, which started in Dorchester and has grown to Allston, Brighton, and Roslindale, gives families a gift basket of books and supplies regardless of income. Trained staff members assess needs and make referrals to various services.

Another strategy is to emphasize the importance of reading to even the very youngest children. This means distributing free books and encouraging illiterate parents to enroll in literacy classes. One model is the national, nonprofit **Parent-Child Home Program**, which is being implemented locally by Crittenton Inc. Crittenton sends literacy coaches to people's homes for 26 weeks. The coaches encourage reading to children, learning through play, and community activities such as trips to the library. Another initiative, the Flash program, provides similar services to families who live in Crittenton's homeless shelter.

Head Start programs are living textbooks of parent involvement. Head Start parents improve their skills, volunteer in classrooms, and participate in Head Start governance. Nationally, Head Start is encouraging efforts to increase the involvement of fathers.

These programs show that people are eager to do the right thing, whether it's a volunteer knitting blankets for the Welcome Baby program or a parent hoping to improve his skills to earn more money. Involving parents should also mean seeking their feedback on how programs work.

Romney should help the state's parents, offering them voluntary opportunities that are too good to refuse. Parent-education classes should be an asset for Massachusetts, not a stick to prod people into government-approved behavior.