

House approves pre-school plan as budget debate concludes [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

BOSTON -- House lawmakers wrapped up a weeklong budget debate by backing a sweeping initiative that would provide a preschool education for every child in Massachusetts.

The early childhood education proposal was introduced by House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran, who called it the last big unfinished piece of the state's decade-long education reform effort. He didn't say how much it might cost, but said the state owes its youngest children the best possible start in life.

The measure's approval follows a judge's advisory opinion saying Massachusetts should spend more to educate students in poorer districts, particularly in the area of early childhood education.

Supporters of Finneran's plan defended the decision to take the first tentative steps, even as the state faces an estimated \$1.5 billion spending gap for the new fiscal year.

"You can choose to be paralyzed by difficult times or you can see them as opportunities," said Rep. Marie St. Fleur, D-Boston. "What we say is that despite the very difficult fiscal times that we're facing we understand that children are our most important resource."

That first step is a modest one.

Finneran's proposal spends less than \$100,000 to create a new board of early education.

The board would be responsible for administering "a program of voluntarily, universally accessible, high quality early childhood education and care to all preschool-aged children" in Massachusetts.

The board would also be required to come up with a curriculum and oversee the training and hiring of early education teachers and day care providers.

Finneran said the cost would be considerable, but could be offset in part by savings in other areas.

He said the proposal is too important to put off until after the state emerges from its fiscal crunch.

"Even if we had a loose billion dollars out there we would have to do this (planning) first," he said. "We won't be able to wave a magic wand and do it overnight."

With the House finished with its budget work, the Senate now will come forward with its own budget plan.

- reprinted from the Associated Press

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