

# Lawmakers push preschool: Measure mandates kindergarten, funds classes for toddlers [US-CA]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Despite a budget deficit of at least \$26 billion, state lawmakers on Wednesday took the first step toward making preschool available for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

A bill approved 8-0 by the Assembly Education Committee establishes the goals of creating universal preschool by 2014 and making kindergarten mandatory.

The legislation, AB56, will likely take two years to reach Gov. Gray Davis' desk as lawmakers grapple with permanently overhauling education for the state's youngest children.

"Over the course of the next decade, we will create the opportunity for universal preschool for every child in California," Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, the bill's author, said. "The more we invest in 3- and 4-year-olds, the more we save down the road."

The bill also establishes school readiness centers at all low-performing schools, creating a place for families to gain access to services meeting children's developmental needs.

"There are too many children who are not emotionally, intellectually and physically ready for school," Steinberg said.

The preschools would begin in the state's neediest school districts before branching out to reach all children. The bill does not specify yet whether the early education will be free to all parents or use a sliding fee scale.

Assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia, R-Cathedral City, said she worries about planning such large programs, no matter how worthy, when thousands of teachers are receiving layoff notices.

Steinberg said the lack of general fund money should not stop lawmakers from moving forward. The cost of the program could top \$2 billion, he said, but existing funding sources might be tapped.

Proposition 10, a voter-approved measure that taxes cigarettes for early childhood development, has already started creating school readiness centers.

"One of our biggest problems is the achievement gap," said Jane Henderson, executive director of the California Children and Families Commission, which was created by Prop 10. "If we can help them to get off to a good start, they don't have to catch up later."

Georgia pays for 70 percent of its 4-year-olds to attend preschool through lottery funds. Several other states have also begun to create universal preschool programs.

California is fifth from the bottom among states in terms of the number of kids in publicly funded preschool, according to the National Institute of Early Education.

Only about a quarter of the state's 1 million 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in publicly subsidized preschool programs for low-income families, Henderson said. There is no data on how many children are privately enrolled, she said.

Dave Gordon, superintendent of the Elk Grove Unified School District, said Head Start shuts out too many parents who cannot afford private preschool.

There was no opposition to the preschool component of the bill, as long as attendance remains voluntary. But objections were raised to a provision of the bill designed to require kindergarten by extending the age of mandatory schooling to 5-year-olds.

Representatives for some private and religious schools said they want parents to have authority over their children that age.

Steinberg's bill is part of a larger legislative overhaul of public education that includes having all students become fluent in a second language, incorporating computers into all areas of the classroom and hiring only fully credentialed teachers.

- reprinted from the San Francisco Chronicle

**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

pre-school <sup>[4]</sup>

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