

Yes, President Obama: Working families desperately need access to preschool -- and childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

I was surprised to be surprised by a big policy proposed in President Obama's State of the Union address last night: universal preschool. He declared, simply and directly, "Tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America." This is huge. Universal access to preschool would undoubtedly, as he noted, be hugely important for the nation's children. But he didn't mention another group who would see it as an enormous financial boon: working parents. In fact, while we desperately need universal access to quality early childhood education, we also need to guarantee universal access to quality childcare at all ages. Our families and our economy would see huge benefits if we made those two programs a reality for people of all income levels.

Obama framed the issue mostly in terms of the benefits that would accrue to children. As he noted, "Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road... In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children, like Georgia or Oklahoma, studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, and form more stable families of their own."

This is absolutely true. But we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that it would also be hugely important in helping parents of all incomes go to work and know that their children are in good hands. The model of a mother who stays at home to care for children is just not the norm: in 1975, more than half of American families had a male breadwinner and a female homemaker, but that's now dropped to just one in five. Yet we stand out compared to our developed peers in failing to provide access to early childhood education. Most developed countries make public education available and free to children over age six. But the early years are far less certain here at home. While public education for five-year-olds is often available for at least part of the day, three and four-year-olds often fall through the cracks. Nearly three-quarters of five-year-olds are enrolled in public kindergarten or nursery school, yet that number drops to 44 percent for four-year-olds and a mere 20 percent, or just one in five, of three-year-olds. In comparison, 13 European Union countries provide nearly universal early childhood education for children ages three, four, and five.

Cost is often a huge barrier for American families. The average annual cost of full-time child care for a four-year-old can be as much as \$11,700 a year, more than 10 percent of the median household income for a two-parent family in 22 states and more than the cost of public college in 19. In fact, families with children under the age of five spend more than 10 percent of their household budget on child care on average, while low-income families making less than \$1,500 a month spend more than 50 percent of their budget. What are working parents supposed to do when they can't afford care for their young children, let alone find quality care?

And we can't just ensure access to Pre-K but, as was hinted at in the State of the Union, preschool generally. The Center for American Progress released a proposal recently to expand access to early childhood education for children ages three and up, and it notes that putting three-year-olds in preschool appears to be particularly challenging for many families. Only about 40 percent of children that age in families earning less than \$10,000 a year are enrolled in a program, while just a third of children in families \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year participate.

This is why Obama's call for universal access is so important, and particularly right now. As he mentioned in his speech, the sequester, an across-the-board package of cuts to discretionary spending that will hit on March 1, will have disastrous effects on the economy. Early childhood education will not be spared. Head Start, one of our few preschool programs, would have to drop about 70,000 children from its rolls due to cuts. At a time when lawmakers, particularly Republicans, are threatening to move us backward when it comes to providing this vital program, it's important to see Obama lead us toward greater investment.

While the price tag may sound high, the benefits will almost certainly outweigh it. CAP's proposal weighs in at \$98.4 billion over 10 years, with an additional \$12.3 billion needed a year after it's up and running. Yet Obama himself noted that we will more than make up that cost in the benefits of early childhood education. "Every dollar we invest in high-quality early education can save more than seven dollars later on – by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime," he noted. In fact, CAP's report notes a study that found Chicago's preschool program will generate \$11 in economic benefits over a child's lifetime for every dollar spent.

The missing piece of Obama's proposal? Universal childcare before children reach age three. Working parents, particularly the mothers who still do the majority of care work for young children, can't be expected to take three years out of their careers to stay home with young children until they're ready for preschool. CAP's plan also proposes expanding access to subsidized childcare and increasing the amount of the subsidies we provide so that they actually help cover the cost of care. The cost of center-based care for an infant is more than \$10,000 a year in 19 states. Yet the average federal subsidy for childcare up to age three is about \$5,600 a year, barely covering half.

This would again come at a critical time. We've already pulled back significantly on subsidies, as 27 states decreased access through one or more assistance policies in 2011. The sequester would again make this worse: Helen Blank of the National Women's Law Center estimates that 30,000 to 50,000 children would lose subsidized care after cuts to the Child Care and Development Block Grant to states.

We don't just put working families in a bind if we fail to heed Obama's call and make access to these programs a reality. We also put our economy at risk. We've fallen behind our peers when it comes to our share of women in the workforce, in part due to our failure to adequately subsidize childcare. This has also helped earn us the distinction of being the worst country out of 16 [2] developed nations for single parents to live, even though we have the highest rate of single parenthood. It may sound politically implausible. But working families can't wait for lawmakers to catch up to the reality of their lives. President Obama's speech last night was a crucial first step in the right direction, and we can only hope Congress follows his lead.

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