

Preschool for all plan in Obama budget may skip some states ^[1]

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Source: Huffington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Apr 2013

EXCERPTS:

President Barack Obama's "Preschool for All" initiative in his 2014 2014 budget proposal is billed as a way to make sure every American child can attend preschool for free. Helping kids in their early years can ease achievement gaps and help them enter the workforce later on, the administration said.

"This would constitute the largest expansion of educational opportunity in the 21st century," Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said on a Wednesday call with reporters.

But the \$77 billion measure, to be funded by a 94-cent tax increase on a pack of cigarettes, is no sure bet. And even if Congress does pass the measure, it would not require states to actually expand preschool offerings. Rather, it would give incentives for them to do so, much like the Affordable Care Act. But the preschool incentive may be even less compelling to states than Obamacare, since Preschool for All doesn't help governors fulfill a federal mandate.

Even if Congress approves Preschool for All among other stimulus-like items in the proposed budget, states may not adopt it. The federal government can't mandate that states expand preschool under the Constitution, according to Sara Mead, an early education expert at Bellwether Education Partners.

Some governors, like Michigan's, have recently proposed early childhood education expansion. "Some states are doing it, but others won't do it at all, even with the new money," Mead said. "It's a continuation of what states are already saying," she said, by cutting back on early childhood education spending in general.

While the measure is likely to help states that are trying to expand preschool, Mead said, "I don't think it'll make Montana give their kids pre-K."

Obama first mentioned the new early childhood education commitment in his State of the Union address. The push comes as the Obama administration tries to cement a legacy for boosting the middle class.

States that agree to sponsor Preschool for All would get federal funds that would help sponsor new pre-K slots for 4-year-olds whose families make below 200 percent of the poverty line. The program would gradually shift early childhood program financial and administrative responsibility to states. In the first year, the federal government would pay 91 percent of the cost. By the eighth year, states would pay half. By the 10th year, states would pay 75 percent.

States that expand preschool slots to richer families would contribute 5 percent for the preschool program the first year, rising to 71 percent in the 10th year.

"It will be structured to ramp up the state participation, but it also will recognize that states have had a longstanding role," said Helen Blank, who directs child care and early learning at the National Women's Law Center.

The new preschool slots would have to meet quality standards. States could expand preschool slots through existing public schools or create new centers.

The administration proposes to budget \$75 billion in mandatory funding over 10 years for Preschool for All, and expects to spend \$66 billion of that. It also wants to budget \$1.4 billion more for Early Head Start and \$15 billion for expanding a home visiting program for at-risk families. The budget proposes \$750 million in discretionary preschool grants to encourage expansion.

The administration expects to pay for Preschool for All by increasing the tobacco tax from \$1.01 to \$1.95 per pack of cigarettes. The White House says the tax hike will raise \$78 billion over a decade. Duncan said it would prevent 233,000 new youth smokers. "That leads to huge reductions of health care costs," he said.

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