

Power to the preschoolers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

"Spread the word about President Obama's plan to provide high-quality preschool for every kid in America," twittered the White House on Wednesday. We all know that nothing on the planet compares to the awesome power of social media. But it may require more than a hashtag to bring this one home.

You may remember that earlier this spring, the president unveiled a budget plan that included a big initiative on early childhood education. Universal pre-K for 4-year-olds! More programs for low-income infants and toddlers! Big push for higher quality! And to help pay for it all, a new 94-cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes.

Everybody was so excited. "This is going to be wonderful," said former Vice President Walter Mondale. (We will stop here for one minute and recall that when Mondale was in the Senate, he successfully led a bipartisan effort to make quality preschool programs available to every American family. Then Richard Nixon vetoed the bill. Flash forward 42 years, and here we are, backward.)

But about Obama's plan. How could this not work out? The nation's fabled upward mobility has come to a screeching halt because low-income kids start behind in kindergarten and never catch up. Nobody has come up with a better idea for fixing the problem than early childhood education.

"People in my home state are like - 'Oh, my God! I'm so glad you're talking about this,' " said Senator Patty Murray of Washington.

Residents of Washington, you are really doing an excellent job of lobbying Murray on this issue. But, honestly, she is not your problem. Patty Murray used to be a preschool teacher. If you happen to have any relatives in Kentucky, call them up and tell them to start nagging Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

"The Leader opposes tax hikes," a McConnell spokesman said when asked about the president's plan. Notice that he did not say cigarette tax. Kentucky lawmakers are so committed to tobacco that former Senator Jim Bunning once single-handedly held up President Obama's nominee for deputy U.S. trade representative because he was angry at Canada for banning the sale of candy-flavored cigarettes. But there's something about saying "I oppose using a tax on Marlboros to fund education of low-income 4-year-olds" that people seem to find unpleasant.

I am telling you all this because nothing major is going to happen for early-childhood education without an enormous groundswell of public demand. This is a cause that's extremely popular in theory. But its advocates have no power to reward or punish. Lawmakers who labor on behalf of preschool programs may get stars in heaven, but they don't get squat in campaign contributions. And the ones who eliminate money for infant care programs have no fear whatsoever that they'll lose an election over it.

Look at McConnell. The Head Start programs in his state are already shrinking because of sequestration cuts. In western Kentucky, Audubon Area Community Services has had to close 12 classrooms and lay off 42 staff members. McConnell is running for re-election, but you do not see him sending out press releases demanding more money for preschool teachers. No, he's bragging about killing an amendment to the farm bill that would have eliminated tobacco subsidies. ("I was happy to lead the fight to protect our farmers from another assault by Washington to go after our home-state jobs.")

If you want to lobby, I'd start with the Senate. The House is impossible, working under a budget that cuts spending on health and education about 22 percent below last year's level. This is part of Representative Paul Ryan's plan to free Americans from the chains of government dependency, which proved so popular during last year's presidential race. (In this chapter, we liberate 4-year-olds from the shackles of learning the alphabet.)

In the Senate, the budget is committed to expanding early-childhood education. But to do something big, you need new revenues, and there's no mention of specific taxes. "I'm not going to say that we have to have a cigarette tax and lose it that way," said Murray.

This is really a job for the Senate Finance Committee. So you might want to reach out to Senator Max Baucus of Montana, the chairman. Tell Max Baucus you want a cigarette tax! And then there are the reasonable Republicans. These days, to get a big breakthrough, you have to start with a bipartisan clique, like the Gang of Eight on immigration reform. If you have a Republican senator, feel free to write a note saying something like: "Quality preschool! Join a gang!"

There are plenty of ways to lobby without big money. Go to your legislator's next town hall and speak up forcefully, while trying to avoid sounding like the people in the back of the hall who think the United Nations is after their assault rifles.

If all else fails, there's always Twitter.

-reprinted from the New York Times

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