

# Universal preschool bill to be introduced in Congress <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

The first significant legislation on early childhood education in more than a decade will be introduced in Congress Wednesday and the announcement is causing waves of excitement among preschool advocates.

Written and sponsored by democrats Senator Tom Harkin (IA) Representative George Miller (CA) and republican Rep. Richard Hanna (NY), the bill is the first effort to make good on President Barack Obama's promise from his 2013 State Of the Union address to make universal preschool a priority.

"We have a long road ahead of us to see it realized, but it feels terrific," said Mathew Melmed, Executive Director of Zero to Three. "It really is a momentous day."

Yet without a Republican co-sponsor in the Senate, observers said getting the bill passed this session will be tough.

Advocates have worked for years on trying to expand early education for low-income children.

Kris Perry, who heads national group, the First Five Years Fund, said the timing of the bill for early childhood education is crucial.

"After 58,000 Head Start spots were eliminated earlier this year due to the Sequester, the expansion of quality birth-to-five educational programs will bring a much-needed investment into our nation's future," she said.

The bill seeks to provide access to pre-K for all low- and middle-income children. Through a federal-state partnership, existing preschools would be expanded and new programs would be launched to serve all 4 years old from families at or below 200% of federal poverty level.

Melmed said he and other advocates were consulted by legislators as they drafted the bill.

If passed as currently envisioned, the measure is estimated to cost the federal government \$1.3 billion in FY 2014, increasing to \$8.7 billion by 2014. The funding would go to states that already have PreK programs so they can expand. There will be small development grants available to states with no PreK to get programs off the ground. The costs are expected to go up as more states ramp up and ask for the matching grants.

Authors also expect the federal government would cover most of the tab in the first few years, but shifting costs to states as the program matures. But those details have yet to be made public - and will likely be the subject of much debate around the measure.

In addition to preschool, states could use up to 15 percent of the funding on "high quality" day care for infants and toddlers.

Advocates said that portion of the measure is particularly important. A recent national study the U.S. Department of Education found 75 percent of infants and toddlers in childcare are in low or mediocre quality facilities.

The bill would create grants for Early Head Start programs to partner with private childcare programs that agree to meet the Early Head Start performance standards. These "early learning partnerships" would cost an additional \$1.4 billion each year, subject to renewal funding being appropriated each year.

President Obama has suggested increasing tobacco taxes to fund the measure. That's how California funds its early childhood initiatives.

The bill will be introduced Wednesday in two key committees in the House and Senate - the House Education and Labor committee and the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee.

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

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