

# Pre-K on the Starting Blocks <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to offer full-day preschool to every New York City 4-year-old hasn't yet rounded the corner from election slogan to classroom reality. But it's moving: a public-relations campaign on Friday started blitzing the city with leaflets and emails to drum up support for the tax to pay for it.

The mayor has assembled early-education experts to design the program and has been seeking support from legislators. He's even won a (backhanded) endorsement from Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who said in his State of the State address that he wants universal preschool for the entire state. While Mr. Cuomo seems content with an applause line in a wish list, Mr. de Blasio is on the hook with a deeper commitment. He has said how he will pay for it, how much it will cost and that it will begin late this year.

His preschool plan (and a separate after-school program for middle-schoolers) relies on the State Legislature raising income taxes on city residents making \$500,000 and above. He calls this a negligible sacrifice for a transformative social good. Even so, its prospects are unclear, given Mr. Cuomo's recent fervor for cutting taxes.

Leaving aside the financing uncertainties, the mayor is on solid pedagogical ground. Full-day prekindergarten is a smart investment in growing minds, preparing children to be skilled learners at a moment when they are primed for it. It's better to reach them at age 4 rather than fixing their learning problems later. Across the country, lawmakers and educators have embraced the universal preschool movement. President Obama has made a similar case. Mr. de Blasio is making a mainstream argument, though on a bigger scale than anyone else.

The city has about 100,000 4-year-olds. Mr. de Blasio wants to reach 68,000 of them: 48,000 new students on top of the 20,000 who have full-day public preschool now. Children in private programs would be able to attend the city's free classes if they wish. This will be expensive: \$340 million a year, plus \$190 million for the after-school program. But if the plan is executed halfheartedly, as an underfinanced form of babysitting, it's not worth doing. (This is why Mr. de Blasio argues for a dedicated tax, saying yearly appropriations battles would leave too much uncertainty about financing, discouraging a full commitment from teachers and staff needed to make the program work.)

One challenge will be finding the physical space to teach all these 4-year-olds, either by expanding existing programs or building new ones. This may require Mr. de Blasio to put aside his antipathy to charter schools, many of which would be well-positioned to add preschools, though state law would have to be changed to allow this.

Then the city will have to persuade parents to sign up, make sure there is a qualified teaching corps with classes small enough to be effective, and tightly integrate the program with kindergarten through third grade so that 4-year-olds do not lose their momentum. It will have to prepare children well for the rigorous Common Core learning standards that promise to bring their math, science and literacy skills up to international norms.

The key, Mr. de Blasio's aides say, is creating a meaningful, high-quality learning experience as they build to scale. Skeptics may say that the benefits of preschool tend not to last, but that doesn't have to be true, if done right and sustained by good schooling in later years.

-reprinted from the New York Times

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

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