

How preschool got hot ^[1]

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Excerpts

All of a sudden, early childhood education is really, really popular. Everybody's favorite. If early childhood education were an actor, it would be Tom Hanks or Meryl Streep. If it were a video game, it would be Candy Crush or Angry Birds, minus the spyware.

The other night at the State of the Union speech, President Obama mentioned "high-quality early education" and John Boehner applauded. Boehner applauded early education! Paul Ryan likes it, too. Prekindergarten is so in, the guys on "Duck Dynasty" would probably have a good word for it.

Kudos, guys! We certainly don't want to complain about this. Early education is one of the best tools for breaking the poverty-to-poverty trap. Unfortunately, it only works if it's high quality, and high quality is expensive. Yet very little of this newfound enthusiasm comes with serious money attached.

Last year, in his State of the Union speech, President Obama called for universal preschool for 4-year-olds, to be paid for by a tobacco tax that would raise \$78 billion over 10 years. The prekindergarten idea was hailed throughout the nation. The tax part did not go anywhere. To say it was dead on arrival at Congress is an insult to the word "dead."

"Everybody seems to agree we need some sort of national effort to provide preschool education to our kids. What we don't have is any discussion about how to pay for it," said Senator Patty Murray who is, I am pretty sure, the first former preschool teacher ever to run the Senate Budget Committee.

When President Obama's detailed budget proposal comes out, he'll presumably include some way of paying for his universal preschool idea. Perhaps it will be the tobacco tax again. Perhaps you will never know because, in recent years, the presidential budget has all the traction and clout of a small mouse attempting to cross a frozen lake. During a windstorm. While wearing bedroom slippers.

Here in New York, we're having a political dispute that pits the let's-just-cheer camp against the pick-a-tax crowd. Mayor Bill de Blasio wants to pay for universal prekindergarten for New York City 4-year-olds with an increase in the income tax rate for high income city residents. He got elected on this issue, but he needs the state's permission.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo says he'll just give de Blasio some money out of the state budget. This is an election year, and Cuomo is definitely not targeting any taxpayers, even if the ones in question are jumping up and down and waving their arms to get attention.

The mayor wants money the city can count on to keep coming every year. It's a very interesting argument. If New York is lucky, the nation will find the debate so fascinating that everyone will forget about the fact that on Tuesday, shortly after Obama called for more quality prekindergarten classes, a congressman from New York City threatened to throw a reporter off the Capitol balcony. This had nothing to do with early childhood education, but you know how people talk.

Cuomo's estimate of how much it would cost to do preschool for the entire state is lower than de Blasio's estimate for just New York City. Which is, on a per-pupil basis, much lower than the amount New Jersey spends on a much-praised prekindergarten program. (Cheers to New Jersey for your effort to provide quality early education to the state's poorest children. We are so impressed that we will leap right over the fact that you only did it because a judge made you.)

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One way to dodge the responsibility for coming up with actual cash for a great leap in preschool financing is to argue, as Cuomo does, that you need to roll these things out slowly. "To do it on a large scale is very difficult," said Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution, a former adviser to the Bush administration. But Haskins thinks poor children's needs are so great, and so immediate, that it's worth the risk. "We're desperate. These kids are coming into school already a grade behind," he said.

A quarter of the youngest Americans are poor. We need to get to them quickly, and do the job right, well before they're 4. And while we should start with the neediest families, if the programs are good, middle-class parents are rightfully going to point out that they need help, too.

It'll be a huge number of kids, and the classes have to be really small. Also, the teachers have to get much better pay. They go into the business out of love, but when you are talking about median salaries of \$27,000 a year, sometimes love is not enough. All in all, we're talking about a ton of money.

So here's the question: How much of the new enthusiasm for early childhood education is real, and how much is just an attempt to dodge the whole inequality debate? Maybe we could agree that no politician is allowed to mention pre-k without showing us the money.

-reprinted from the New York Times

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