

Obama Pushes Plan to Expand Early Education

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The Obama administration's plan to expand preschool would send federal dollars to states that agree to certain conditions, such as adopting small class sizes, rigorous curricula and assessments for youngsters, according to details released Thursday.

The initiative would also include money to expand high-quality programs that prepare infants and toddlers for pre-kindergarten.

"Study after study show the earlier a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But here's the thing: We're not doing enough to give all of our kids that chance," said President Barack Obama, speaking about the plans on Thursday at College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center in Decatur, Ga.

The moves are part of Mr. Obama's effort to ensure high-caliber early learning for all children, especially those who come from low- and moderate-income homes. The president announced his intentions earlier this week during the State of the Union but didn't provide details until Thursday. "The size of your paycheck...shouldn't determine your child's future," the president said Thursday.

The education blueprint doesn't yet have a price tag, but in newly re-

leased documents, Mr. Obama said he was proposing a "series of investments" to establish a continuum of care for children from birth to age 5.

"[T]he specifics about how much this program would cost...will be included in the budget that the president plans to release next month," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest.

Currently, only about one-third of 4-year-olds are enrolled in top-notch pre-K programs, according to the Obama administration. The U.S. ranks 28th out of 38 other developed countries in the share of 4-year-olds enrolled in early education, the administration said.

Evidence has recently mounted that quality preschool can boost academic achievement and job-earning potential. Studies by Nobel Prize laureate James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, for example, show that every \$1 invested in quality early childhood programs provides a 7% to 10% return on investment per child, per year in terms of better education, health and economic outcomes.

Mr. Obama's plan calls for a new "federal-state partnership" that would allocate preschool funds to states based on the number of low- and moderate-income 4-year-olds. It would include an incentive to expand offerings to middle-income families. States would have to put up

some matching funds. And, to access the money, they would have to meet certain conditions, such as hiring "well-trained teachers" who are paid comparable to K-12 teachers. They would also have to agree to low teacher-student ratios and to comprehensive health services for children. The administration would create guidelines for each standard but states would have some leeway to craft their own plans.

It isn't clear yet how far the proposal will go. Some Republican lawmakers have already questioned the effectiveness of the federal government's \$7.6 billion Head Start preschool program, and have signaled a reluctance to expand the federal role in pre-K. The plan needs congressional approval.





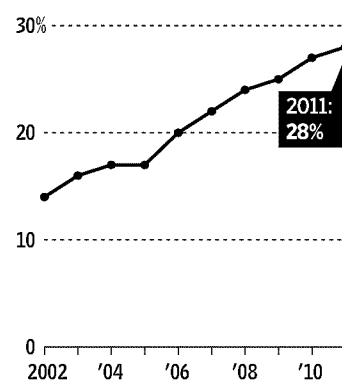
Reuters

President Obama plays a game with children in a pre-kindergarten classroom in Georgia, Thursday.

Pre-K Ups and Downs

The rate of enrollment in state-funded pre-K programs has grown as spending per student has shrunk.

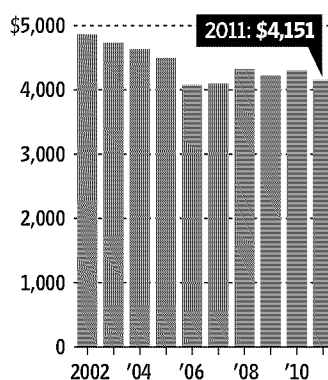
Percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in state pre-K programs



Note: State spending in 2011 dollars

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

Average state spending per pre-K student



The Wall Street Journal