



Who Obama's Universal Preschool Push Will Impact

By Emily Deruy February 18, 2013

Beginning with his State of the Union address last Tuesday, President Barack Obama called for a quality preschool education for every child in the United States several times this month. That early education, he says, is critical in keeping kids from falling behind before their education really even gets going.

'Education has to start at the earliest possible age,' he told a gathering of teachers in Decatur, Georgia, on Thursday after meeting with local students. 'We are not doing enough to give all of our kids that chance.'

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The president said the "true engine of economic growth" is a thriving middle class, and that young people who attend preschool have a solid foundation on which to build their lives. He said increasing preschool attendance would raise high school graduation rates, reduce teen pregnancy and violent crime, and make people more likely to hold stable jobs later in life.

Early childhood education is a particularly valuable tool for helping low-income, disadvantaged kids build a "ladder" to a middle-class life, the president noted. When poor children don't get a quality preschool education, it can affect their entire lives. "We all pay a price" for that, he said.

It's an idea that early education advocates have been pushing for years, but the path to universal preschool attendance is tricky and not everyone thinks it's a good idea.

Convincing a Congress already reeling from "fiscal cliff" negotiations that dropping more money into providing preschool education for the country's most vulnerable children will be difficult. A statement on the website of the Cato Institute, a think tank that advocates for limited government, alleges that any early childhood education benefits of preschool to low-income kids have been "few and fleeting."

"Public preschool for younger children is irresponsible, given the failure of the public school system to educate the children currently enrolled," the site says. "The desire to 'do something' for young children should be tempered by the facts, and proposals for universal preschool should be rejected." But according to a report from the progressive Center for American Progress, spending money on children early decreases the likelihood that they will be a burden later.

"Despite these benefits, some people will surely ask whether it's sensible to spend more money on preschool right now, just as we're trying to tighten our fiscal belts," reads the report. "This concern is understandable but misplaced. Studies show that investing money in high-quality preschool will actually improve our country's fiscal health by strengthening human capital, enhancing economic growth, increasing revenues, and decreasing future spending obligations."

Other studies say that there are some benefits but that they diminish by mid-elementary school.

The White House has said it would like the federal government to work with states to provide preschool to every low- and moderate-income 4-year-old, and the president has called for an expansion of Early Head Start, a federal program aimed at providing quality childcare to low-income families. He would like to provide federal matching dollars to states that offer preschool slots to children from families making incomes of twice the poverty level or less. He would also provide incentives for states to expand preschool for middle-class families, by creating a sliding-scale tuition system for instance.

States would have to hire qualified teachers and meet certain benchmarks to get the funding, and they would have to meet curriculum standards and keep class sizes small.

Maribel Ventura-Torres, executive director of Barbara Chambers Children's Center in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C., says she sees long-term benefits when children, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds, attend preschool.

"Yes, we need it," she said decisively from her office as children chattered in the hallways around her.

About 90 percent of her 120 or so preschool attendees are Hispanic, and they come to the school not only to learn English as well as their shapes and numbers, but to develop as young members of society. Many come from low-income families, and the school receives funding from the District to help subsidize the costs for those who cannot afford to pay. The kids go on field trips to museums and performances, activities many would not otherwise experience.

"The most important thing, the most, is that they develop social and emotional skills here," she said. "They build that foundation and they are ready to learn. When they go, they are ready to be kindergarteners."

Many of the students come from immigrant families and have parents that are not familiar with the U.S. education system. The school offers support for parents as they prepare to navigate that system with their children.

The sense of community the kids derive from her school is particularly important for the demographic it serves, Ventura-Torres said. Some of the children come from mixed-documentation families, and the school has lost several students recently due to deportation. The mother of a little girl from El Salvador was deported and took the student with her. The girl's father is still in Washington, D.C., working, Ventura-Torres said.

She added that it can be hard to build strong foundations for children when their families are thrust into deportation proceedings, and said immigration and education are inextricably linked.

"They go together," she said.

The president has promised to make immigration a priority in recent months, and added education to a list that also includes improving the economy and reforming gun laws during the State of the Union.

Obama's decision to promote his plan in Decatur is no coincidence. Georgia is one of only five states that has pledged to offer preschool to every four-year-old in the state. The president said he would like to see all states make that commitment.

"The size of your paycheck shouldn't determine your child's future," he said.