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Obama reiterates goal of universal preschool, but how will the nation pay for it?

Currently, fewer than 30 percent of 4-year-olds attend [preschool](#) in the United States. During the State of the Union address last year, [President Obama](#) proposed partnering with states so that all low- and moderate-income families would have access to such programs.

In Tuesday's State of the Union address, Obama returned to this theme: "Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child's life is high-quality early education. Last year, I asked this Congress to help states make high-quality pre-K available to every 4-year-old. As a parent as well as a president, I repeat that request tonight."

Although members of both major parties have in the past year co-sponsored [congressional bills](#) consistent with the [White House proposal](#), those bills are [unlikely](#) to make it to the president's desk because the political reality of tight funding has stalled action.

Instead, Obama highlighted how 30 states have raised pre-kindergarten funding on their own. And he promised that — whether or not Congress acts — "this year, we'll invest in new partnerships with states and communities across the country in a race to the top for our youngest children." He said, "I'm going to pull together a coalition of elected officials, business leaders and philanthropists willing to help more kids access the high-quality pre-K they need."

Preschools and market failure

One cause is divergence over how academics interpret research on the costs and benefits of such additional education. Some encourage [universal education programs](#) while others advise [targeting populations](#) where the greatest benefits can occur.

While some experts find significant gains in cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language [skills](#) among preschoolers, other studies demonstrate that these [gains dissipate](#) or disappear in a few years.

As a result, a variety of scholars support gathering more data through [national demonstration programs](#) before launching a complex set of hundreds of local initiatives aimed at universality.

Still, many believe that early childhood education offers significant benefits to low- and middle-income families and that it probably has benefits in cognitive and life improvements for all social and economic groups.

One influential school of thought holds that early childhood education “[fixes a market failure](#),” in the words of University of Chicago economist and Nobel Prize laureate James Heckman. This isn’t “some warm, fuzzy notion,” but a sound public policy investment based on “hard, observable data,” he said.

Universal early education could cost [\\$10 to \\$25 billion annually](#). Although that price tag may appear steep, many economists are saying that it’s a bargain: early childhood education generates “a 7 to 10 percent per annum [return on investment](#)” in terms of less governmental expenditures in the future, according to Heckman.

Preschool does much more than simply boost cognitive skills and academic success, argues Heckman and other economists who hold this view. The equation goes like this: improving personal, social and economic outcomes, both for the individuals and society, leads to a positive-feedback loop. Once children learn better attitudes about school and display higher self-esteem, academic skills and educational attainment rise; later, graduation rates rise and more pursue higher education; and as participants progress through life, benefits continue to accrue.

Fewer use welfare, and employment rates are higher. Criminal activity is averted and fewer children are born out of wedlock. In adulthood, the now-preschoolers would presumably pay higher taxes because they would enjoy higher income levels, cost the health care system less and even instill greater values of self-reliance in their future children.

Considering the lifetime benefits to the individual and society, a National Institutes of Health study estimated that every dollar spent on early childhood education would generate between \$4 and \$11 of economic benefits over a child’s lifetime. Robert Lynch of Rice University summarizes, “putting money into early childhood education is perhaps [the soundest investment](#) one could make today.”

Funding and fade-out

Obama has proposed [funding early childhood programs](#) through tobacco taxes. (Obama [is open to alternatives](#) to that approach, which have been [considered by experts](#), but has not received widespread political attention.) This is expected to produce \$75 billion, which the federal government would presumably [funnel to the states](#) for distribution to local school districts charged with administering universal preschool.

Programs would be charged with introducing evidence-based curriculums, small class sizes, hiring teachers with bachelor’s degrees, with salaries comparable to K-12 teachers, as well as extensive program monitoring and an open door policy for all students whose families are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

At a conference at [the CATO Institute](#) earlier in the month, several of the nation’s leading education researchers on the subject agreed that [significant academic and social results](#) accrue while children are in high-quality preschool and that at least some of the benefits extend to kindergarten.

The first longitudinal study of preschool began in 1965 and collected data as the participants reached ages 14, 15, 19, 27 and 41. [The Perry preschool study](#) shows that, compared to their cohorts, students who attended preschool have been significantly more successful in cognitive performance, high school graduation rates, higher education and in earning more money. They are also less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.

The [Abecedarian Early Intervention Project](#) followed. As with the Perry study, the children were low-income and were tracked for decades — in this case, up to age 30. Unlike Perry, study participants first began child-care and educational programs while in infancy. There have been significant benefits in academic skills, educational attainment, employment and parenthood.

[A summary of this and other research](#) found that preschool seems to extend benefits to both typical and special-needs children, to native English speakers and their dual-language learning counterparts. [Other studies concur](#) in this finding: while poor kids benefit more, everyone makes significant advances.

Yet students' early successes can diminish in size or disappear almost entirely early in elementary school. The well-regarded [Head Start Impact Study](#) found an impressive range of gains for participants. But those gains did not last.

The students who began the federal Head Start program at the age of 4 maintained a small advantage in vocabulary at the end of first grade, and their improved reading skills persisted through third grade. The 3-year-olds had higher oral comprehension skills at the end of first grade. Researchers tend to agree that Head Start participants perform at about the same level as their peers early in elementary school.

In short, many of the advances made in pre-kindergarten programs seem to “[fade out](#).”

Policy implications

Given the “fade-out,” critics including Grover J. Whitehurst of the Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution question the need for universal, as oppose to targeted, preschool funding.

Whitehurst urged [targeting](#) programs to the most disadvantaged students, including those who speak English as a second-language. Targeting may bring about the key short- and long-term benefits for the students and for society, and a role that he called a “classic government function.”

Critics outside the education community like Michelle Malkin call Obama's prescription a “[federal encroachment](#) into our children's lives at younger and younger ages.” Yet that argument runs up against a line of experts, including [Steve Barnett](#), director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, who says that a universal preschool program “is one of the most important education initiatives, maybe since Brown versus Board of Education.”