

## **Funding is crucial for Obama's pre-kindergarten plan**

By: Jessamy Brown – February 18, 2013

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President Barack Obama's ambitious plan to offer preschool education to every child in America is meeting enthusiasm from educators and skepticism from critics, but most everyone agrees that before any such program can be put in place, funding must be found.

In other words, "Show me the money ."

In last week's State of the Union address, Obama said students who have been in pre-kindergarten programs "grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind."

The plan calls for using federal funds to supplement existing state-based programs. But with few other details available -- especially about funding -- educators are eager to see specifics.

"It's something that people have realized is important but it has been a budget issue," said Amber Brown, an assistant professor of elementary education at the University of Texas at Arlington. "It won't do any good for the federal government to make these mandates if there is no financial support. It will be a burden to the state rather than a benefit."

Estimates suggest that such a program could cost the federal government \$10 billion to \$15 billion annually.

Lisa Guerney, director of Early Education Initiative at the New America Foundation, a public policy institute in Washington, D.C., deemed Obama's plan "very important, but it has to be done right."

"That means that it must be high-quality and it needs to be much better connected to what children learn in kindergarten and first grade to ensure that the children's learning gains can be sustained," Guerney said in an email to the Star-Telegram.

Guerney acknowledged that funding will be challenging but said such a program is "absolutely worth doing."

But Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a think tank in Washington, argued that there is no evidence to suggest that universal preschool will achieve what its advocates promise, and that there's good evidence it won't.

"Advocates base their claims on one of two things: either a totally unjustified extrapolation from just three small, local pre-K programs of the '60s and '70s; or on universal state pre-K programs that don't actually show the results they promise," Coulson said in an email.

'Sets kids up for success'

In 2011-12, Texas spent almost \$711 million on 225,037 children ages 3 and 4 enrolled in pre-K programs, the Texas Education Agency says. That's about 29 percent of the 775,000-plus pupils in that age group.

State law requires school districts to provide free half-day preschool programs if 15 or more 4-year-olds meet eligibility criteria, although a district can get this waived if it would mean building new facilities. To qualify for the pre-K program, students must meet certain criteria for being at risk of not being successful in kindergarten, such as being economically disadvantaged or not speaking or understanding English.

Josh Havens, a spokesman for Gov. Rick Perry, said that under Perry's leadership Texas has become a national leader in providing high-quality pre-kindergarten programs.

"As Gov. Perry has made clear, Texas knows best how to educate our children," Havens said. "Any additional efforts by the federal government to expand pre-K services across the nation should not infringe upon the rights of the states to control their own programs and set their own standards."

In Tarrant County, pre-K classes are available in various formats: half-day, full-day and tuition-based for students who don't qualify for free services.

Some school districts, including Fort Worth, provide pre-K classes taught by certified teachers at neighborhood schools.

Other districts, such as Arlington and Keller, also operate centralized pre-kindergarten centers.

Local educators say it's important to get the children started at an early age.

"There is incredible evidence that says early childhood is the most efficient time to make a difference and if you wait too long you've missed your big window and you're forced to remediate with less success and greater cost," said John R. Breiffeller, executive director of Educational First Steps, a North Texas nonprofit that works to improve education at private child-care centers. "This sets kids up for success."

Fort Worth school officials felt so strongly about their program in 2011 -- after the state cut \$4.2 million in full-day pre-K funding -- that they agreed to find money for the expanded programs.

"You're setting their foundation. If we catch them early and build that foundation then we're going to ensure their success," said Patricia Rangel, executive director of the district's department of early academic success and acceleration. "We're trying to eliminate the achievement gap and not allow any of our children to fall into the cracks. High-quality pre-K programs provide the foundation for school readiness and should be available to all young children and families."

Rangel said students in pre-K have fewer behavioral issues and drop out less than those without the early start. In addition to building vocabulary, students work on social skills crucial in succeeding at school.

About 4,300 Fort Worth students attend full-day pre-K classes or get instruction at satellite locations, but officials estimate that about 40 percent of children entering kindergarten enroll with no preschool education.

Fort Worth and Arlington teachers also help young children at three childhood development centers operated by the YWCA of Fort Worth and Tarrant County.

At the centers -- two in Fort Worth and one in Arlington -- about 92 percent of families served are low-income and can't afford private preschool, said Elizabeth Marshall, the Y's special events and communications manager.

"These children are already at a disadvantage, are already behind from Day One. So our entire dedication and focus is to build up their vocabulary and make sure that they are ready to learn to read when they are ready to enter kindergarten," Marshall said. "This is important for the working poor and working parents."

In the Arlington district, pre-K classes are offered to qualifying 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, though limited space requires the district to use random selection for slots.

The district's highly recognized Kookan Education Center, which serves learning-disabled and at-risk preschoolers, narrowly survived a round of budget cuts in 2011 that would have shut it down and redistributed its students and programs.

Arlington schools have also expanded pre-K services into some day-care centers. Each participating center has a certified Arlington district teacher on staff. Children receive the education that is provided at district schools.

Three years ago, Keller district officials opted to place students in pre-kindergarten and preschool programs for children with disabilities at a single location, the Keller Early Learning Center, which serves 640 children with a budget of \$3.1 million for payroll and expenses.

"One of the advantages we've seen is we can streamline the programs," said the director, Karin Mahlenkamp.