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Biden's \$390 billion universal preschool plan based on troubled Head Start program

Jeff Mordock

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President Biden has modeled his universal preschool plan — the biggest expansion of publicly subsidized education in more than 100 years — on Head Start, a preschool program for poor children that even the federal government says has no discernible impact on participants.

The new \$390 billion universal preschool plan is one of the most expensive and extensive proposals in Mr. Biden's \$1.75 trillion social welfare and climate bill. It would offer preschool to every 3- and 4-year-old in the U.S.

Supporters of universal preschool, also known as universal pre-kindergarten, say the benefits are multitudinous. It will close the educational gap for low-income families, boost workforce participation among parents and better prepare children for the classroom, they say.

“Investing in universal pre-K is not only good for children and families, but it also benefits communities and taxpayers. Studies show that every dollar invested in quality early childhood education for low-income children yields as much as \$7 in benefits in the future,” Rep. Bobby

Scott, Virginia Democrat and chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, said in a statement to The Washington Times.

Critics, however, point to the persistent poor performance of Head Start that currently costs taxpayers \$10 billion a year.

Launched in 1965 under former President Johnson, Head Start was created to fund education and health services for children living in poverty in the form of a public preschool program.

Nearly 60 years and \$240 billion later, Head Start has spent decades being reformed and its goals have become less ambitious over time. In 1965, the program aimed at reducing poverty. Today its goal is to get low-income students ready for elementary school.

The federal government's research raises questions about whether it can even meet watered-down goals.

The White House did not respond to The Time's inquiry about basing universal preschool on the Head Start program.

The Department of Health and Human Services studied 5,000 three- and four-year-olds who were either assigned to Head Start or did not participate in the program.

The multi-year study, released in 2010, showed by the end of first grade the effects of Head Start had disappeared. A 2012 follow-up revealed that by third grade, there was no discernible difference between those who participated in the program and those who did not.

A handful of independent studies, including one by Vanderbilt University, reached similar conclusions.

Both reports remain the largest, most comprehensive studies of Head Start, which costs more than \$10,000 per child.

“They’ve spent billions and billions of dollars on Head Start and have nothing to show for it,” said Colleen Hroncich, a policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute. “If you are spending \$10 billion a year on a program and by third grade, you can’t tell which kids were in it and which kids weren’t, that doesn’t seem like a good use of resources.”

Champions of Head Start say the study didn’t take into account its impact beyond elementary school.

A 2019 study by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman concluded that Head Start participants were more stably married, had higher earnings, and committed fewer crimes than children from similar economic backgrounds who did not participate in the program. The study also found that participants’ children were more likely to be employed and graduate high school.

Other studies found similar results.

“High-quality early childhood education can address the social and emotional skills that are not really measurable in kindergarten but measurable in how you go on later in life,” said Abbie Lieberman, a senior policy analyst with New America, a left-leaning think tank. “These studies take 20 plus years to see those gains.”

Ms. Lieberman said Head Start requires a high educational standard but acknowledged that implementation and support vary from state to state. Still, she said applying Head Start standards would improve some current universal pre-kindergarten programs.

Despite questions over the return on investment, Head Start has become sacrosanct among lawmakers, which are constantly advocating to boost its funding.

Former President Donald Trump, who ran on a platform of cutting government, ultimately boosted the program by more than \$1 billion.

Still, some states are worried that Mr. Biden's proposal will drive up costs and want to see more consistent or more tangible returns on the spending.

During the new program's first three years, it would be fully funded by the federal government. The federal contribution drops to roughly 60% in the fifth year.

By the seventh year, the federal funding would end and leave states scrambling to either cancel the program or find more money.

In Alabama, which has one of the most successful state-run preschool programs, Gov. Kay Ivey, a Republican, said the president's plan was overly expensive.

Cato's Ms. Hroncich warned that Mr. Biden's pre-K would be next to impossible to roll back once it starts.

"Nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program," she said. "It is impossible to get rid of them. With this, they are not telling people the federal money runs out pretty quickly. Why should state taxpayers be on the hook when Head Start didn't have any long-term results?"

Ms. Lieberman sees it differently. She says universal preschool brings economic benefits to states that would more than cover the program's costs.

She cited a 2018 study from the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, that found the public preschool program in Washington increased workforce participation among women with children under five by as much as 65%. The increase was most significant among low-income and single mothers in the city, with 13.3% of unmarried women returning to the workforce.

"I think universal pre-kindergarten has a long-term return on investment because its workforce support for parents," she said. "It's more than two years of free education and free child care and I think states would realize that."

A major cost component for the plan would be teachers' salaries. The proposal mandates that preschool teachers get the same salary as elementary school teachers with similar credentials and experience.

Ultimately that would require states and private providers to match the union-negotiated salaries of elementary school teachers in public schools.

Elementary school teachers make an average of \$47,000 annually while the average preschool teacher currently earns roughly \$35,000 a year.

Critics argue that the market sets the salaries and introducing price controls only drives up the cost of universal pre-school. There also is a higher training level of elementary and high school teachers that is not required for pre-school.

Ms. Lieberman said that higher wages will attract and retain talented teachers.

“In order for these programs to be high quality, we need high-quality teachers,” she said. “If I’m a pre-K teacher and I’m making half of what a kindergarten teacher is making, what is the incentive to stay?”