



Budget Proposal Draws Attention to Child Care, Education

By Allison Kite

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President Barack Obama's education and child-care proposals to support "middle-class economics" are being met with both enthusiasm and doubt.

Washington, DC - infoZine - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - The president released his budget proposals on the heels of his State of the Union address, touting the proposals as a support for middle-class families. Provisions in the budget range from parental leave and child care to higher-education student aid.

Liza Mundy, director of the breadwinners and caregivers program at the New America Foundation, stressed the importance of keeping families' interests in mind when drafting social policy.

"It's easy to identify social policies like welfare or the child-care development block grant that directly and specifically are designed to affect families," Mundy said. "But there are many other policies having to do with education or small business that affect families and family formation as well."

participated in a discussion about the proposal at the New America Foundation on Tuesday. While many, including panelists at Tuesday's discussion, have shown enthusiasm for the proposals, others, including Neal McCluskey, associate director for the CATO Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said the proposals mean further unnecessary federal reach into education.

"Constitutionally, there is no authority for the federal government to do anything to govern or interfere with education unless they see that state or local governments are discriminating in their provisions," McCluskey said in a telephone interview.

Beyond education, the president's family-centered budget proposals would give incentives for states to adopt paid parental leave policies and make changes to the tax code to support child care and college and retirement savings.

The paid leave proposal would encourage states to enact policies like those of California, New Jersey and Rhode Island, which have paid leave policies, by providing money to launch the programs.

"I did appreciate, also, the fact that the president took pains to say that all these concerns about families and work are not just a woman's issue – that they are a men's issue and everybody's concern and obviously, ultimately a concern about children." Mundy said.

Incentives and mandates, however, are not the way to ensure families can take off the time they need, Lindsey Burke, Will Skillman fellow in education for the Heritage Foundation, said in a telephone interview.

"We need to give families flexibility when it comes to leave, when it comes to child care," Burke said. "The absolute best way we can do that is to have a strong economy where parents can earn money and have those decisions about how much time is apportioned to work versus home life. It all comes back to having a strong economy, not having centralized policy and federal mandates about how businesses should run their business."

Several proposals centered on higher education, including an expansion of the Pell Grant, America's College Promise and reforms to income-based loan repayment for students. Mary Alice McCarthy, a senior policy analyst for the New America Foundation, said rising tuition creates a drag on the economy because debt-saddled college graduates delay starting households and making purchases.

"America's College Promise, by guaranteeing the first two years of college for free, basically, really addresses that issue head-on," McCarthy said.

McCluskey said policies such as student aid and America's College Promise, if it is enacted, are a driving force behind rapidly rising tuition costs.

"The help that they're supposedly sending in the form of grants and loans and tax breaks and all sorts of other things has primarily just fueled the tuition or price inflation in higher education – because there's more to the price than just tuition," he said. "Essentially, it's enabled colleges to raise their prices at speeds greatly in excess of normal inflation."

Support for registered apprenticeships would provide an alternative to traditional two- or four-year colleges.

“Apprentices, unlike students in higher education, know the moment that they start how long their apprenticeship will last and where it is leading,” McCarthy said. “That kind of stability and predictability is something that families desperately need and don’t have.”

The idea of supporting apprenticeships is a bipartisan one, Rick Hess, resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said in a telephone interview. He said the idea is fantastic and people should be asking how to support apprenticeships with existing federal funds.

“The right response is to take a look at these rules: credit transfer rules, eligibility for federal aid rules. I think the wrong response is to dream up some new federal program using some new pot of money in order to drive it from Washington,” Hess said.

Alternatives to the president’s proposal favor more localized, state-driven or free-market approaches to education and child care.