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Highlights From Obama's Budget Proposal

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The White House's budget request for the 2014 fiscal year drew headlines for its proposed changes to how entitlement benefits are calculated in a compromise effort to cut the budget. But how would other departments and programs be affected? While Congress almost never enacts the president's budget as proposed and Republicans oppose many of the specifics, the budget offers a window on Mr. Obama's priorities at the beginning of his second term. Times reporters provided analysis.

1:30 P.M. Education: Universal Preschool, More Money in Budget

At the center of President Obama's education agenda, which was outlined in his budget proposal, is a program that would guarantee public preschool for all 4-year-olds from families with low and moderate incomes. In order to pay for the plan, the administration has proposed an increase in federal cigarette taxes from \$1.01 to \$1.95 per pack. That would cover the \$66 billion cost of providing preschool over ten years and the \$11 billion cost of home visiting programs for poor families.

The budget also called for a total of \$12.5 billion over the next two years to preserve teacher jobs and increase hiring as the economy recovers.

Under the pre-K proposal, Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, told reporters on Wednesday, the federal government would initially support 90 percent of the cost of the programs for 4 year-olds, leaving 10 percent of the cost to states. Over time, the state contribution would rise to about 75 percent, with the federal government funding 25 percent.

"We want to encourage states to have skin in the game," said Mr. Duncan. He added that funding the program with a cigarette tax could have the added benefit of reducing smoking, particularly among young people.

Several other proposals for K-12 education included investments in hiring more science, math and technology teachers, help for struggling schools, encouraging schools to link with colleges and employers to create courses of study in high school, and a school safety program.

While the budget proposed significant cuts for many other agencies, it proposes a 4.6 percent increase in discretionary funding for the Education Department over 2013 spending.

Grover J. Whitehurst, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, noted that the Obama administration was continuing its education policy of using federal funds as incentives to drive its overhaul. Many of the programs require states to comply with administration priorities to get financing.

Even the pre-K program, he said, was a partnership with states in which “it’s a game in which not every state is going to play and which will require significant commitments by states to the administration’s vision of what quality pre-K looks like.”

“This is a very activist budget,” Mr. Whitehurst said. “The administration intends to use the mechanism it has used successfully to impose its policy views widely on states and, in some cases, districts.”

Given these kinds of strings, Andrew J. Coulson, director of the center for educational freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian policy group, said federal funding would “tend to homogenize pre-K programs.” As a result, he said, “we are going to lose the ability to figure out what works and why. The more they are caused to become uniform over time, the less variation and less opportunity there is to see how different policies work.”

Kris Perry, executive director of the First Five Years Fund, an advocacy group, said that the administration’s program was “not a federal mandate but an initiative with great flexibility for states.” Inasmuch as the federal funding is targeted at particular kinds of programs, she said, it would be for high quality pre-school programs.

Mr. Duncan said that children could enter pre-K programs run by public schools, existing Head Start centers, or other community groups. “We are agnostic on who delivers” the education, he said.

— *Motoko Rich*