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Obama Visits Georgia to Rally Support for Preschool Plan

By: MICHAEL D. SHEAR - February 14, 2013

ATLANTA — President Obama began to rally political support on Thursday for a nationwide expansion of early education when he visited a Georgia classroom of 4-year-olds and pushed for a plan that could cost as much as \$10 billion a year.

In laying out his agenda, President Obama continued trying to define a 21st-century version of liberalism that could outlast his time in office.

Guns

Mr. Obama pledged in his State of the Union address this week to make high-quality preschool available to “every single child in America” — a costly and controversial proposal that is already running into opposition as Washington grapples with how to reduce the nation’s deficit.

The plan, as described by administration officials, would seek to sharply expand the universe of children who attend school before kindergarten. Federal money — perhaps as much as \$10 billion per year — would be used primarily to make preschool classes available for more low- and moderate-income children.

By comparison, the federal government spent about \$108 billion last year on all federal education programs, according to Jason Delisle of the New America Foundation. That figure includes Education Department grants, Head Start and student loan subsidies, among other programs.

“In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children, like Georgia or Oklahoma, studies show students 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,” Mr. Obama said in his address on Tuesday. “We know this works.”

Aides said federal money would be offered as an incentive for states to expand their own preschool programs, not to create a large, new federal system of education. The federal Head Start program, which offers preschool for very poor children, would continue as is, they said.

Officials said the state preschool programs would have to meet rigorous standards, have highly qualified teachers and submit to assessment programs. Teachers would have to be paid comparably to kindergarten teaches and class sizes would be limited.

Mr. Obama’s plan also would avoid one of the thorniest political challenges facing universal preschool proposals: the use of scarce resources to provide early educational services to children who come from wealthy families. That prospect has scuttled some state efforts.

But the plan still faces deep skepticism among conservative academics and Republicans in Congress, who insist that despite Mr. Obama's rosy descriptions, there is little scientific evidence that large-scale preschool programs do much good for children in the long run.

"I do expect it to run into some serious headwinds," said Andrew J. Coulson, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a right-leaning research organization. "Why would you want to very expensively expand the programs like this if the evidence of effectiveness is not really sound."

House Speaker John A. Boehner quickly dismissed the idea on Wednesday, telling The Associated Press that getting the federal government more involved in early education is "a good way to screw it up."

The president is betting that the public will pressure lawmakers to support preschool efforts that have been embraced in some of the most politically conservative states. Oklahoma and Georgia have Republican governors and were won by Mitt Romney in last year's election. But both states have expanded their preschool programs in recent years.

In addition, White House officials and child care advocates noted that Govs. Rick Snyder of Michigan and Mike Pence of Indiana, both Republicans, have talked about the need for better early education efforts.

"If you look at how pre-k has grown, you see a range of different governors supporting it," said Helen Blank, the director of child care and early learning for the National Women's Law Center. "We should be able to come together on something that we have clear research on."

White House officials say the cost of the preschool expansion would not push federal spending beyond the caps in a budget agreement between the two parties 18 months ago. Aides said Mr. Obama would offer financial details about how much the preschool program would cost when he unveils his budget later this year.

But the proposal for new investment in early education comes at a time of deep divisions in Washington, where Republicans accuse Mr. Obama of embarking on a government spending spree without concern for the nation's long-term debt.

And Democrats are sure to be wary of a perception that the president wants to expand the role of the federal government in education.

W. Steven Barnett, the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, called the effort to achieve universal preschool for all 4-year-olds "the biggest proposed change in American education since Brown versus the Board of Education," the court case that integrated schools.

But Mr. Barnett, an advocate of the preschool expansion, said he recognized the political difficulties it faced, partly because of the cost of the program. He said it could cost between \$3 billion and \$20 billion a year. One study estimated the cost at about \$10 billion a year, Mr. Barnett said.

“The inside-the-Beltway politics don’t look particularly good on this,” Mr. Barnett said, citing the current deficit-cutting fervor among many Republicans. Still, he said Mr. Obama’s visit to Georgia is encouraging because it might help turn the tide in Washington.

“The outside-the-Beltway politics look much better,” he said.