



Federal initiative aims to ‘school’ children from birth

By: Kenric Ward - March 14, 2013

WASHINGTON — Unimpressed by the fraud-ridden, multibillion-dollar Head Start program? Brace yourself for a federally driven pre-kindergarten initiative that aims to “school” millions more children from birth.

Some education analysts applauded President Obama’s new proposal to expand access to early childhood education.

But others see the administration’s plan as yet another bloated underperformer that’s more about rewarding unions than bolstering academics.

Washington already spends some \$25 billion a year on child-care and pre-K services, including \$8 billion for Head Start. With fewer than one in three eligible children enrolled in such programs, the price of going beyond Head Start’s 1.1 million enrollment will skyrocket.

Obama, who outlined his vision in the State of the Union address, has yet to specify how much money would be required, or from where it would come.

The administration says it wants to “ensure a cohesive and well-aligned system of early learning for children from birth to age 5.” Currently, Head Starts primarily serves 4-year-olds.

Playing to the Democrats’ union base, the Obama plan calls for “well-trained teachers who are paid comparably to K-12 staff,” small class sizes, low adult-to-child ratios, “comprehensive health and related services” and all-day kindergarten.

Skeptics say expanded preschool and comprehensive “Early Head Start” are doomed to fail if the current program is any indication.

“Head Start is an incredibly bad model for providing pre-K,” said RiShawn Biddle, editor and publisher of Dropout Nation.

Even the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the program, admitted in a report last year that while a sample group of 5,000 Head Start graduates scored early educational gains, those gains faded by third grade.

More damning, the Government Accountability Office found widespread fraud at Head Start centers.

Across the country, GAO undercover investigators uncovered rampant fraudulent activity, such as employees counseling families to under-report income to qualify for services.

The Obama administration says it wants to clean up Head Start, which now costs U.S. taxpayers \$7,300 per child. Local and state matching funds add to that tab.

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Sara Mead, associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners, suggested at a Thomas B. Fordham Foundation forum in Washington on Thursday that Head Start “move into a charter school model with an emphasis on school readiness, content and outcomes.”

But Democratic ideas for reforming Head Start and “incentivizing” states to ramp up more pre-K programs would be costly.

Obama has already committed \$1.5 billion to expand “voluntary home visiting programs (to) enable nurses, social workers and other professionals to connect families to services and educational support that will improve a child’s health, development and ability to learn.”

The president says he will pursue “substantial investments to expand these important programs to reach additional families in need.”

Meanwhile, a proposal in the Democratic-controlled Senate earmarks \$33.5 million in new funding – through congressional districts – to force the worst-performing Head Start centers to re-compete for public funds.

Lindsey Burke and Will Skillman, fellows in education at the conservative Heritage Foundation, say Head Start should be scrapped.

“At minimum, it should be reformed to allow states to make their Head Start dollars portable, following low-income children to a private preschool provider of choice, instead of relegating them to underperforming Head Start centers,” Burke and Skillman say.

FIX K-12 FIRST: RiShawn Biddle says pre-K is no quick fix.

Biddle says the administration’s pre-K gambit misses the mark.

“Pre-K sounds easy, looks easy and lends itself to being a silver bullet. But it loses focus because it distracts from the issues of teacher quality and curricular quality that persist in the K-12 system,” Biddle told Watchdog.org in an interview.

“To make pre-K work, you have to deal with what’s happening in K-12,” he said.

In Virginia, where 17,478 children are enrolled in Head Start, Gov. Bob McDonnell launched a pilot program to rate preschool programs.

“The governor is dedicated to ensuring that every child, regardless of ZIP code, has access to a world-class education,” said McDonnell’s press secretary, Jeff Caldwell.

“That is why he spearheaded reforms this session, including funding to pilot a kindergarten readiness assessment. This pilot will give us insight into which pre-school interventions are working in each locality.”

Ever-increasing federal spending in education has had a negligible and, occasionally, reverse effect on academic outcomes.

A report from the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute shows federal K-12 outlays jumped 375 percent (inflation-adjusted) since 1970. During that period – when more than \$2 trillion was expended – 12th-grade test scores have been flat or falling.

Mike Petrilli, executive vice president at Fordham, told Watchdog that some recent improvement has been registered in fourth- and eighth-grade scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. But he added that advocates of an expanded or universal pre-K program may “overstate a lot of the potential benefits.”

Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, says he remains “unsure about the return on investment with 4-year-olds.”

Though he doesn’t necessarily object to a need-based, cost-neutral model – preconditions he sees as crucial for bipartisan support – Whitehurst cautioned, “Thinking that we’ll spring back to the fore on international tests seems unjustified.”