

CHILD CARE

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

President Obama's Plan for Early Education

April 2013

President Obama has proposed a comprehensive plan to increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five. Here are answers to some commonly asked questions about the proposal and about early care and education.

Why is the President's proposed plan for early education important?

This plan recognizes that a significant portion of brain development occurs in a child's earliest years and that ensuring children enter school ready to succeed requires a comprehensive approach. The plan begins with an expansion of evidence-based, voluntary home visiting programs that offer parent education and support, because parents are children's first teachers and central to young children's development. The plan also addresses the need to expand high-quality options for infants and toddlers—which are in short supply in communities across the country—through partnerships between Early Head Start and child care. In addition, the plan would guarantee access to high-quality prekindergarten for all children in low- and moderate-income families (families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty), children who are more likely to lack access to, yet stand to benefit the most from, high-quality prekindergarten.

The plan would take a significant step forward to address the critical shortage of affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five. Less than two-thirds of four-year-olds (63 percent of those not yet in kindergarten) are enrolled in preschool programs,¹ and many of these programs are not high quality. Infants and toddlers are even less likely to be in high-quality programs. One study rated only 29 percent of center-based care for infants as high quality² and another study rated just 8 percent of center-based care for infants as high quality.³

How can you expect this proposal to be enacted given the partisan nature of Congress?

Prekindergarten and child care programs have enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington and in the states, as political leaders, regardless of party, have recognized that early care and education helps children get a strong start, supports families, and is a financially sound investment.

Governors on both sides of the aisle have championed state funding for prekindergarten for many years. Oklahoma and Georgia have been leaders in making prekindergarten universally available—initiatives that have continued under Democratic and Republican governors in these states. Just this year, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, a Democrat, has proposed a universal prekindergarten initiative; Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican, is supporting a major expansion of his state's prekindergarten program; and the Republican Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi, Tate Reeves, has shepherded a bill through the legislature that will create a prekindergarten program in the state.

Child care has also had bipartisan support among governors. For example, previous Republican governors in Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Illinois supported guaranteeing child care assistance for all low-income families.

As one more indication that this is a bipartisan priority, 27 governors mentioned early care and education in

their 2013 State of the State addresses, and nearly half of these governors (12) are Republicans.⁴

At the national level, presidents from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Obama have supported significant expansions in funding for Head Start. Legislation establishing the Child Care and Development Block Grant—the major federal child care program—was co-sponsored by Democratic Senator Chris Dodd and Republican Senator Orrin Hatch and was enacted in 1990 under the first President Bush.

Will the President's plan discourage states from moving forward on their own investments in early childhood?

The plan calls for expanding prekindergarten through a federal-state partnership. The federal government and states would share the cost of expanding or starting new prekindergarten programs. States would still have to invest their own dollars—but they would have an additional incentive to invest those dollars, and those dollars would go further with a federal match.

Many states have invested in prekindergarten for decades and, as of 2010-2011, 39 states funded pre-kindergarten programs, spending a total of over \$5.49 billion and serving more than 1.3 million children.⁵ Under the President's plan, the federal investment should encourage, not substitute, additional state investment.

Why is the President suggesting new investments at a time when there is an emphasis on reducing the federal deficit?

Investing in young children in their key developmental years is an investment in our current and future economy. We will only be able to truly address the deficit if we have economic growth, and we will only have economic growth if we have a productive workforce now and in the future.

The benefits of early care and education exceed the costs and therefore do not add to long-term deficits. Research shows that \$1 invested in high-quality early education today can save \$7 in the future, by reducing the likelihood that children will have to repeat a grade or require special education in elementary and secondary school or that they will get involved in crime or become dependent on welfare as adults, and by

increasing the likelihood that they will find secure employment and become financially self-sufficient.⁶

In the near term, expanding families' access to child care and early education programs will help enable low- and moderate-income parents to work so they can support their families and make a productive contribution to our nation's economy.

Thus, by investing in early care and education today, we ultimately help reduce the deficit and, more importantly, create a stronger America.

Why should we invest in prekindergarten and other early childhood programs when the research on Head Start does not show lasting results?

A number of studies, including small-scale studies of intensive programs as well as studies of larger state and local prekindergarten programs, show that high-quality early education programs have short- and long-term benefits for children.⁷ These benefits include improved academic performance in elementary and secondary school, reduced grade retention, decreased need for special education, increased high school graduation rates and college attendance, higher earnings as adults, and reduced criminal involvement. These programs work because they help young children acquire cognitive skills and knowledge as well as the persistence, motivation, and self-discipline they need to learn in school and throughout their lives.

One of the most recent studies showing that high-quality early education can produce sustained benefits was of New Jersey's Abbott prekindergarten program. The program—established in urban, low-income districts as a remedy in the New Jersey Supreme Court school funding case, *Abbott v. Burke*—is well-funded and has strong quality standards. The study found that children who had attended the Abbott program performed better on language and literacy, math, and science achievement tests and had lower rates of grade retention and special education placement through fourth and fifth grade than children who had not attended the program.⁸

Although the Head Start Impact Study found that most of the benefits of the program faded out during elementary school, it is important to interpret the results with caution. First, while the Impact Study was

done as carefully as possible, there were some methodological issues that are inevitable in any social science experiment involving real people and circumstances that cannot be completely controlled. For example, some of the children in the control group ended up attending another Head Start or preschool program, and some of the children in the treatment group did not attend Head Start for the entire school year. As a result, the findings might have not fully captured the difference in performance between children who actually attended Head Start and those who did not attend Head Start (or a similar program).

Second, children who attended Head Start did perform better on cognitive tests at kindergarten entry than children who did not attend the program. The fact that this advantage disappeared may be due to their experiences in elementary school. The non-Head Start children may have received more attention from their teachers to help them catch up with their classmates. In this way, resources—teachers' time and attention, at the expense of other students—may have been needed during the elementary years when they were not provided prior to kindergarten.

Finally, Head Start as it exists today should not be judged mainly based on the Head Start Impact Study, because the children in the study attended Head Start prior to significant quality improvements implemented under the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. Under this legislation, teachers must meet increased credential requirements and grantees that do not meet all of the program's high quality standards must compete for continued funding.

What does the plan mean for Head Start?

The plan builds on states' long-standing role in supporting prekindergarten. Over the past few decades, states' investment in prekindergarten has grown—today, 39 states fund prekindergarten programs, spending a total of over \$5.49 billion and serving more than 1.3 million children in 2011.⁹ However, nationwide, these state prekindergarten programs serve only 28 percent of four-year-olds and just 4 percent of three-year-olds.¹⁰ The President's early education plan would expand state prekindergarten programs to reach more four-year-olds while allowing Head Start to focus on reaching the many three-year-olds who are not currently served by Head Start or state prekindergarten programs. The plan

would also provide an opportunity for Early Head Start, in partnership with child care programs that meet Early Head Start's quality standards, to expand to reach more infants and toddlers; currently, less than 4 percent of infants and toddlers in poverty are participating in Early Head Start.¹¹

In addition, local Head Start programs, as well as child care programs, will still be able to serve four-year-olds through states' new or expanded prekindergarten programs under this plan. Head Start programs are already participating in state prekindergarten initiatives across the country. For example, 11 percent of children enrolled in New Jersey's highly acclaimed Abbott pre-school program—which operates in the state's lowest-income school districts—are in Head Start settings and another 49 percent of children enrolled in the program are in child care settings.¹²

What makes a high-quality prekindergarten program?

A high-quality program is a program that ensures children's safety, promotes their healthy development, and encourages their learning and growth. Research—and day-to-day experience with young children—shows that there are a number of essential components of a high-quality program:

- Well-educated teachers with credentials in early education that demonstrate they have an understanding of how children learn and how to encourage children's successful development.
- Early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate, that address all essential areas of early learning (including cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional development), that accommodate children's diverse backgrounds and abilities, and that are linked with curriculum, classroom practices, and teaching strategies to promote positive development and learning.
- A developmentally appropriate, comprehensive curriculum that engages children, encourages them to develop positive attitudes about learning, and gives them an opportunity to learn content through investigation, play, and focused, intentional teaching.
- Low child-teacher ratios and small class sizes that allow teachers to provide individualized attention and support to children.

- Good nutrition for children during the prekindergarten day, so they are physically healthy, have the energy they need to learn, and begin practicing healthy eating habits.
- Parent engagement and support efforts, which help teachers and program staff gain a greater understanding of children's needs and help parents gain greater knowledge about promoting their children's learning and development.
- Vision, hearing, and health screenings and referrals to appropriate health care providers, to ensure that any developmental delays, disabilities, or other health issues are identified and addressed as early as possible.
- Facilities that are geared to young children, that are safe, and that offer space for learning and play.
- Materials and equipment that foster young children's cognitive, physical, and social development.
- Regular monitoring to ensure that individual programs and classrooms are meeting high standards.

Why does the plan support investments in early learning for infants and toddlers?

High-quality early care and education is essential for children in their earliest years of life when they are first learning and exploring and when critical brain development is occurring. Young children need positive experiences in and out of the home to provide a strong foundation for their future development.

For millions of working parents, infant/toddler care is a necessity. Three-fifths (60.6 percent) of women with children under age three are in the labor force.¹³ Yet high-quality care for infants and toddlers is scarce in many communities and often difficult to afford. The average cost of full-time infant care ranges from approximately \$4,500 to nearly \$15,000 a year, depending on where a family lives and the type of care.¹⁴ These costs can be a particular burden for young families with infants since the parents may be just starting to work and have not had time to accumulate any savings. Nearly half (49 percent) of children under age three—5.6 million infants and toddlers—live in low-income families (families with incomes under 200 percent of poverty).¹⁵

The President's plan would help support vulnerable families with infants and toddlers by expanding access to home visits (on a voluntary basis). Home visiting programs offer parent education and connect parents with resources that help them promote their children's health, well-being, learning, and development. Research indicates that well-designed home visiting programs can have positive impacts on children's school readiness, health, and development, parenting practices, family economic self-sufficiency, and maternal health.¹⁶

The President also proposes to expand access to high-quality, comprehensive early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers through partnerships between Early Head Start and child care. Currently, less than 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers are able to participate in Early Head Start.¹⁷

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- 10 The State of Preschool 2011, 8.
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