

Governor proposes universal preschool

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Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich today will unveil a plan for universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, a move potential Republican foes dismissed as expensive, election-year pandering the state can't afford.

"It's a \$135 million TV commercial at taxpayers' expense," said Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, referring to the program's estimated cost the first three years. "Our economy is still lagging behind and he's spending more than we're bringing in."

The governor's "Preschool For All" program aims at ensuring all children start elementary schools with enough basic knowledge to avoid falling behind academically, something that could haunt them the rest of their lives.

"What the governor is saying is the social science is clear, so let's really redefine education in Illinois to include the option of preschool," said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children, a non-profit group that helped craft the proposal.

The program would be voluntary and aimed at helping middle-class parents making \$30,000 to \$80,000 a year. Parents making less than that already qualify for government-funded preschool, while the vast majority of parents making more than that already send their children to private preschools.

As envisioned, the state's preschool coverage would expand from 75,000 children to about 140,000 in three years, Stermer said. That's in addition to the 25,000 more children attending state-funded preschool under Blagojevich during his administration's first three years.

After five years, Stermer estimated more than half the 340,000 3- and 4-year-olds would be enrolled in a state-sponsored universal preschool program. Illinois would become the first state in the nation to offer preschool to all 3-year-olds and one of a handful to offer preschool to all 4-year-olds, Stermer said.

The proposal is the result of two years of work by the Early Learning Council, an unpaid state panel of experts formed to look at early childhood learning. The founder of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, one of the groups pushing universal preschool, also is one of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's top campaign donors. Irving Harris has given \$100,000 to Friends of Blagojevich: \$50,000 in May 2002 and another \$50,000 on Christmas Eve 2004.

Blagojevich would pay for the major preschool expansion by taking money in special bank accounts in the state budget reserved for specific programs, a practice he's used before and whose legality is under question. He'd also ask legislators to close so-called tax loopholes on businesses, which he's also done before. That led to loud criticism from Republican governor candidates.

Chicagoan Ron Gidwitz, a former Illinois State Board of Education chairman, accused Blagojevich of "pandering" for votes and putting the burden to pay on businesses.

"It's akin to using a loophole closing for a noose," said Gidwitz, who last week proposed a \$25 million program to get the remaining 6 percent of 5- and 6-year-olds into kindergarten. "He's been strangling Illinois businesses since his first day on the job and it's got to stop."

State Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington suggested Blagojevich "must sit around dreaming up programs for his national ambition."

Sugar Grove businessman Jim Oberweis questioned whether the science behind Blagojevich's proposal is solid, claiming it's based on one 30-year study that had flaws. Even if it were solid, Oberweis said a more efficient approach is to provide a tax credit to allow child care businesses and faith-based groups to get involved. "It's government by press conference," Oberweis said. "I hope Illinois voters get it."

A governor's spokeswoman said the Republican criticism clearly shows there are two visions for the state.

"Ours, which means every child gets the same chance to go to preschool and have health care so they have the best shot at growing up to be healthy and productive adults," spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said. "Then there's the opposing vision, which means cutting education, cutting health care, a bloated state payroll and giveaways that put small businesses at a competitive disadvantage."

Meanwhile, Stermer acknowledged it will be difficult to find all the new certified teachers that will be required and to find enough space for the new students to attend preschool.

Blagojevich's preschool push comes in advance of his Wednesday budget speech, where he faces increased pressure to spend on elementary and high schools and public universities and community colleges.