

Chicago Tribune

State eyes free preschool

Blagojevich plan would offer program to all 3- and 4-year-olds

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Published February 12, 2006

Gov. Rod Blagojevich will propose Sunday that all Illinois families have the option of sending their children to a state-funded preschool, creating the nation's first "universal prekindergarten" for children as young as 3.

Just weeks away from a primary election, the governor will propose a five-year "Preschool for All" initiative that recommends spending an additional \$135 million in the first three years. It is one of several marquee programs Blagojevich has rolled out as the election draws near, raising questions from critics about where the money will come from.

With growing evidence about the importance of early learning, many educators believe they can improve academic achievement if all children begin kindergarten with the same basic skills, such as recognizing the shapes and sounds of letters.

"The whole idea behind funding education is to make sure we help our kids learn, and the evidence is very persuasive that if we invest in early education, children will learn better," the governor told the Tribune.

He also said preschool gives all children a chance to succeed and compete with their peers, regardless of their backgrounds.

"It is giving kids an equal playing field, and an equal chance at the American dream," Blagojevich said. "If we don't do this, what you're going to see is more disparity, less fairness, less opportunity for children to get ahead."

The state would be the first to offer free preschool to all 3-year-olds, regardless of family income, and it would become the fourth to offer so-called universal preschool to 4-year-olds, joining Oklahoma, Georgia and Florida.

The current state preschool, which serves some 75,000 children, is limited to youngsters at risk of academic failure because of low income and other factors, such as speaking another language at home.

The school day at the state-funded prekindergartens would last a minimum of 2 1/2 hours. Attendance would not be mandatory at any preschool, and many families would continue to send their children to private preschools.

Administration officials estimate that after five years, about 140,000 of the 342,700 children ages 3 and 4 in Illinois would be enrolled in the proposed universal program.

Educators have been selling the concept of universal prekindergarten to business leaders and

politicians. They cite research showing investment in preschool saves money down the road by keeping people out of prison, reducing dropout rates and lessening the need for remedial education.

Still, the governor's ambitious universal preschool proposal will face challenges--political and financial.

Administration officials acknowledge that the state will need several hundred more certified teachers and additional facilities to house a growing population of preschoolers. Part of the proposed funding would go toward increasing the teacher supply, including working with universities that train new teachers.

Tax loopholes targeted

The governor hopes to increase education funding in part by closing what his administration believes are corporate tax loopholes and moving money out of a variety of special state funds--both controversial measures that would have to be approved by lawmakers.

Questions about costs undoubtedly will be raised by Republicans, the minority party in both houses. But with Senate President Emil Jones and House Speaker Michael Madigan co-chairing Blagojevich's re-election campaign and working closely with him on the budget, the governor's proposals will likely have smoother sailing than in sessions past.

The governor is expected to outline the first phase of the preschool expansion at a news conference Sunday.

On Wednesday, he will announce his spending recommendations for 2006-07 to the General Assembly.

The governor intends to pay for universal prekindergarten with general revenue dollars, the state's primary checkbook that gets money from income taxes and other fees.

He will propose the state spend an extra \$45 million a year over each of the next three years, to bump up enrollment by about 32,000 children, attract new preschool teachers and make other improvements. That money would be on top of the current \$273.2 million spent on state prekindergarten and an accompanying program for even younger children.

In the following two years, a total of \$90 million more would be needed to serve an additional 30,000 children, his staff estimated.

Adding in other federal and state programs available to preschoolers with special needs, Illinois would be serving about 56 percent of the 3- and 4-year-olds in the state by 2010.

By comparison, Georgia serves about 53 percent of its 4-year-olds and Oklahoma serves about 70 percent.

If more families than expected apply, the state would set criteria for who gets in first, including giving priority to 4-year-olds over 3-year-olds, said Elliot Regenstein, director of education reform for the governor and co-chairman of the Illinois Early Learning Council. The council, formed in 2003, provided the blueprint for the governor's proposals.

With a push from Blagojevich, the state has put an extra \$90 million into prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds over the last three years, allowing some 25,000 more children to attend and pushing total enrollment to some 75,000 children today.

The middle-income gap

Illinois now has a hodgepodge of publicly funded early-childhood programs. They include the federal Head Start program for families in extreme poverty and the state's child-care subsidy program for working families, along with state preschool. But there are no public programs to help families in the middle, such as a family of four or more making \$40,000 to \$70,000.

"The real gap is for the children right over the income cutoff point, those who fall off the cliff of financial eligibility," said Harriet Meyer, president of the Chicago-based Ounce of Prevention Fund. She is also co-chairman of the Illinois Early Learning Council.

For example, nearly three-quarters of children in families who make \$75,000 a year or more go to preschool. But only half of the children in families with incomes of \$30,000 to \$75,000 attend preschool, according to a report by the council.

The universal program is especially designed to help those middle-income working families, Blagojevich said.

Some less affluent communities have more need than others for child services. A 2003 study by the Illinois Facilities Fund found 10 Illinois communities were in most need of early-childhood care and education services. They were, in order of need: Cicero, Berwyn, Aurora, Bolingbrook, Mt. Prospect, Calumet City, Elgin, Waukegan, Chicago Heights and Chicago.

Some parents said they would welcome any relief. Amy Schuffler, an office manager from Arlington Heights, said she recently had to change her 4-year-old son's preschool and child-care center when it raised her payment to \$500 a month.

"There are lots of people in similar situations," Schuffler said. But she cautioned that half-day state preschool would have to coordinate or complement full-day child-care arrangements to help working parents.

Governor's 'vision' lauded

Preschool advocates praised the governor's proposal.

"This vision matches what the science tells us and our sense of what families are interested in and our sense of what will make a difference in closing the achievement gap." said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children and a member of the executive committee of the Early Learning Council.

The current state preschool program delivers services in a variety of settings, from private child-care centers to rented storefronts or park facilities. If state-funded preschool expands, new providers would have to meet strict quality standards, such as having lead teachers with bachelor's degrees, to be eligible for state funds.

In contrast, Georgia does not require its state preschool teachers to have four-year college degrees, while Oklahoma does.

Georgia's program has a 6 1/2-hour school day, while Oklahoma allows half- or full-day programs, either 2 1/2 or 6 hours.

Illinois' half-day preschool will still provide challenges to working families, who will need to find an affordable setting for their children for the rest of the workday.

But a longer preschool day would be far more expensive for a state that has been struggling with deficits.

Even so, Illinois' proposed program would put the state in the national limelight, said W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

"Nationwide, state pre-K is almost all about 4-year-olds," Barnett said. "Illinois really is on the forefront if it is talking about all 3-year-olds."
