

Cuts would curtail Obama Head Start plan

Sequestration would cut \$14.6 million from Ohio Head Start, affecting 2,359 children.

By Jessica Wehrman, Margo Rutledge Kissell

WASHINGTON — February 13, 2013

[President Barack Obama](#)'s call for universal pre-kindergarten during his State of the Union address was symbolic of many of the proposals he floated during that speech: A big idea currently facing the budget ax.

Obama's plan would, in part, create a new federal-state partnership that would provide low- and moderate-income four-year-olds with high-quality preschool and create a new Early Head Start-Child Care partnership paid for through competitive grants.

By blending the new early education program with Head Start — the federal program that allows low-income three and four-year-olds to attend pre-school — millions of children would have access to pre-kindergarten education.

There's a hitch, however: Even as Obama wants to expand pre-school, automatic spending reductions scheduled to go into effect next month will slash \$406 million from Head Start through the end of the fiscal year, kicking 62,887 children off the program within the next seven months alone, according to the National Head Start Association.

Those same cuts would cost Ohio \$14.6 million in federal dollars during the next seven months, meaning 2,359 children would lose Head Start services unless Congress works to reverse those cuts. In Dayton, 2,809 are currently enrolled in Head Start, according to the National Head Start Association.

If the programs are cut, said Adele Robinson, deputy executive director for Policy and Public Affairs for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, some children "will have no place to go."

Robinson admits that the dichotomy — cuts scheduled for March 1 versus being named a national priority by the president — amount to something of a "fiscal bungee cord."

At a time when Head Start is being slashed, it may be difficult to persuade House Republicans to approve Obama's pre-school program which the New York Times reports could cost \$10 billion a year.

“Preschool is great,” said Rep. Pat Tiberi, R-Genoa Twp. in suburban Columbus. “But our government should not make promises we cannot keep.”

He called the preschool program “another entitlement” at a time when the nation is running deficits of \$1 trillion a year. “This president is trying to be Santa Claus for every American,” he said.

The idea of universal pre-kindergarten is nothing new. In the 1990s, states such as Georgia and Oklahoma led the way to providing preschool for all four-year-olds. But the recession stalled the idea for many.

Helen Blank of the National Women’s Law Center said that idea has come back, though, as the economy has slowly recovered. In Massachusetts, Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat, in January proposed expanding prekindergarten. In Mississippi, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican, last month backed a bill that would expand early childhood education programs through school districts, private and parochial schools, private child care centers and Head Start.

Economists argue that early investment pays dividends in the long run.

“The research is pretty clear,” Blank said. “Longitudinal studies show a child with high quality pre-k is less likely to be involved in the law, more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to become pregnant as a teenager.”

In Ohio, the state’s early childhood education program serves 5,700 children statewide. An additional 23,000 students are served by preschool special education services, according to Stephanie Siddens, director of early learning and school readiness for the Ohio Department of Education. The state also offers money for subsidized childcare through the state Department of Job and Family Services, she said.

Those involved locally with the programs are thrilled to hear Obama call for universal pre-k.

“Hallelujah,” said Springfield City School District Superintendent David Estrop. “For Springfield, a community with considerable poverty, preschool and all-day kindergarten are essential to the success of our children.”

About 240 children attend Springfield’s preschool program at the Clark Center, said program director Steve Whitacre, and there is a waiting list for enrollment. Head Start has 580 students in the city.

And in Dayton, hundreds of community leaders gathered in November for Learn to Earn Dayton’s formal launch of a cradle-to-career educational initiative that aims to better prepare students for high-skilled jobs.

The concept targets key areas, including kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading achievement, successful transition to high school and from high school to completing college. Among those involved in that effort is ReadySetSoar, an early childhood collaborative working to improve kindergarten readiness across Montgomery County.

ReadySetSoar director Robyn Lightcap cited her organization's 2012 data showing students who attend a center-based preschool or child care program score higher on a key assessment of kindergarten readiness to read.

"We know it has a significant impact on the kindergarten readiness scores," she said.

But universal pre-kindergarten programs have their critics. Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman fellow in education policy at The Heritage Foundation, cited a December 2012 report on Head Start by the Department of Health and Human Services demonstrating that the program had "no impact on the cognitive ability" of the 5,000 students studied. Head Start, she said, "is a 48-year failed experiment with federal preschool."

"It failed, and it failed wildly to achieve its mission," she said. "Yet we spend \$8 billion a year on Head Start, over \$180 billion on Head Start since its implementation, and it's just an abject failure."

Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, said that study reflects low pay among Head Start teachers. In programs where teachers are better compensated, quality improves.

He said a number of studies dating back to 1960 indicate that preschool works.

He said the issue isn't a partisan one in state legislatures, where Republicans and Democrats alike tend to agree that investing in children early pays off with a better prepared workforce.

"Congress is playing a big game of chicken with the American economy," he said.

Jack Torry of the Washington Bureau and Staff Writer Megan Gildow Anthony contributed to this report.