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Early ed gains momentum in states

By Pauline Vu, Stateline.org Staff Writer

This fall, states will see the results of the big bucks they are promising to plug into early education programs.

Among several states expanding access to preschool classes, Washington state will have an extra 2,250 pre-kindergarten spaces, Oregon will serve another 3,200 youngsters, and Tennessee will have up to 5,000 more openings. Meanwhile, kindergartners in seven states could see their school hours double as the drive for all-day kindergarten gains momentum.

It's all part of a push to get more kids learning at a young age when, research has shown, their brains still are developing and they're most likely to soak in information. Advocates also say that students who have attended preschool are less likely to commit crimes later and more likely to attend college, get jobs and pay taxes.

So far this year legislatures in Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington are among those that answered the call of a record 29 governors who sought to boost funding for their state pre-K programs. Two years ago, only 11 governors asked for such increases.

Currently, 39 states have a state-funded preschool program, although the majority of them only cover low-income kids. Only three states — Georgia, Florida and Oklahoma — offer voluntary preschool to all 4-year-olds. Illinois last year passed a law to create the country's first universal program for 3-year-olds, as well as 4-year-olds, but the program is being phased in.

Some new Democratic governors have been the most eager to jump on the pre-K bandwagon. Arkansas' Mike Beebe requested and the Legislature allotted \$40 million to extend spots in the state's "Better Chance" preschool program. Iowa Gov. Chet Culver won approval for \$60 million over four years and New York's Eliot Spitzer got an increase of almost \$146 million to boost the number of preschool openings. Within four years, Iowa and New York hope to join the group of states that provide pre-K to any 4-year-old who wants it.

"What we've found is, when a governor recommends it, the legislature usually falls in line," said Libby Doggett, executive director of [Pre-K Now](#), a national advocacy group that supports universal access to preschool. (Pre-K Now is funded mainly by [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#). *Stateline.org* also is funded by the Trusts as a project of the nonpartisan, non-advocacy [Pew Research Center](#).)

This week Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski (D) is expected to sign a budget that includes a \$39 million increase for the state's Head Start pre-K program that serves low-income youngsters. The money means 3,200 eligible children currently on waiting lists will get into a class.

Oregon had made cuts to Head Start when the state's budget was hurt by the national recession in 2002. But with available revenues this year, "Head Start was a priority program for the

governor to restore funding to, not just to make up for lost time, but to move ahead,” said Anna Richter Taylor, a spokeswoman for the governor.

States aren’t just expanding pre-kindergarten by pouring money into it. This legislative session, Texas ensured that foster children are eligible for pre-K, including after they’ve been adopted. The clarification will add an estimated 750 preschool spots to the state’s program.

In Vermont, lawmakers passed a bill that will give school districts enough money to teach half the 3- and 4-year-olds in their district as long as the districts work with existing preschool providers such as Head Start and private preschools, such as by sharing facilities. Gov. Jim Douglas (R) signed the bill in pen, but filled in the date with a crayon.

This year a few of the 11 states that don’t have state pre-K programs also took hesitant steps in that direction.

The Dakotas, for example, broke some barriers. South Dakota set aside \$700,000 for a three-year pilot program in the Sioux Falls School District that could be a model for extending voluntary pre-K to other districts. North Dakota passed a bill allowing districts to create preschool programs, but senators failed by one vote to allot \$200,000 to those districts.

In Mississippi, the only Southern state without a program, a bill that would have provided \$10 million for the state to set up a pre-K program got further than it ever had by passing the House, although it failed in the Senate.

All-day kindergarten also spread. This year at least seven state legislatures set aside money for all-day kindergarten, among them Montana, North Dakota and Utah, which don’t have state pre-K programs.

In Indiana, another state that lacks a state pre-K program, Gov. Mitch Daniels (R) made all-day kindergarten his top educational priority, and the Legislature agreed to spend \$92 million more in the two-year budget to give grants to school districts for full-day programs. Lawmakers also slipped a provision into the kindergarten bill to set up a state pre-K program, although they didn’t put any money into it.

Bucking the trend, Idaho, which doesn’t have pre-K, rejected an attempt in the Legislature this year to allow districts to set up preschool programs. It passed the Senate but failed in the House.

Idaho state Rep. Steven Thayn (R) said the House rejected the Senate measure because representatives felt parents were in the best position to prepare their kids for kindergarten.

“Early childhood education is important, but the parents are the ones who deliver the best quality of a child’s education,” Thayn said. “We’re saying, let’s build the family unit, encourage parents to do their job.”

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Contact Pauline Vu at pvu@stateline.org.