

# States Investing More in Pre-K Education

## **BACK TO SCHOOL: With More State Money, Pressure's on to Make Pre-K Programs Succeed**

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**The Associated Press**

**HILLSBORO, Ore.**

With school starting at Head Start centers in this fast-growing Portland suburb, so many 3-and-4-year-olds are trooping into classrooms that administrators are holding separate morning and afternoon sessions.

Split sessions are just a temporary fix. Program leaders plan to look for new sites in a year or two to house a preschool population that's expected to blossom with a recent infusion of state funding.

The same story is playing out across the country. In just the past few months, governors and lawmakers from more than a dozen states have sealed deals to spend far more public money on childhood education.

Nearly a million children now attend state-funded preschool, up more than a third from five years ago. States are investing \$4.2 billion in such programs, an increase of 75 percent since 2005, according to Pre-K Now, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.

The movement has been buoyed by research showing that the programs are cost-effective, a lure for businesses, and may lead to higher standardized test scores.

In Pennsylvania, for example, Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell pushed through a proposal to put \$75 million into preschool programs, one of the spending items that survived a recent one-day state government shutdown during fractious budget negotiations.

New York lawmakers went even further than Democratic Gov. Eliot Spitzer had urged, adding \$145.9 million to the state's preschool budget in hopes of making it available to every 4-year-old in the state within four years.

Oregon lawmakers added nearly \$40 million to the state's Head Start budget, enough to add 1,700 new children this year and 1,400 more in 2008.

And in Iowa, legislators signed off on \$60 million to make preschool programs universally available to 3-and-4-year olds by 2011.

Eventually, every state will increase its spending in preschool education, predicts Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

"It will become an issue for state competitiveness; it will become an issue about moving state test scores," he said. "The larger it gets, the more demand it will generate."

The explosive growth has largely answered the question of whether states should be in the preschool business at all, said PreK-Now director Libby Doggett. States need now to turn their attention to making these new programs succeed, she said.

"States are trying to figure out how to phase this in," Doggett said. "Should they target those at risk and then go up the economic ladder, or should they target low-performing schools? Should they allow superintendents to make decisions about which schools they want to fund?"

States will also have to cope with housing greater numbers of preschoolers. Barnett's institute found that as many as 40 states have been expanding preschool programs or starting new ones, but very few are paying for renovations or construction of classrooms.

There's also the matter of finding qualified teachers for the influx of preschoolers. In Oregon, education officials put out the word in July that 200 new Head Start teachers were needed by September.

Qualifications for pre-K teachers vary from one state to another. At least 15 states require only an associate's degree.

Lawmakers have made it clear that they expect to see tangible returns on their investment in preschool education, said Farzana Siddiqui, director of child development at the Head Start program in Hillsboro, where the diverse student population includes children from Vietnam and Somalia.

Pre-K programs must dispel the perception that they're state-supported day care, Siddiqui said. Preschoolers won't be taking standardized tests, but teachers will be closely tracking their progress: Have the children learned to count? Do they raise their hands when they have a question? Do they know that a caterpillar will eventually turn into a butterfly?

A few states haven't embraced the pre-K movement. Lawmakers in Idaho, North Dakota and Mississippi turned back efforts this year to funnel money into preschool programs.

In North Dakota, legislators had to choose between financing a pilot preschool program or a long-standing plan to expand the kindergarten program, said state Sen. Raymon Holmberg.

"The one that had been to the altar many times was going to have a wedding," Holmberg said of the kindergarten proposal. "You can't pay for everything."

Early childhood advocates say kindergarten and preschool shouldn't be competing for support, but financial reality dictates otherwise, Holmberg said. Expanding kindergarten programs seemed practical because the classrooms are already in place, he said.

Elsewhere, there is lingering skepticism about investing in preschool. Virginia lawmakers wouldn't sign off on a preschool expansion proposed by the Democratic governor that would have covered all the state's 4-year-olds. In Idaho, Republican Gov. Butch Otter pulled \$1.5 million in federal money from the state's Head Start program.

"He wants to make sure that we are doing a good job spending the money we are currently spending on K-12," said Jon Hanian, Otter's spokesman. "We are not satisfied with the job we are doing there yet."

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