

Obama Makes Push for Universal Preschool

President Barack Obama turned his State of the Union roadshow to the topic of **education** on Thursday with a trip to Georgia, where he touted proposals to provide **preschool** access to all four-year-olds across America.

Obama proposed in his annual address to Congress on Tuesday that the federal government work with states to improve and broaden early childhood education to make the **United States** more competitive worldwide.

The White House cites evidence that investment in learning for very young children pays multiple benefits later, and his program seeks to make progress in closing the “achievement gap” – the chasm in test scores between children who grow up in poverty and the better off.

“Education has to start at the earliest possible age,” Obama said in a speech in Georgia, a state he said has shown leadership on the issue. “We are not doing enough to give all of our kids that chance.”

Obama’s proposal involves a cost-sharing partnership of the federal government and states to ensure children from low-income and middle-income families have access to good preschools, preparing them for kindergarten.

The White House has declined to put a price on the federal cost of the initiative, saying that will appear in the president’s upcoming budget proposal.

“This works. We know it works. If you’re looking for a good bang for your educational buck this is it,” Obama said.

Prior to his remarks, Obama visited the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center, which serves infants to pre-kindergarten students, hugging the children and helping out

with a series of learning games.

“Can I help?” he asked a group of kids working on a sculpture with blocks.

“We did it!” he exclaimed after they finished, giving high fives and fist bumps all around. Despite the appearance of a visit to a normally functioning school, CNN reported that College Heights had been on winter break, but the children were brought back for Obama’s visit.

Investing in **education** is part of a larger economic program Obama hopes to push through Congress, despite concerns about high deficits and an impasse with Republicans over government spending. Obama discussed his proposals for manufacturing during a visit to North Carolina on Wednesday.

Education Push

In his State of the Union address, Obama also proposed incentives for high schools to be redesigned to emphasize “real-world learning” and to include classes on technology, science and engineering. He also called for tighter accountability for colleges receiving federal aid.

Teachers unions and early childhood advocates hailed Obama’s preschool initiative as an effective way to narrow the achievement gap between impoverished and more well off kids.

Children from low-income families come into school with far more limited vocabularies, which can hold back their academic progress. High quality preschools aim to build up those critical skills with heavy emphasis on literacy, conversation and creative play.

But research on the benefits of preschool programs like the federally subsidized **Head Start** has been mixed.

Founded in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start is a joint federal and local program that aims to boost cognitive, social and emotional development among low-income children and help their parents nurture that growth at home as well.

The program serves infants through 5-year-olds, until they enter kindergarten.

The latest and most comprehensive study, sponsored by the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, found that children in Head Start did not get lasting academic or social gains from the program.

Though their language development improved modestly while they were in Head Start, the gains dissipated in elementary school.

The program's supporters counter that Head Start has not been given adequate support, the quality of centers varies from city to city and the pay scale for teachers does not draw top-quality educators. Head Start serves about 965,000 low-income children nationwide.

As part of his education proposals, Obama is also calling for a new Early Head Start-Child Care partnership for infants and toddlers. He also hopes to expand home visitation programs by nurses and social workers to vulnerable children.

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