

**Invest In Your Future: Implementing President Obama's  
Plan for Universal Preschool**  
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## Invest in you Future: Implementing Universal Preschool

### I. Introduction

The United States should fund Universal preschool and provide free early education to all children. While the states should provide the bulk of the funding, the federal government should contribute as well. Students at all levels would benefit through implementing this system.

During his recent State of the Union Address, President Obama called for an increase in children's access to preschool. He proclaimed, "Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But today, fewer than 3 in 10 four year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program."<sup>1</sup> He went on to point out that for our nation's poor children, who typically need the most support, that this lack of preschool education can shadow them for their entire lives.<sup>2</sup> The President assessed that "Every dollar we invest in a high-quality early childhood education can save more than \$7 later on, by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime."<sup>3</sup> Finally, he proposed that the federal government work with the states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America.

Following up on this statement, the President's proposed budget for 2014 includes a push for Universal preschool for low and middle-income four year

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<sup>1</sup> Obama, Barack H. "State of the Union Address." 2013 State of the Union. Capitol Building. Washington D.C. 2. Feb. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

olds.<sup>4</sup> He intends to do this by “raising taxes on tobacco products that harm our young people.”<sup>5</sup>

Although making a high-quality preschool available to every child in America will be a costly endeavor, research shows that benefits to children and society as a whole are well worth the investment. The first few years of a child’s life are critical and can be determinative of their later success in education and in life. Research shows that children who attend preschool programs are more likely to succeed in school and go on to have successful careers.<sup>6</sup> Economists agree that taxpayers will receive a high return on their investments in early childhood education.<sup>7</sup> Universal preschool will result in savings through increased labor productivity and reduction in crime.

First, this paper will describe President Obama’s Proposal for Universal preschool. Next, it will analyze the benefits of this plan for children, particularly those from a low socioeconomic background, as well as the overall benefits to society. Further, this paper will address the potential arguments against Universal preschool. Finally, it will discuss the movement towards Universal preschool in the states and how this can and should be implemented on a larger scale.

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<sup>4</sup> “*The President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2014.*” [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget). 10. April. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> “*Fact Sheet: Obama’s Plan for Early Education for all Americans*” Office of the Press Secretary. [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office). 13 Feb. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

## II. President Obama's Proposal

The President proposes a federal-state partnership to provide all low and moderate-income four-year-old children with high-quality preschool.<sup>8</sup> This proposal will improve the quality and expand the access to preschool through a cost sharing partnership throughout the states. These federal funds will reach all low and moderate-income families at or below 200% of poverty.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Department of Education will then allocate dollars to states based on their share of four-year olds from low and moderate-income families and distribute them accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

Under this plan, states are required to ensure that the children are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs. The states must meet benchmarks linked to better outcomes for children. These benchmarks include: (1) State-level standards for early learning; (2) qualified teachers for all preschool classrooms; and (3) a plan to implement comprehensive data and assessment systems.<sup>11</sup>

Preschools programs would have to meet standards for quality including; (1) well-trained teachers paid comparably to K-12 staff; (2) small class sizes; (3) a rigorous curriculum; (4) comprehensive health services and; (5) effective evaluation and review of programs.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the President proposes that the states expand the availability of full-day kindergarten. Currently, only 60% of kindergartners can access full day

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<sup>8</sup> “*Fact Sheet: Obama’s Plan for Early Education for all Americans*” Office of the Press Secretary. [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office). 13 Feb. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

learning. To ensure kindergartners reach the demanding standards, funds can be used for full-day kindergarten once states have provided preschool education.<sup>13</sup>

The President hopes that this series of new investments will help close the school readiness gap in American and ensure that children enter school ready for success. Pointing to the states that have made it a priority to educate their youngest children by implementing similar preschool programs the President stated, “We know this works. So let’s do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind.”<sup>14</sup>

### **III. Benefits of this Plan**

The advantages of Universal preschool greatly outweigh the costs and expenses incurred. This system allows students to be educated at a time where their minds are developing rapidly. It will particularly benefit students whose families cannot afford to put them in private preschools and provide them with quality education at a young age.

Advances in neuroscience show that the first few years of life are crucial for cognitive development and that early experiences greatly influence the “architecture of the brain”.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, early childhood offers an important opportunity to enrich a child’s development. The high quality programs proposed

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<sup>13</sup> “*Fact Sheet: Obama’s Plan for Early Education for all Americans*” Office of the Press Secretary. [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office). 13 Feb. 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Obama, Barack H. “State of the Union Address.” 2013 State of the Union. Capitol Building. Washington D.C. 2. Feb. 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Currie, Janet. “*Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What Do We Know?*” The Brookings Institute. April 2000. at p. 7.

by President Obama would lead to both short-term gains in cognitive functioning and long-term gains in school achievement.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence of social science also shows that high-quality preschool produces substantial gains in learning and development. Many preschool programs have produced lasting academic gains, a reduction in placements in special education, increased graduation rates and decreased crime and delinquency.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Universal preschools would provide an earlier opportunity to detect learning disabilities in children. Early detection gives both parents and schools the opportunity to identify and understand a student's disability and maximize their potential to learn.<sup>18</sup>

#### **A. Benefits to Children of Low Socioeconomic Background**

Typically, there is a wide gap in the school readiness between poor and affluent children when they enter kindergarten. Disadvantaged children begin kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills.<sup>19</sup> Often times, when children get later start at school, they fall behind. Research suggests that through high-

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<sup>16</sup> Sawhill, Isabel. *"Kids Need an Early Start: Universal preschool education may be the best investment Americans can make in our children's education"*. Blueprint Magazine. Fall 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan, James. "A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO PRESCHOOL?" California Law Review. Jan. 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Greene, Wilson. "Universal Preschool: A Costly But Worthy Goal" Journal of Law and Education. Oct. 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, Valerie. *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social differences in achievement as children begin school*. Economic Policy Institute. 2002.

quality preschool programs for children of low socioeconomic backgrounds can close this gap in readiness.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, with the current state of our economy, low-income parents need to work to provide for their families. Universal preschool provides a safe place from them to leave their children. Not only would this program allow for children from high-risk families to prepare for school but also it would enable low-income mothers and fathers to work to support their families and contribute to the economy.<sup>21</sup>

In the current preschool system less than half of impoverished children attend preschool at ages three and four.<sup>22</sup> The recession forced many states to cut back on early education programs.<sup>23</sup> These children from low-income families enter primary school unprepared and this puts them at a substantial disadvantage. Unfortunately, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are typically the students that need a solid educational foundation to be at the same level as other students.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study was an experiment to measure long and short-term benefits of high-quality education for impoverished

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<sup>20</sup> Lee, Valerie. *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social differences in achievement as children begin school*. Economic Policy Institute. 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Sawhill, Isabel. “*Kids Need an Early Start: Universal preschool education may be the best investment Americans canmake in our children’s education*”. Blueprint Magazine. Fall 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Barnett, Steven. “*Thoughts on the State of Preschool*” NIEER- A blog of the National Institute for Early Education Research. <http://preschoolmatters.org>

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

children.<sup>24</sup> It took low-income African American children who were categorized as in danger of failing school. The experiment divided the children into two groups and assigned one half to attend a quality preschool while the other did not attend preschool.<sup>25</sup> The students who attended preschool entered at age four and attended for one year.<sup>26</sup> They attended preschool for five days a week for two and a half hours each day. There were very small class sizes with a teacher-student ratio of one to six and the teachers were certified and well trained in early childhood development. The study tracked the participants annually through age eleven and again at ages fourteen, fifteen, nineteen, twenty-seven and forty.<sup>27</sup>

The children who attended preschool were found to repeat fewer grades and were more likely to achieve higher levels of education. The preschool participants had better grades, higher graduation rates and lower rates of special education placement.<sup>28</sup> This resulted in savings in schooling because of the reduced need for special education services.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, they went on to have a more positive attitude toward their own children's educational experiences.

The results of this experiment also showed benefits beyond the walls of the school. The group of children who attended preschool had lower

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<sup>24</sup> Schweinhart, L. D. "*Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40.*" (2005)

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Schweinhart, L.D. "*Lasting Benefits of Preschool Programs*" ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Urbana, IL. (1994)



unemployment rates and earned more money.<sup>30</sup> This led to higher taxes paid by preschool-program participants because of their higher earnings. They also saved taxpayers money through savings in welfare assistance as students who participated in the program had lower rates of welfare dependency.<sup>31</sup> Further, studies have showed that the children who attended preschool engaged in less criminal behavior which led to savings for the criminal justice system and potential victims of crimes.<sup>32</sup>

Researchers monetized this experiment and they came to the conclusion that the program more than paid for itself in benefits to the government. Estimates revealed that the return to the public was nearly \$13 for every \$1 invested in the program.<sup>33</sup>

#### **IV. Arguments Against Universal Preschool**

President Obama's push for Universal preschool is not without its critics. Many of the criticisms regarding federally funded preschools are directed at the Head Start program, which many consider unsuccessful. Critics also point to the expenses involved and the difficulties that would come along with implementing this program on a larger scale.

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<sup>30</sup> Schweinhart, L.D. "*Lasting Benefits of Preschool Programs*" ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Urbana, IL. (1994)

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> Ryan, James. "A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO PRESCHOOL?" California Law Review. Jan. 2006.

Critics argue that the federal government already attempted a national preschool program with Head Start, an early childcare and education program for low-income children to enhance their cognitive, social and emotional development. The Head Start program has cost the government billions of dollars every year and has not yielded the results that the legislature intended.<sup>34</sup>

After over forty years of operation many argue that it the Head Start program is simply not effective. The goal of Head Start was to prepare children for kindergarten and provide them with a better chance at future success; however, a 2010 study showed that there were almost no advantages to kindergartners who had participated in the Head Start program over those who had not.<sup>35</sup> The study looked at a sample of 5,000 children who were assigned to the Head Start group and the non-Head Start control group. This study revealed that measured benefits of the Head Start program disappeared once statistical methods were applied.<sup>36</sup>

Darcy Olsen, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute argues that public preschool plans are not worth the costs to taxpayers. She argues that “experience provides little reason to believe that Universal preschool would significantly benefit children, regardless of family income. For nearly 40 years local, state and federal governments and diverse private sources have funded

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<sup>34</sup> Sawhill, Isabel and Ron Haskins. “*The Future of Head Start*”, Brookings Institute. July 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Coulson, Andrew “*Head Start: a tragic waste of money*” New York Post. 28 Jan 2010.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

early intervention programs for low-income children and benefits to children have been few and fleeting.”<sup>37</sup>

## V. Implementing Universal Preschool

Despite these criticisms, the President’s proposal provides for something more effective than the Head Start Program and can certainly be implemented on a larger scale. Additionally, while this will be an expensive program, it is important that taxpayers look at Universal preschool for what it is, an investment in their future.

The Head Start program serves less than half of the children who are eligible and lacks a strong educational component.<sup>38</sup> Universal preschool could build onto the system now in place and extend the part-time Head Start program to meet the needs of low-income children as well as working parents.

The President’s proposal calls for high-quality programs, including qualified teachers, small classrooms and rigorous curriculum.<sup>39</sup> High quality preschool education has been shown to substantially improve school readiness for low-income children.<sup>40</sup> The results of the Head Start program differ from the results of the Perry Preschool and other state programs that have been

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<sup>37</sup> Olsen, Darcy Ann. “*Universal Preschool is No Golden Ticket.*” CATO Institute, 9 Feb. 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Sawhill, Isabel. “*Kids Need an Early Start: Universal preschool education may be the best investment Americans can make in our children’s education.*” Blueprint Magazine. Fall 1999.

<sup>39</sup> “*Fact Sheet: Obama’s Plan for Early Education for all Americans*” Office of the Press Secretary. [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office). 13 Feb. 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Sawhill, Isabel and Ron Haskins. “*The Future of Head Start*”, Brookings Institute. July 2003.

implemented and this is likely a result of the quality of the programs. When the quality of the teachers is improved, state level standards applied and effective reviews of the programs put into place, this plan will surely be a success.

The states that have implemented high-quality preschool systems over the past few decades have yielded good results. States including Illinois, Georgia and Florida have provided greater access to families through Universal preschool, using systems modeled after, though not identical to, Head Start.<sup>41</sup> These programs provide evidence that high-quality preschool reduces grade retention and placements in special education and increases graduation rates and college attendance.<sup>42</sup> High quality programs have lasting effects and empower children, parents and teachers alike. While many states have already started down this path, it is time that the rest of the nation joins them.

Unfortunately, state funding for preschool programs has experienced a large drop in recent years. States are currently spending less per child than they did ten years ago.<sup>43</sup> Reports show that “half a million preschool students are in programs that don’t even meet standards suggested by industry experts, that would qualify for federal dollars”.<sup>44</sup> The inadequacy of the country’s current preschool programs further illustrates the need that President Obama’s proposal be implemented.

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<sup>41</sup> Strauss, Valerie “*Universal preschool: Important but no panacea*” The Washington Post. 10 April 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Sawhill, Isabel and Ron Haskins. “*The Future of Head Start*”, Brookings Institute. July 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Elliott, Philip. “*Universal preschool: President’s priority faces challenges*” Portland Herald. 20 April 2013.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

The establishment of state funded and federally supported preschool programs will take a great deal of planning and funding. While the effects of a Universal preschool program may not be immediate, evidence shows that they will be substantial. In the long run, providing a high-quality preschool education for our children will benefit both them and us.