

## Kaine Offers Plan to Boost Preschool

More Underprivileged Kids May Be Enrolled

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Sunday, October 7, 2007; Page PW05

[Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine](#) presented his plan last week to expand state-funded preschool to a group of [Northern Virginia](#) educators, business leaders and politicians, a trial run for the pitch he'll make to lawmakers when the General Assembly convenes in January.

At a Sept. 25 forum on school readiness in [McLean](#), Kaine (D) said that his plan to enroll about 17,000 more underprivileged 4-year-olds in public preschool would reduce the need for remediation in school, cut the dropout rate and lead to a better-prepared workforce.

"One of the most powerful things you can do if you want kids to be successful early is high-quality early-childhood education," Kaine said.

Kaine's push to expand preschool coincides with a movement locally and nationwide to improve education for young children. For the first time, [Prince William County](#) has full-day kindergarten in all schools. [Fairfax](#) schools also expanded full-day kindergarten classes this year and aim to have the program at all elementary schools by fall 2009.

Kaine has been advocating his preschool expansion plan in meetings across the state, but the governor acknowledged it will be a tough sell in a year when money is tight. Facing a \$640 million budget shortfall, Kaine has said the state may have to lay off some workers, increase user fees and take other cost-saving measures. He's also considering asking the General Assembly to transfer money from the state's \$1.2 billion "rainy day" fund.

"People are concerned about the dollars, and that's fair," Kaine said in an interview after his speech. "Revenues are tight, so we need to be more innovative."

Kaine contends that increased investment in preschool will save money in coming years. Under his plan, the state eventually would spend about \$125 million annually. He points out that [Virginia](#) spends about \$400 million each year educating about 50,000 students who repeat grades. Research has shown that children who attend high-quality preschool are less likely to repeat a grade.

"We could put money in at the front end . . . instead of paying for kids to repeat grades," Kaine said.

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Gov. Timothy Kaine will continue his push for expansion of state-funded preschool, despite Virginia's budget shortfall, when the legislature convenes in January. The program would cost \$125 million annually. (By David Crigger --

Kaine's remarks came during a day-long forum by Fairfax Futures, a nonprofit group that supports early-childhood education. Participants included members of Fairfax Futures' School Readiness Network, a partnership of county agencies, community groups and businesses, including [Capital One](#), which hosted the event.

As a candidate, Kaine campaigned in 2005 on a goal to offer free preschool to all of the approximately 100,000 4-year-olds in Virginia. That would have cost about \$300 million a year. Recently he scaled back his plan to focus on the neediest children.

Virginia 4-year-olds who qualify for free school lunches -- those in households with incomes of less than \$27,000 for a family of four -- already are eligible for state-funded preschool, and about 12,500 such children participate. Kaine's plan would extend benefits to children in families with incomes up to \$38,000. He estimates about 17,000 more children would participate.

Those children could attend public preschools or go to private or faith-based programs that work with the state. The program would cost about \$125 million a year when fully implemented by 2012.

Del. Kenneth R. Plum (D-Fairfax), who attended the event, said he and other supporters will try to persuade other lawmakers to think of preschool expansion as an "investment, not an expenditure."

Kaine also is calling for a voluntary state-led rating system to help parents gauge how providers measure up. Preschools would be rated on a five-star scale based on such factors as the educational level and training of teachers, class sizes and an expert's classroom observation.