

The Preschool Question: Who Gets to Go?

Va. Expansion Efforts Highlight Debate

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The children in Carrie Hamilton's preschool class yesterday drew wobbly hearts with wobbly letters underneath. They tapped the buttons on a toy cash register and raced cars over roads built of wooden tracks. Hidden in the games and giggles were lessons on the building blocks of reading and math.

These [Fairfax County](#) 4- and 5-year-olds are part of a national push to devote more public resources to the youngest learners. They are also at the center of a debate, underscored last week in a [Virginia](#) policy shift, over whether the government should offer preschool to all children or concentrate on those from poor families.

Nationwide, about 950,000 children are enrolled in state-funded preschool, a 36 percent increase from five years ago, said experts who track the programs. As advocates promote quality pre-kindergarten as a way to prepare children for school, strengthen the workforce and reduce crime, states have increased funding since 2005 for such programs by 75 percent, to \$4.2 billion, according to the District-based organization Pre-K Now. Some in Congress have also proposed more federal money to help build state preschool initiatives.

The questions about which children will benefit most from government-funded preschool and how great the investment should be are at the core of Virginia's effort to expand pre-kindergarten but have also arisen in [Maryland](#). Next week, in its first foray into all-day preschool, [Montgomery County](#) plans to introduce full-day, federally funded Head Start classes for 260 students at 10 elementary schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. This week, [Prince George's County](#) expanded its full-day state-funded preschool program by half, to 261 classes, also targeting students from poor families.

After campaigning in 2005 to offer free preschool to every 4-year-old in Virginia regardless of family income, [Gov. Timothy M. Kaine \(D\)](#) scaled back his plan last week and said he would focus resources on the neediest children.

In an interview yesterday, Kaine said his pledge to launch universal preschool was prompted by research showing that a tremendous amount of learning takes place before the first day of kindergarten. But education experts persuaded Kaine to build on the work of existing public and private preschools.

"Instead of just creating a system from scratch, why not take the existing network and focus on the goals of increasing access and increasing quality?" Kaine said. "We can change the financial criteria to help kids who can't afford it and have an impact on the quality of all parts of the system."

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 -- are eligible for free preschool, and about 12,500 children

take part at an annual state cost of about \$50 million. Kaine's plan would extend benefits to children in families with incomes up to \$38,000. The new proposal, which envisions enrolling about 17,000 more underprivileged children by 2012, would cost an additional \$75 million a year.

Kaine also is calling for a state-led rating system to help parents gauge how providers measure up. Preschools, much like restaurants or hotels, 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.

Kaine's plan to offer universal preschool for all 100,000 4-year-olds in the state would have cost about \$300 million annually.

Bruce Fuller, an education and public policy professor at the [University of California at Berkeley](#) who is a leading proponent of income-targeted funding, said research has shown that children from poor families get the biggest boost from high-quality preschool. He said universal preschool provides unneeded benefits to wealthy families and said the emphasis should be on helping children in lower-income homes, who tend to start school knowing fewer letters and numbers than their peers.

"We need to focus scarce dollars where the benefit is the greatest, and that's to children from low-income and blue-collar households," Fuller said. "If dollars are sprinkled across all families rich and poor, it's illogical to think early learning gaps will be narrowed."