

Michigan moves into national forefront of preschool funding

By Ron French/Bridge Magazine

Michigan will move from middle of the pack to top of the heap when Gov. Rick Snyder signs off on a massive expansion of state-funded early childhood education in coming days.

The \$65 million increase in funding for the Great Start Readiness Program, allowing at least 10,000 more 4-year-olds to attend high-quality, publicly funded preschool, is the biggest increase in the nation this year and leads an emerging trend to invest in children before kindergarten.

“My sense is that as states come out of the recession, they are beginning to move forward again,” said Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research. “As a percentage (increase) there may be a few states that are close to Michigan, but in dollars, no state is close.”

The most recent preschool yearbook reported that state funding for preschool in 2011-12 fell by \$548 million nationally, close to 10 percent, in one year. The next yearbook, produced by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, will show that trend reversing.

Here’s what’s happening in other states:

- Mississippi, which had never had a state-funded preschool program, is starting a small program next year.
- New Mexico is increasing preschool funding by 49 percent, about \$5.75 million.
- Colorado provided funding to expand its preschool program by 3,200 slots.
- Alabama approved a 27-percent increase in preschool funding.

“A lot of states are trying to recover to previous levels,” said Nguyen Phuonglan, policy specialist for the National Council of State Legislatures. “This session we’re seeing a lot of states looking at increasing access and enrollment” to early childhood programs.

“It’s not a red-blue issue,” Barnett said. “Mississippi and Minnesota both are expanding. We’re hoping the tide is turning.”

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Margie Wallen, director of national policy for the Ounce of Prevention Fund in Chicago, speculates that Michigan could get rewarded for its pre-K investment with federal dollars. The state’s increased funding helps Michigan’s “positioning itself to take advantage of the president’s [Race to the Top early childhood initiative](#).”



REASON TO CELEBRATE: Great Start preschool student Shelby Tomshani, left, plays with Head Start preschool student Zoey Stock in September 2012 at Lakeland Elementary School in Pinckney. Michigan lawmakers chose this week to vastly expand funding for the Great Start program, making thousands of additional classroom slots available for low- and moderate-income children. (Bridge photo/Lon Horwedel)

At the Mackinac Public Policy Conference Wednesday, Gov. Rick Snyder and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush both spoke of the value of investing in early childhood education.

“Early childhood literacy must become a national priority,” Bush said.

“Nationally, people are looking at Michigan and seeing a Republican governor and a Republican Legislature, and seeing we got this done,” said Mina Hong, senior policy associate for the advocacy group Michigan’s Children. “It shows how good the evidence is (of the effectiveness of early childhood education).”

Senior Writer Ron French joined Bridge in 2011 after having won more than 40 national and state journalism awards since he joined the Detroit News in 1995. French has a long track record of uncovering emerging issues and changing the public policy debate through his work. In 2006, he foretold the coming crisis in the auto industry in a special report detailing how worker health-care costs threatened to bankrupt General Motors.

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