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 (VERY) EARLY EDUCATION

Michigan's governor wants to catch young students before they fall behind

BY KIMBERLY HAYES TAYLOR - 21 HOURS AGO

PHOTO: *Christina Veiga*

Advocates say programs that work with babies and toddlers to address developmental challenges can save schools money by eliminating the need for special education services later.



Alesia Jackson noticed her two-year-old son Aaron could only speak about 50 words and wasn't yet forming sentences. As a preschool teacher herself, she knew he was behind.

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Now, at 12, Aaron is thriving in middle school and his mother credits the benefits he got from the Early On Michigan program, which provides help for children from birth to three with learning disabilities or delays. Federal money currently pays for that program, but for the first time, Gov. Rick Snyder wants to add \$5 million more in state funds to make it available to more families.

The money for EarlyOn is the only increase for special education proposed by the governor for next year's budget. Some advocates were hoping for a more robust increase in special education funding following a report last year from [Lieutenant Governor Brian Cally's office](#) blasting the state's current funding formula for special education. However, Snyder said money for Early On ultimately would save costs for special education once children reach school age. That's because children will start school better prepared and will be less likely to need further special education services.

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"Specifically, this money is going to be very helpful for children with a less severe delay or disability," said Robert Dorigo Jones, a spokesman for Michigan's Children, a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization based in Lansing.

Lawmakers are expected to vote on Snyder's budget recommendations in June. They have been [skeptical of spending additional education money](#) and are looking for ways to cut taxes in a crucial election year.

Christy Callahan, president of the Early On Michigan Foundation, which advocates for the program, said more money could dramatically enlarge and improve the program for the state's youngest children.

"Reaching children when they are the youngest and supporting their families is our best chance to mitigate delays and support them for success in school, with friends, and for life, she said."

The state receives more than \$12 million every year in federal money for about 19,000 young children who need the mild special education services provided by Early On. But advocates believe the majority of families who need Early On are not receiving them.

That's because the counties that distribute money to school districts supplement federal special education funding by using local millage dollars, which vary across the state.

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Dollars spent on the program have saved money in the long run: The state saves cash every year for the estimated 37 percent of infants or toddlers who receive Early On services who did not later require special education services.

The program assesses children's needs and provides help designed for their families. Some children are hearing impaired, others are developing more slowly than their peers. Some may have delays caused by underlying medical conditions such as autism, cerebral palsy or Down syndrome.

Alesia Jackson and her son, Aaron

Aaron received speech therapy and a chance to talk to other children his age. His parents were encouraged to increase time reading aloud to him, and learned techniques to help him refine his verbal skills. Specialists visited their westside Detroit home, and Aaron also attended classes at the closed Detroit Day School for the Deaf.

"It gave him the right interaction with other children," she said. Aaron, now 12, attends a Harper Woods middle school.

"He had struggles, and he was able to start working on them. Without that help, it would have taken him much longer to improve."

By Kimberly Hayes Taylor KTAYLOR@CHALKBEAT.ORG

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