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PRE-K PROPOSAL

# What Whitmer's budget means for preschoolers in Michigan — and Detroit

BY KOBY LEVIN - 18 HOURS AGO



Children in a Great Start Readiness Program Classroom, which would see a funding increase under Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's proposed budget.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer campaigned hard on the promise of offering preschool to every Michigan 4-year-old. Now she says it could still happen — just not this year.

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Whitmer's first budget proposal does take a step in that direction, opening Michigan's highly regarded free pre-kindergarten program to thousands of additional families while also boosting the state budget for child care.

That was welcome news to advocates of early childhood education, who know that Whitmer is trying to simultaneously increase access to child care, address major problems in infrastructure and K-12 education, and fend off what is sure to be a strong political challenge from the Republican-controlled Legislature.

“We have limited dollars to do everything we need to in our state, but she (Whitmer) is committed to education and to kids, and she understands the importance of early investment,” said Gilda Jacobs, president of the Michigan League for Public Policy, and a former Democratic state senator.

Mayor Mike Duggan has repeatedly [floated](#) the possibility of a Detroit-specific universal pre-K program. But under Whitmer's budget, the [windfall of federal funding](#) that he'd been eyeing would be allocated to child care statewide, raising questions about where Duggan would find the money to pay for plan.

If approved by the state Legislature — [a big “if”](#) — Whitmer's budget would nonetheless make it easier for the youngest Detroiters to get the well-documented benefits of early education. Under the proposal, a family of four making roughly \$77,000 a year would be eligible for the Great Start Readiness Program, the state's high-quality program for 4-year-olds. At least 85 percent of families in Detroit fall below that threshold, according to census data from 2017.

“It’s probably not the solution the mayor was looking for, as far as universal pre-K, but it’s still more public dollars into our pre-K system, which is going to benefit Detroit and Detroit public schools,” said Matt Gillard, president of Michigan’s Children, an advocacy group.

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Duggan did not mention pre-K in his State of the City address on Tuesday night. An adviser in the mayor’s office with knowledge of his plans declined to comment.

A state-funded pre-K program solely for Detroit would likely face stiff opposition from Republican lawmakers, who control both chambers of the state Legislature. To reach every 4-year-old, the city would need to add 1,900 seats in pre-K programs at a cost of \$11 million, according to a memo obtained by the conservative news site Michigan Capitol Confidential.

That would be a big chunk of the \$85 million that Whitmer proposes to add to boost the state pre-K budget by 35 percent. Instead, she wants to use those funds statewide to help more families access pre-K, expanding the number of seats by 5,100. And, she wants to send more funding per pupil to preschool operators.

“I hope it’s not the death knell for the conversation around of universal pre-K in Detroit,” Gillard said. “I think that’s a good conversation to have.”

Whitmer’s proposal also adds about \$30 million to expand access to child care programs for younger children. About half of the money would go to boosting pay for child care workers — part of an effort to help more child care providers keep their

doors open. Michigan lost about one-third of its child care providers from 2010 to 2017, according to Public Sector Consultants.

The other half would open a state funded program to families whose income is 140 percent of the federal poverty level, adding 2,000 families to the program.

Michigan previously ranked 49th in the nation for access to child care, and Whitmer's proposed change likely won't take the state out of the bottom ranks, Gillard said, but he said it's a start.

"We're a long way from the finish line," he said.

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