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As Budget Talks Continue, Whitmer Urges \$450M For Preschool Program

EAST LANSING – The latest funding proposal from **Governor Gretchen Whitmer** as she and the Legislature negotiate a budget for the upcoming fiscal year, as well as how to spend the billions in federal aid the state has received, is to use \$450 million to assure all children eligible for Great Start Readiness Preschool have access to the program.

In recent weeks, Ms. Whitmer has announced her funding priorities in a series of public events as she and her administration work behind closed doors to work out a budget framework. Those have covered the economy and education.

Currently, one-third of the children eligible for the Great Start Readiness Program, a state-funded preschool program, are unable to attend based on available funding, but Ms. Whitmer on Tuesday proposed using federal funds and surplus state monies to assure sufficient capacity so all eligible children can attend.

Ms. Whitmer, at a news conference with Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and the Democratic leadership in the Legislature, proposed using \$255 million federal money and \$150 million in state funds for the next three years to enable the estimated 65,400 eligible 4-year-olds to attend the program.

The Great Start Readiness Program provides full- or part-day preschool to families at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

Ms. Whitmer and the Legislature, both majority Republicans and minority Democrats, are in discussions about finalizing the 2021-22 fiscal year budget, and the expansion Ms. Whitmer proposed would require legislative approval.

"We have a unique opportunity right now to make the type of investments in early education and preschool that will pay massive dividends by improving health, educational, and social outcomes for our children decades down the line," Ms. Whitmer said in a statement. "Parents across our state are aware of the importance of early education and now we have to seize this chance to eliminate waitlists for eligible children. The investments announced today provide access to all eligible children and will help narrow the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students. As we put Michigan back to work, parents can go about their workday knowing that their children are learning in a safe and productive environment."

Ms. Whitmer's proposal would use another \$50 million in federal funds for grants to providers to ensure sufficient capacity, access to transportation, scholarships to early educators and expanding outreach efforts to inform parents of program availability in their area.

Mr. Duggan, on hand at Tuesday's news conference, said it looked like this proposal would come to fruition last year for the current fiscal year, but the budget turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic scuttled those plans.

"There is nothing we could do more to give our children a better start to their education than as a 4-year-old to have full-day pre-K," he said. "The amount of nurturing and education that goes on in a quality pre-K is life-changing."

There are 4,000 Detroit children in preschool in Detroit, but more than 1,500 do not have a spot, he said.

Ms. Whitmer said she is confident that while these funds would cover the expansion of the program for the next three fiscal years, revenues will keep growing to sustain it beyond then.

The proposal was welcomed by a cross-section of business groups and child advocates.

"Manufacturers support the use of American Rescue Plan funds for long-range investments that spur growth for residents and businesses – and **Governor Gretchen Whitmer's** proposal to expand the Great Start Readiness Program will do just that," said John Walsh, president and CEO of the Michigan Manufacturers Association, in a statement. "Our state's largest and most impactful sector needs the best and brightest talent to compete globally. This investment in high-quality preschool programming will help improve learning outcomes, increase student achievement and enrich Michigan's talent pool for years to come."

Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, said the group is "over the moon" about the governor's proposal.

"This is not only the right thing to do for Michigan families and the state's most at-risk children who have been shut out of preschool education though legally eligible, but it marks a momentous and historic point in the evolution of needed expanded public education to ensure a highly literate population and productive future workforce," Mr. Gillard said in a statement. "Unless all at-risk Michigan children receive the targeted support they need to enter school ready to learn, develop reading skills and thrive, they and our state's future will continue to be compromised compared to other states."