

# Universal pre-K not off to a Great Start

Expanding program to higher-income families does nothing for children in need

By Molly Macek | March 2023

Nearly half of eligible children choose not to enroll in Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program, a taxpayer-provided preschool initiative. The state might make a positive long-term change in student achievement by trying to increase enrollment of the needy students for whom this program exists.

But the \$79 billion state budget proposal Gov. Whitmer introduced in February aims to do something else. The budget would roll out universal pre-K for all four-year-olds over the next four years. This would include expanding eligibility for enrollment in Great Start in 2024. Children from households with income up to three times the federal poverty level would be eligible for taxpayer-provided preschool. Families with income four times the poverty mark could be eligible if there are available slots.

Bringing in children from higher-income families would do little for children who are currently eligible for Great Start but do not take advantage of the program. Enrolling the kids who are already eligible

would likely accomplish more than expanding the program to relatively wealthy households.

Just over half of eligible kids were enrolled in a Great Start program in 2020, according to a review by

Michigan's auditor general.

While a little more than 67,000 children qualified, districts only enrolled about 37,000. Some of this difference may be accounted for by children who enrolled in a Head Start program instead of Great Start.

However, this accounting still leaves around 20,000 eligible students who did not enroll in a publicly funded preschool program.

A Michigan State University study found similar results. In 13 intermediate school districts, including Wayne, Macomb and Oakland, fewer than half of the eligible four-year-olds were enrolled in Great Start or Head Start. Most intermediate school districts serve fewer than 75% of the students eligible for government-provided preschool programs.

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These statistics help put the governor's push for Great Start expansion into context. The state could do far better by getting more of the already eligible kids enrolled in government preschool programs than by making wealthier households eligible for the program.

The governor's budget proposal also claims that expanding the program will save families \$10,000 per year. It does not provide a rationale for this dollar amount – it may be an estimate of the amount private preschools cost families that don't enroll in a government program. However, the average cost of private preschool in Michigan is closer to \$6,000, according to Private School Review. A 2016 Mackinac Center survey of private schools found the average tuition for private elementary schools in Michigan was about \$5,000.

But The Great Start program is not exclusive. Families with a household income over the current eligibility limit can still enroll if slots are available. They have to pay tuition. But the state recommends

districts charge between just \$435 and \$870 annually. It's likely that only a small number of students pay to attend Great Start.

Considering this context, it's hard to see how the governor's expansion of Great Start will make much of a difference. Some wealthier families will benefit from getting free preschool at the expense of taxpayers. But the best way to increase early learning for the kids who need it most is not by expanding eligibility requirements. Rather, it's the much harder work of convincing more of the parents who are already eligible for Great Start to enroll in the program.

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**Dr. Molly Macek** is the director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.