

# Whitmer's PreK for All Plan is wasteful, unnecessary, unfair

Working class residents would be taxed to buy preschool for high-income families

By Molly Macek | February 2024

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer reiterated her plan to continue expanding taxpayer-paid preschool to all four-year-olds in this year's State of the State address and budget proposal. But her PreK for All plan will do nothing more than subsidize preschool for wealthier families. It's a waste of time and money for the state to pay the bills of people who don't need help.

Families in need already have access to free government preschool in Michigan. The state's Great Start Readiness Program was established so that low-income families can access preschool at no or little cost to them. So were the federal Head Start and Young Fives programs.

Last year, the governor increased the income cap for eligibility under Great Start from 250% to 400% of the federal poverty level. Under these limits, some families earning well over \$100,000 are eligible for taxpayer-paid preschool. The governor has now proposed removing the cap altogether so that all four-year-olds can enroll – regardless of their family's income level.

To be accurate, the governor's goal is to enroll 75%, not 100%, of four-year-olds in a GSRP program by 2027, according to the PreK for All report released last month. Currently, 41% of the state's four-year-olds are enrolled in some form of taxpayer-funded preschool. Only 28% of these students are enrolled in a GSRP program. Expanding the program to reach the governor's goal will require enrolling 40,000 more students – nearly doubling current numbers.

But most of the families who will become eligible for universal preschool don't need it. Removing the income cap means opening the program to families who can already afford preschool. Some of these families (about 20%) send their children to a private provider, while others keep their kids at home.

Then there's the cost. Taxpayers will need to fund salaries for 5,100 more teachers and carry the costs of 1,700 more classrooms to achieve the governor's goal of 75% enrollment. They'll need to pay for salary raises for pre-K employees. Expanding government programs

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such as Grow Your Own and MI Future Educator Fellowship to recruit teachers to staff the new classrooms will mean even more financial burdens. There will also be expenses for classroom materials, regular inspections, program evaluations and staff training. The list goes on, and some of the people who will be taxed to cover these expenses will make less money than the newly subsidized.

A better approach would be to assess the problems that parents face when they look to enroll their kids in preschool. Would they send their kids to a government preschool if they had access to one? If they do have access but don't use it, why not? Would they remove their kids from their private provider setting and opt for government preschool if this were an option? An effective assessment that surveys parents across the state would be money better spent than doubling down on existing programs.

An evaluation of GSRP performed by Michigan State University in 2021-22 provides some data that would typically be revealed by a needs assessment. For example, the evaluation included the distribution of GSRP programs across the state – they're most concentrated in areas where there's the greatest need – and the extent to which eligible families use them.

The MSU report also found that only 331 four-year-olds were on the GSRP waitlist in 2022. A much larger number of families didn't apply, even though they were eligible based on their income. Enrolling 40,000 more students in the program seems like an unrealistic goal given the number of families who are eligible but choose not to apply.

And according to the PreK for All report, 6,800 spots are currently open in government preschool classrooms across the state. The governor can get

more kids into preschool through existing means without having to subsidize wealthy parents.

But there is a more fundamental question: Should the state do more to get more kids into its preschool programs? There is not a lot of evidence that they help. Most studies that examine the benefits of government preschool look at low-income students, who make up the largest percentage of children typically served by these programs. But evidence that these programs have positive effects on more advantaged student populations is sparse, at best. A longitudinal study of Tennessee's universal preschool program found that students who had enrolled in the program performed worse than their peers, not better, once they reached third grade.

Lawmakers should be concerned about the lack of evidence supporting the governor's costly PreK for All plan. What is clear is that the plan only benefits wealthier families. And even offering taxpayer support might not prompt them to send their kids to preschool.

In other words, the governor's plan calls for payments for people who don't need it and who may not use it. It would magnify the problems already existing in the state's preschool programs. It would put kids into programs that don't work. If the governor wants to help people who would benefit from state-paid preschool assistance, there are better ways than enacting a universal plan.

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