



SPECIAL REPORT: Where Bernero and Snyder stand on early education

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By Jo Mathis

Jawun Nelson doesn't credit two years in Head Start for all his success today. But he knows it was a factor.

It provided me with a comfort level that made my transition to kindergarten and elementary school relatively easy," said Nelson, 37, who is assistant chief financial officer with the Flint Community Schools. "My graduation from Head Start became the first of many."

Studies show that an investment in early childhood education is an efficient use of taxpayer dollars because it has long-term social and economic benefits.

But as tax dollars are stretched thin in the worst economic climate in decades, many wonder what effect Michigan's new governor and legislators will have on funding for 0-5 education.

In August, both Republican gubernatorial candidate Rick Snyder and his Democratic opponent, Virg Bernero spoke in support of preschool at the Sandbox Party Convention, an event to help spread the word about the economic impact of early childhood education in the state.

"Reform Michigan's Educational System" is Number 8 on Snyder's 10-point plan to reinvent Michigan.

And Bernero has often said that education is economic development.

Bernero campaign spokesman Cullen Schwarz said it is now a widely accepted fact that preschool education is vital for the cognitive development of children and is a major factor in future academic success.

"Virg's goal is to have every four-year-old in Michigan enrolled in pre-school by the end of his first term," he said. "Michigan needs a strong pre-K program that has uniform benchmarks and quality standards to ensure that all our children are getting a jump-start on gaining the tools to succeed in a global economy."

Snyder campaign spokesman Bill Nowling said Snyder does not yet have a specific preschool proposal, but believes the state must refocus its effort on 0-5 learning because of its proven return on investment. That will require using what Snyder calls “value for money budgeting.”

“The most uniform benchmark we tend to use in this state is the amount of funding per pupil, which doesn’t really get at all we’re trying to do,” said Nowling. “We’re trying to measure outcomes, and not just funding levels. Part of the problem is the system is set up so we’re constitutionally required to fund only the K-12 portion of it. The important stuff that happens either before or afterwards falls under discretionary funding, and it’s usually the first thing that’s put on the chopping block.”

No entitlement to early education

In Michigan, there is no entitlement to education until kindergarten – unless a child has a disability and qualifies for preschool special education.

Otherwise, a child may qualify for a preschool program based on certain risk factors or economic need – if there is space.

The two major preschool programs in Michigan are the federally funded Head Start and the state-funded Michigan Great Start School Readiness Program (GSRP), a 30-week program for 4-year-olds offered through local school districts, which often subsidize the cost. The maximum family income requirement is higher for GSRP than Head Start.

But not every eligible child gets in.

Each school district receives enough money to serve somewhere between one-fourth and one-half of the children who are eligible for the preschool program, according to Lindy Buch, director of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Family Services for the Michigan Department of Education.

She said she sometimes hears from parents complaining that because they make too much money, they can’t send their children to the public preschool – which in some smaller communities may be the only preschool.

“They say, ‘You mean my kid can’t go? I pay my taxes! You mean it’s only for some kids?’” said Buch. “I tell them to talk to their legislator. Because I kind of agree ... I feel even worse for the people whose kids qualify, but they’re on a waiting list because there’s just not enough space.”

“This year, Detroit is telling us they have long waiting lists.”

There is also a constant waiting list of families hoping to enroll their children in one of the Ann Arbor Public Schools’ three preschool programs, said Lee Ann Dickinson-Kelley, the district’s deputy superintendent of instruction. The programs are supported by federal and state funded grants, which are supplemented by local money.

“I appreciate that funding in Michigan is challenged right now, but if we’re serious about closing the achievement gap, preschool is essential,” she said, adding that there’s a clear difference in fundamental readiness between children who start kindergarten with preschool experience, and those who don’t.

Asked what the Legislature would do in an ideal world, Gary Schafer, finance manager for the state’s Office of Early Childhood, said: “Double the funding. It might catch most of the kids.”

Last year’s cuts

Nobody wants to see a repeat of what happened last year when the Michigan Senate nearly eliminated about \$100 million in preschool funding to help solve its budget deficit.

As a compromise, it cut non-school-district agency funding for the Great Start Readiness Program by half, to \$7.6 million. Another \$88 million for programs run through school districts was left intact.

“It was awful,” recalled Buch, noting that long-standing quality programs were shut down last year for lack of funding. “It was a real blow.”

Because districts have discretion to use those dollars to make up cuts in other programs, some school districts offer no preschool. (Their special education preschool is offered through their local intermediate school district.)

Buch is worried about what’s to come.

“When there’s a change of administration, you wonder what the priority will be,” she said.

At least two-thirds of the state Senate and 52 of 110 state House members will be new to office in January.

For 2009-10 and 2010-11 the State funded preschool program – Great Start Readiness, is \$3,400 per part (half) day slot. If it is a full day it is \$6,800, but counted as two slots. For 2009-10 the state foundation per K-12 child ranged from a base of \$7,316 to \$15,000+ depending on the district. The statewide weighted average in 2009-10 was \$7,813.

About 25 years ago, legislators asked HighScope Educational Research Foundation President Larry Schweinhart how much he thought it would cost per child to offer quality preschool education in Michigan.

After Schweinhart gave them a figure, the legislators settled on a lower number to fund the new Great Start Readiness Program.

“There’s also been the persistent notion among legislatures that preschool should cost half as much as K-12,” said Schweinhart, who believes the funding should be at the same level. “In fact,

it's the only level of education in which we can claim such a strong positive return on investment.”

Schweinhart also believes there should be no income requirements for preschool enrollment, just as there is none for K-12. He said the most sensible plan is to offer preschool to all three- and four-year-olds who want it.

“Why should income matter?” he asked. “It doesn't matter when you enter kindergarten or first grade.”

But he said if the state insists on taking a categorical approach to this one grade level, it should quit talking about the percentage of eligible kids who don't get in the program, and instead figure out how many kids it can serve, and then set the income level on that basis.

That would require combining Head Start and the Great Start Readiness Program, creating a joint administration, he said.

“We could say, ‘OK, we have this much money, and at this level of per-child funding, we could serve this many children.’ And then we could do the calculations on where that falls on the income spectrum, and make a single criterion of annual income.”

According to Wilder Research's 2009 study, the estimated annual cost of expanding the Great Start School Readiness Program to all eligible children is at most \$236 million, based on a cost of \$6,800 for a full-day program per new student.

The study, “Cost Savings Analysis of School Readiness in MI” found that the cost savings and revenues realized in 2009 due to the investments in school readiness over the past 25 years is an estimated \$1.15 billion. That breaks down to savings in K-12 education; reduced government spending and increased tax revenues; and reduced social cost to taxpayers.

The study also estimates that the cost of not investing in school readiness for all disadvantaged children in an estimated \$598 million per year.

Noted Schweinhart: “If we provided programs that we confidently felt had a return on investment, it would change the politics. I'm afraid what happens now is that people hear claims of return on investment, and they just don't believe it because they've become so cynical from the political process.”

Schweinhart's own research (The Perry Preschool Study) found that children from at-risk, low-income families who attended preschool went on to have higher earnings, commit fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than those children from the same socio-economic background who started school in kindergarten.

But not all preschool programs yield the same results.

A study of 5,000 Head Start graduates released this year found that most of the educational advantages that children gained in Head Start — a program for low-income families that focuses on health, social, and cognitive development — disappeared by the time they finished first grade.

“Although the quality is high on average,” the authors of the study concluded, “Head Start programs vary in terms of instruction in the key areas measured as part of this study.”

The low salary of Head Start teachers may have played a role in the results, said Schweinhart, who believes preschools must employ qualified teachers, do outreach to parents, and offer an interactive child development curriculum rather than one in which teachers spend the entire time talking.

From where would the cuts come?

The gubernatorial candidates both believe there is money in the budget that could be shifted to early education.

At least \$300 million can be saved immediately with increased cooperation between school districts, Bernero’s spokesman Schwarz said, due to savings in costs such as transportation, computer and textbook purchasing, administration and facilities management. The duplication of services that are found between neighboring school districts must be eliminated to stop wasting tax dollars and put more money in the classroom, he added.

Snyder is determined to figure out what investment will yield the best value for taxpayers, Nowling said.

“Rick believes there’s an enormous amount of savings that can come from reprioritizing spending, and simply stop spending on those things — across the budget — that either don’t work or are outdated,” he said. “Doing that frees up money that can be put towards programs where there is tremendous benefit. Like early childhood development.”

He said the tight budget means money can’t simply be thrown at a problem.

“We have to look at a broad spectrum of issues in education. We have to look at ways of helping or in some cases gently encouraging school districts to find economies of scale and savings in administrative costs with other school districts so that frees up more of the funding available to them to provide those programs.”

Asked if Snyder has specific things in mind that could be trimmed from the budget, Nowling said they could be “any number of things.”

“We need to ask: What do we want this money to accomplish?,” Nowling said. “Do we want to make sure we’re funding a uniform preschool system across the state? Or do we want to make sure that we’re giving the school districts the tools they need to help students come to kindergarten ready to learn, and let the school districts individually decide what are the best

programs for their area? That's the discussion and approach that Rick is going to take in looking at this."

Buch said a preschool experience is becoming the norm, because even the most involved families can't teach kids to interact with 15 other kids and a teacher.

About 80 percent of the state's 4-year-olds attend some type of classroom preschool program, which includes full-day child care center of varying quality.

Kalamazoo County has proposed a plan to make preschool accessible to all county 4-year-olds by 2012-2013. That would require adding 1,500 preschool openings, and securing additional private funds.

Other districts are also coming up with their own ways to fund early learning programs, said Jessica Gillard, early education specialist at the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, a public non-profit corporation working to build a statewide system of support for young children and their families.

"In what we term 'blended funding models' or 'blended classrooms,' communities are coming together to pool federal, state, local, and private funding to meet the need for high quality preschool slots in their area," she wrote in an e-mail. "In many communities, that means all kids participate in the same program, but some kids are funded by Head Start, others by GSRP, and others by tuition."

Some districts offer tuition-based programs through community education for all children who want to participate.

Laura Beutler of Rochester considers herself lucky that her two sons were able to attend the local Great Start School Readiness Program.

"We couldn't have afforded it otherwise, and it really helped them do well in school," she said. "It was the best possible thing we could do for our kids."

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