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Governor offers a new approach – but no new funding – for early childhood education

By Susan Frey | January 7, 2016 | 1 Comment

The governor's budget proposal makes no new funding commitments for pre-kindergarten students, but does propose a new block grant that will give districts more flexibility in how they allocate existing early education funds – similar to the Local Control Funding Formula for K-12 schools.

Gov. Jerry Brown has proposed that funds from Proposition 98 for state preschool, transitional kindergarten and a quality rating system be combined into a $1.6 billion Early Education Block Grant. The total reflects what was spent in 2015-16 on those three programs.

Every school district would receive at least what it got in 2015-16, but future funding would mimic LCFF, with more funding distributed to districts based on the number of students and the percentage of low-income students served.

The proposal would make a substantial change in the state's transitional kindergarten program, which provides an extra year of school to children whose birthdays fall between Sept. 2 to Dec. 2. The program currently must serve all children regardless of family income, but under the proposal, districts could decide to funnel funds only to low-income children or charge wealthier parents a fee if they want their child to participate. Legislators would have to agree to change the current law in a trailer bill to the budget.

Under the budget proposal, all state pre-kindergarten funds would also go to school districts even though more than a third of preschool programs are operated by nonprofit and private organizations that receive their funding directly from the state. If Brown's proposal is implemented, it would be up to local school districts whether to fund those organizations.

"It's a great invitation to begin to think systematically about how we are investing in early education," said Erin

Gabel, deputy director of external and government affairs for First 5 California. The policy outlined by Brown is in line with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act – the new law that replaces the No Child Left Behind Act – which encourages districts to "think of early learning as an achievement gap strategy," she said.

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But, Gabel said, she is concerned about the consequences for nonprofit and private preschools, a part of the system that she and other advocates believe works well.

"Many of the programs that have been in existence doing a great job would be out of business," said Celia Ayala, CEO of Los Angeles Universal Preschool, an advocacy group that focuses on increasing preschool access and quality. "This budget proposes giving all funds over to the local school districts, which sacrifices what we in the early care and education community have worked hard to build – a mixed-delivery infrastructure."

In another concern about the governor's proposal, Ted Lempert, president of Children Now, said it is too early to apply LCFF principles to pre-K education because the state has no quality standards for these programs to hold districts accountable.

"The state has a critical role to play in ensuring quality," Lempert said. "Under the proposal, it's all up to the local districts. There is no assurance of quality."

Lempert says he appreciates the new focus on low-income families but "the real issue is significantly increasing the pie."

The budget allocates $47.8 million to child care and preschool. But those funds were part of an agreement reached in the 2015-16 state budget to add 7,030 preschool slots and increase rates to providers. The new slots and increased rates began this month. Additional funds are needed in the 2016-17 budget to cover those slots and rates for a full year.

Gabel expects the governor will support more funding for preschool slots, but, as in the past, will leave it up to the Legislature to make the first proposal as to how many.

During a press conference Thursday where he unveiled the budget, Brown explained why he was not supporting some programs he considered worthy by comparing the state's need to fix its infrastructure to a family tempted to spend extra money on a vacation when the roof needs repair.

Gabel applied his words to early education, which she sees as the educational foundation of the K-12 system.

“After six years of economic recovery, our early learning and care system has not benefited from the state’s booming prosperity, so the system’s foundation has continued to erode,” she said in a prepared statement. “And as Gov. Brown noted, it may be tempting to go on vacation when you have extra money, but you must fix the basics first. Prior year budgets and this proposal combined do not fix the basics and may, in fact, crack the cornerstone of our current system.”

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