

If voters OK education aid, difficult choices await

BY DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU

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Prekindergarten student Grace Baca plays in a play house at Atalaya Elementary School in Santa Fe on March 5. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

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SANTA FE – The ballot measure to tap more heavily into New Mexico’s largest permanent fund would generate enough revenue to offer nearly universal prekindergarten to 4-year-olds and reach about half of the state’s 3-year-olds, according to the early childhood department.

But after that, there wouldn’t be much money left over to expand other early childhood programs, such as home visiting for new parents, child care, and aid for infants and toddlers with developmental delays.

Now that the proposal has been cleared for the 2022 ballot, supporters of the initiative will soon face the task of explaining what the extra funding would be enough to do – and what gaps would still remain.

The shortage also illustrates the challenges policymakers would face in deciding how to allocate the extra funding, if they get it.

“The need is quite enormous,” Elizabeth Groginsky, secretary of the Early Childhood Education and Care Department, said Thursday in an interview.

If the proposal passes, it would be up to legislators and the governor to determine how to spend the money. The ballot measure is expected to generate about \$127 million a year for early childhood education and \$85 million for K-12 education, according to legislative analysts.

Groginsky has outlined some options in recent legislative hearings for what the early childhood money could do. She said:

- About \$48 million would be enough to add 6,800 prekindergarten slots throughout the state, pushing the percentage of 4-year-old children in pre-K from 65% to 85%, or roughly the standard considered “universal” access.
- Another \$59 million would allow the state to expand the share of 3-year-olds in prekindergarten from 25% to 50%.
- About \$137 million would allow the state to expand voluntary home visiting programs to another 39,000 families, the number the state believes would benefit. Just 6,700 families are now served, but the state is aiming to create a more comprehensive program.

Groginsky said her figures take into account families already served by state, federal, tribal and private programs.

Other options for early childhood spending include the Family, Infant and Toddler Program – which helps kids through age 3 who have or are at risk of developmental delays – and child care services.

Each early childhood program can have ripple effects on families, Groginsky said, such as boosting mothers’ participation in the workforce.

The availability of federal money and the expansion of federal programs, she said, would also factor into the state’s decision on where to apply its own money, including the potential to generate federal matching funds.

Worthy programs

The permanent fund changes are expected to go before voters in November next year.

Voters will be asked to amend the state Constitution to boost the annual withdrawal from 5% to 6.25% out of the state's permanent schools fund.

The schools fund is the largest component of the broader Land Grant Permanent Fund.

Most of the new revenue – about \$127 million a year – would be dedicated to early childhood education, such as prekindergarten, home visiting and other programs that target children before kindergarten.

Another \$85 million would be available for K-12 education and designated for extending the school year, compensating teachers and enhancing instruction for students at risk of failure.

Rep. Antonio “Moe” Maestas, an Albuquerque Democrat and co-sponsor of the proposed constitutional amendment, said the extra money from the permanent fund would be a dramatic help, even if it isn't a cure-all.

“We can shape the future of our families and our state,” he said.

Legislators, Maestas said, would have to decide how to divide up the money among a host of worthy programs.

Maestas, for his part, said he is particularly hopeful that New Mexico will sharply expand home visiting programs for new parents and erase any stigma about learning the skills necessary to best care for a child.

Increased pay for early childhood workers is also necessary, he said, to build an effective workforce.

Rep. Rebecca Dow, a Truth or Consequences Republican with a background in early childhood education, said flatly that universal pre-K shouldn't be the goal. Instead, she said, New Mexico should target the families who need help the most. Rushing to expand services dilutes their quality and fails to produce strong results, Dow said.

“I think we're already spending enough money,” Dow said. “We continue to go broad when we really need to go deep.”

Trust fund

The permanent fund, of course, isn't the only potential source of extra funding for early childhood education.

The state last year created a \$300 million trust fund for early childhood education.

Even without specific legislation, New Mexico has more than tripled its investment in early childhood programs over the last decade – a reflection of the bipartisan consensus in the Roundhouse that pre-K and similar programs are an effective target for new spending.

Analysts for the Legislative Finance Committee say New Mexico is seeing positive returns on much of the investment.

Participation in prekindergarten, for example, has coincided with academic gains for low-income students, a reduction in special education needs, fewer students held back in third grade and a higher rate of high school graduation, analysts say, though high-quality programs are necessary to produce the gains.

The state's early childhood spending has jumped from about \$137 million in fiscal 2012 to \$449 million this year, according to legislative documents.

The proposed constitutional amendment would also deliver an extra \$85 million in funding for the broader K-12 education system in New Mexico.

Each 1 percentage point raise in teacher pay costs about \$15 million a year. Adding five weeks to the school year for all kindergarten and elementary school students would cost about \$223 million a year.

Requiring extended learning time programs at every school – such as adding 10 days to the academic year and expanding after-school and enrichment programs for students – would cost about \$164 million.