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Kaine Trims Pre-K Proposal

Va. Would Forgo Universal Access, Target Poorer Kids

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RICHMOND, Aug. 16 -- [Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine](#) on

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Thursday scrapped his campaign promise to provide universal access to pre-kindergarten, announcing that he will instead push to more than double the number of underprivileged 4-year-olds eligible for early education at the state's expense.

Faced with a looming lean state budget and skeptical Republicans in the General Assembly, Kaine (D) said he can largely accomplish his goal to expand pre-kindergarten by focusing on the state's neediest children -- those eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches.

"We're coming at it a little differently, because the experience of other states has convinced us to work within the existing system we already have," Kaine said in announcing his proposal at a day-long education forum.

In his 2005 bid for governor, Kaine promised to pay for preschool without regard to a parent's income, a promise that polls show is popular with voters.

With strong backing from the business and educational communities, pre-kindergarten initiatives have sprouted nationwide, and states credit them with boosting test scores in elementary schools. Twenty percent of 4-year-olds in the country are enrolled in state-funded programs, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

But Kaine's plan for universal pre-kindergarten would have cost \$300 million a year, and Republican legislators said the state could not afford it.

Under Kaine's revised proposal, which the General Assembly will consider when it convenes in January, the state would extend free pre-kindergarten to 4-year-olds who qualify for reduced-price lunches. In [Virginia](#), a family of four with an annual income of \$27,000 to \$38,000 is eligible for such assistance. The change, which would cost \$75 million a year, would make an additional 17,000 4-year-olds eligible for free pre-kindergarten.

Those who qualify for free lunches -- living in households with incomes of less than \$27,000 -- are already eligible for free pre-kindergarten through the Virginia Preschool Initiative. That program, which costs the state \$50 million a year, serves 12,500 4-year-olds.

Republican leaders said that Kaine's revised plan is more likely to be approved by the General Assembly but that it must compete with other priorities.

Del. Phillip A. Hamilton (R-[Newport News](#)) called Kaine's proposal "a cautious, more manageable approach" and said the governor's earlier proposal was unrealistic.

"There was a lot of concern about a universal plan, because why should government subsidize the upper middle class and upper-class population for early childhood education?" Hamilton asked.

Kaine won't announce his 2009-10 budget until January, but the scaled-down pre-kindergarten proposal is a sign that he faces difficult spending decisions.

Mandated adjustments for public school spending, which occur every two years, are likely to cost the state an additional \$1.1 billion in the next budget. A weakening housing market may lead to a budget shortage of as much as \$500 million, legislators say. The state also faces mandated increases in [Medicaid](#) spending.

Furthermore, Kaine and legislators have said they would like to boost spending on mental health in the aftermath of the [Virginia Tech](#) massacre in April.

"You've got to be very careful not to start some new program that you can't fund down the road," said Del. [Vincent F. Callahan Jr.](#) (R-Fairfax), chairman of the [House Appropriations Committee](#).

Under Kaine's pre-kindergarten initiative, Start Strong, the state will implement a rating system to try to assure a "quality" network of preschools.

Preschool programs that meet certain standards -- public, private or religious -- would be eligible for state funding to serve underprivileged children. Currently, only public schools participate in the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

Including the preschool programs that parents now pay for, Kaine estimated that two-thirds of the state's 4-year-olds could be enrolled in an educational program by 2012 if his new initiative is approved.

Several experts who spoke at the forum yesterday applauded the shift to targeting state funding toward poor and lower-middle-class families.

Thirty-eight states have state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, but only [Florida](#), [Oklahoma](#) and [Georgia](#) offer universal access, according to Pre-K Now, a Washington-based organization.

"The highest returns come with the most disadvantaged families," said James Heckman, a [University of Chicago](#) economist.


Former [North Carolina](#) governor James B. Hunt Jr. (D), who was at the forefront of establishing pre-kindergarten programs in that state in the 1990s, said Kaine's program should be an easy sell.

"Ask [legislators] what they do for K-12; they fund it 100 percent. Ask them what they do for higher ed; they fund it. This is more important," Hunt said. "This is necessary for those other things to work."

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