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Report: States' funding for pre-K taking hit

Duncan: 'Trends are not encouraging'

By Ben Wolfgang - The Washington Times

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Preschool programs have become the victims of budget shortfalls across the nation, and the Obama administration's education point man said Monday he fears it's only going to get worse for the 1.3 million youngsters who benefit from them.

"The trends are not encouraging. I simply can't support where governors are cutting back in early-childhood education," Education Secretary Arne Duncan told reporters during a conference call Monday to discuss the National Institute for Early Education Research's annual "State of Preschool" survey. "We have to give children a fighting chance. When budgets are tough, there are smart ways to cut, and there are dumb ways to cut."

The report, which examined data from the 2009-2010 school year, shows that overall funding for pre-kindergarten programs has declined. Nineteen of 40 states that fund preschool cut allocations in 2009 and 2010, the report shows.

On average, states are spending \$114 less on each child, despite an influx of money from the federal stimulus package. States now spend an average of \$4,028 per student, down about \$700 from a decade ago. Nine states cut per-child spending by more than 10 percent.

While nationwide enrollment in preschool programs increased by 26,996 children, five states — Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri and Ohio — now enroll fewer children than they did 10 years ago, according to the report.

Cutting funding means states run the risk of funneling children into ineffective programs, and Mr. Duncan said it's apparent some preschool efforts have become or are in danger of turning into little more than "glorified baby-sitting."

"Spending on poor quality isn't good investment. It's just spending," said W. Steven Barnett, NIEER co-director.

The report also set up 10 benchmarks for things such as teacher quality and how preschool programs drive better student performance down the road. Five state programs met all 10 quality standards. Only Ohio and Nebraska lost ground, according to the report. The majority of states remained on par with previous years.

The biggest funding cuts hit programs for 3-year-olds, with nine states cutting enrollment by 10 percent or more.

“Three-year-olds are the redheaded stepchild of early-childhood education,” Mr. Barnett said.

Of the 1.3 million children enrolled in state-funded programs, fewer than 300,000 are 3-year-olds, the report says.

But Mr. Barnett said research shows children who attend preschool for two years are much better prepared for kindergarten. Disregarding that research, he said, states view early-childhood education programs — especially those for 3-year-olds — as expendable, making them especially vulnerable during tense budget battles.

“With preschool in most states, there’s no right to the program,” as there is with K-12 education, Mr. Barnett said.

Illustrating that, the report points out that 10 states — Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North and South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming — provide no state-funded preschool programs at all.

That number used to be 12, but Alaska and Rhode Island began funding preschool programs for the first time in 2009 and 2010.

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