

PA Republicans tout preschool choice as Rendell plan alternative.

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HARRISBURG (AP, June 8) - As Gov. Ed Rendell readies for what promises to be intense legislative negotiations over his plan to increase school funding and lower property taxes, he has insisted that early-childhood education is not negotiable.

While Republican leaders are not ready to guarantee that early-childhood spending is a given, GOP members in both houses are developing their own alternatives to Rendell's call for state-funded preschool programs.

Rendell wants any money spent on preschool to go directly to the poorest school districts, defined as those with at least 35 percent of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

But Rep. Elinor Z. Taylor, R-Chester, says the money should go directly to low-income parents to spend on pre-kindergarten education as they see fit. Taylor recently introduced a bill that would grants of up to \$6 per hour of preschool attendance for 4-year-olds, limiting income eligibility to families who earn up to more than triple the federal poverty level.

Parents could enroll their children in full-time or part-time programs, and they could choose from public, private and parochial programs.

"One thing I like about my bill is that it provides full flexibility. For example, a child could be enrolled in a program for two days a week, and I think that's important, particularly for small children," she said.

Rendell's proposed Early Childhood Investment Fund would cost \$309 million in the fiscal year that begins July 1 and increase to about \$687 million over the next three years.

The fund includes money for full-day preschool programs for 4-year-olds in roughly one-fifth of the state's 501 school districts, where at least 35 percent of children qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Taylor's bill has drawn praise from several interest groups that supported former Gov. Tom Ridge's unsuccessful efforts to implement school vouchers, which enable parents to use government money to help defray the cost of private and parochial school tuition. Sen. Mary Jo White, R-Venango, is working on a similar version.

"Flexibility is a big issue," said Dennis Giorno, executive director of the REACH Alliance, a pro-voucher advocacy group. "A lot of parents don't want to send their kids to full-day programs."

Rep. Phyllis Mundy, D-Luzerne, is sponsoring the legislation for Rendell's proposal in the House. She questions whether Taylor's proposal would ensure that parents choose high-quality programs for their children.

"The idea is about having high standards and accountability, and there certainly is none in the private and religious schools. They don't even want to be regulated by the same health and safety standards," she said.

Under Mundy's bill, state-funded preschool programs would have to employ teachers who have either bachelor's degrees or state certification in early childhood development. The measure also would require the state Education Department to develop specific standards and eligibility criteria for districts and preschool providers.

Steve Miskin, a spokesman for the House Republican caucus, said leaders won't be ready to commit to any of Rendell's proposals, including preschool, until they can determine exactly how they will be funded.

"If it came down to a choice, we would support Elinor Taylor's bill, because we feel very strongly about parental choice. There are some people that seem to want to take parents out of the equation," he said.

For his part, Rendell is pleased to hear Republican legislators getting involved in the preschool discussion, but he wants to be sure that any final plan has extensive standards and certification guidelines, spokeswoman Kate Philips said.

"The (Taylor) bill does address a lot of the same things that Gov. Rendell wants, but the quality guidelines are inadequate," she said.

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