

Great Start Expansion Still Needs Some Selling

Questions and testimony in a pair of hearings Wednesday for the proposed \$65 million increase in the Great Start Readiness Program show the plan is not a done deal, at least among conservative House members.

Leaders of the panels that will oversee the School Aid budget so far appear to support the plan. Rep. Bill Rogers (R-Brigh-ton), chair of the House Appropriations School Aid Subcommittee said as much at a hearing Tuesday. Sen. Howard Walker (R-Traverse City), chair of the Senate Appropriations K-12, School Aid and Education Subcommittee, questioned why the Early Childhood Investment Corporation should not simply be rolled into the Great Start Program.

However, a joint meeting of the House Education Committee and Appropriations subcommittees on Education, Human Services and School Aid showed some concern about expanding the program.

Susan Broman, deputy superintendent and head of the Office of Great Start, said both at the Senate subcommittee and the House joint hearing that the program had a proven track record of improving student achievement and increasing ultimate graduation rates among students who participated.

The funding increase would, in part, open up 16,000 slots to those most at risk among the 29,000 4-year-olds in the state who qualify but are not participating.

The plan also increases the per-pupil allocation under the program, a move she said was needed to ensure quality programs could continue to participate.

“We have been losing good providers because they can’t afford to subsidize the Great Start Readiness Program,” she said.

She said the funds would be available to market their programs to be sure all of those eligible were aware the classes existed. “Whether it’s going door to door or an ice cream truck cruising through the neighborhood ... we need to be more aggressive,” she said.

As witnesses had noted previously, Ms. Broman said the funds needed to be available to reimburse for transportation. “If the kids can’t get to the program, it doesn’t do them or anybody else any good,” she said in the Senate subcommittee. “Oftentimes services are set up and they don’t often keep in mind what it takes for families to get to the services, so families don’t access the services,” she then told the House panel.

Still, transportation is not being ignored in the program, she told the House panel.

“But we are going to take this as an opportunity to encourage programs to look at the transportation system in their com-

munities and how they can piggyback on the transportation system already there,” she said.

Mr. Walker questioned the value of having both the Office of Great Start and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC). He was particularly concerned, he said, because members had not been able to get information about the activities of the ECIC.

“I’ve heard some of the things they do, but I haven’t seen the results like you guys have shown,” he said to Ms. Broman. “Do we need all the layers of early childhood?”

Ms. Broman said the ECIC was now essentially a contractor for the Office of Great Start, conducting certain assigned tasks.

“We also have metrics established that the ECIC needs to meet in order to continue to receive funds,” she said.

Sen. John Pappageorge (R-Troy) questioned whether federal funds for Head Start could be used for Great Start programs. “If we don’t take all this money and invest it the best we can then we’re only doing half the job,” he said, noting studies that showed Head Start was largely ineffective at improving student achievement.

K.P. Pelleran, executive director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Michigan, said the studies to which Mr. Pappageorge referred predated the 2007 reauthorization of the program. She said those offering services through Head Start now have to show they are effective to qualify for the funds. If a program is found to be ineffective, the contract for that area is rebid, she said.

But Ms. Broman told the House hearing (Mr. Pappageorge asked his question after she had already stepped down in the Senate hearing) that the office was looking at ways to combine federal Head Start and state Great Start and Child Care Subsidy funds to further expand the program.

One current hitch in that plan is the federal government provides the funding directly to Head Start providers, others noted.

And Ken Sikkema, a former legislator and senior policy fellow at Public Sector Consultants, urged the state not to use the Head Start funds for Great Start unless those funds are converted to a block grant that would not place any federal restrictions on the program.

Michael Van Beek, director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, urged the House panel to reconsider the proposed expansion. While he acknowledged there was a recent longitudinal study that showed higher achievement for GSRP graduates, he said the study was not designed in a way that could be extrapolated beyond the students actu-

ally involved in it.

“I’m skeptical of the notion that by simply spending more money on Great Start, we create greater return on investment for Michigan citizens,” he said. “The evidence of the long-run effects of large scale programs is not encouraging or inconclusive at best.”

He said the programs that have more convincingly shown their value in improving student results have been smaller and generally more expensive per student than what Great Start is proposing.

Committee members also raised concerns that the program was too broad. Rep. Ray Franz (R-Onekama), for example, said the program was reaching too far into the middle class.

“Those are the ones that we should be servicing: the extreme at-risk, the poor, the minorities,” he said. “By diluting it so much ... we’re really depriving those most in need.”

Ms. Broman said the program was limited to those living at 300 percent of poverty or less unless they have developmental disabilities or other conditions that would otherwise make them eligible.

And John Bebow, executive director of the Center for Michigan, which has been reviewing the program, told Gongwer News Service after the House hearing that the language in the budget proposal further restricts the additional funds to targeting children living at 200 percent of poverty.

That would mean trying to attract children closer to the truly poor level Ms. Broman cited of 150 percent of poverty.

Mr. Van Beek also said parental support could have swayed the results for children in the program. “That the parents of the children were motivated to enroll them in a voluntary preschool program indicates they might have been a factor,” he said.

Some Republicans questioned, though, whether the program is actually pulling children away from parents.

“There’s obviously a great deal of research that indicates parental involvement is a key factor,” Rep. Thomas Hooker (R-Byron Center) said. “Are there better ways to spend our Great Start dollars that would spur parental involvement?” Mr. Van Beek said parental involvement is important and is often lacking. “The first step there is to admit we have a problem,” he said.

But he also was unsure there were changes to the program that would help. “I think there are limits to what we can do with regards to that problem,” he said.

Ms. Broman also acknowledged that family support for students is an ongoing problem, particularly for those at-risk. “Hopefully we will be addressing that in the comprehensive plan we’re developing,” she said.

Rep. Theresa Abed (D-Grand Ledge) said parental involvement would increase with financial security.

“What’s going to spur parental involvement is job growth,” she said. “The reason they’re not involved is they can’t find a job, they’re losing their homes, the utilities are being turned off.”

And supporters of the plan used the parental involvement point to push back on Republicans who said the program would essentially take away parental choice.

“This is choice because parents choose,” Mr. Sikkema said.

Rep. Lisa Posthumus Lyons (R-Alto), who was chairing the House hearing, did not give conservatives free rein to attack the program on the point. Rep. Martin Howrylak (R-Troy) got shut down after saying the program was counter to encouraging parental involvement in their child’s development. “It seems to me the perverse incentive is to keep families apart,” he said.

Ms. Lyons was not as successful at shutting down Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton (D-Huntington Woods), who questioned Mr. Van Beek’s qualification to testify on the issue. She insisted, after Ms. Lyons had told Mr. Van Beek not to answer the question, that it was related to early childhood.

“There must be some gap,” she said of Mr. Van Beek’s biography, noting that he had only taught for four years before joining the Mackinac Center in 2009.

Ms. Lipton’s question earned some chastising from the Republican side for having to resort to personal attacks, but Mr. Van Beek said he was qualified because “I’ve done research on this issue and I was invited here to testify.”

Mr. Van Beek did argue that expanding the program could reduce choice because at least some of the children coming into the expanded slots could be coming from other preschool programs.

“To the extent these children move from a private provider ... it’s creating a government solution to a problem that doesn’t exist,” he said.

Mr. Bebow said it was unlikely any of the children moving into one of the Great Start slots would be coming from a high quality private program because their families would not likely be able to afford such a program.

Mr. Van Beek did not, though, in answer to a question from Mr. Franz, think the expansion of the program would take enough out of the School Aid Fund to substantially affect programs at higher levels of education.

Ms. Broman said the program would save money in the long run. “We are basically saving money within the K-12 system by kids not repeating kindergarten or repeating grades and graduating early,” she said.