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ANALYSIS OF FUNDING

Ohio led states in preschool cutbacks

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ohio slashed preschool programs more than any other state in the nation, according to a new report.

The state-by-state analysis found that Ohio cut the largest percentage of funding from preschool education and, as a result, will deny services to the largest number of children.

"Ohio lawmakers' choice to demolish pre-kindergarten derails a turnaround in education reform that barely began," said Marci Young, of the Pre-K Now campaign, a Washington-based advocacy group that conducted the study.

The report - "Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K Fiscal Year 2010" - showed that Ohio was among 10 states that decreased pre-kindergarten funding this year.

Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia increased or planned to increase spending, and six states maintained current funding. In Alabama, state aid jumped by 20 percent, the largest increase in the nation.

The 24-page report noted that Ohio lawmakers cut \$11.5 million in state aid to early childhood education in the two-year budget passed in July. The Early Learning Initiative, a preschool program for poor children that replaced state-funded Head Start, was eliminated, and funding to public preschools operated by school districts was reduced by a third. As a result, at least 12,000 fewer low-income children will be served.

"In Ohio, legislators have ignored the research, which clearly demonstrates that pre-K builds the human capital essential for economic recovery and gives children the high-quality educational opportunities they need to enter kindergarten ready to ... succeed," the report said.

The state's dubious ranking comes as little surprise to Ohio education advocates.

"Early childhood was not made a priority by the governor or legislature," said Katie Kelly, director of GroundWork, a coalition of early education supporters.

"The bottom line is, children who do not have access to quality care and education don't enter

kindergarten ready to learn."

The cuts will cost taxpayers more in the long run, she said.

"Do we want to invest in children when their brains are developing and we can make such an impact, or do we want to spend money on the back end to remediate those children, to give them the special education that they need?"

Amanda Wurst, spokeswoman for Gov. Ted Strickland, said despite the cuts, state spending on public preschool programs (separate from the Early Learning program) is still higher than it was two years ago.

She also noted that 7,500 of the 12,000 children cited in the report being cut from the Early Learning Initiative have moved into subsidized child-care programs, and others started kindergarten this fall.

"The resources in a very, very challenging economic situation were limited," she said. "The focus was to provide access to early care and education to low-income families who are using these services to keep their jobs or find a job."

The report concluded: "In Illinois, Michigan and Ohio, in particular, a failure to make tough choices that put proven programs ahead of politics will cost thousands of young children the opportunity to enter kindergarten better prepared."

The report is available at <http://www.preknow.org/>.

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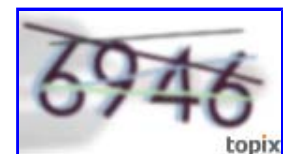
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