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## Report: Ohio leads in preschool budget cuts

*ASSOCIATED PRESS*

COLUMBUS -- Ohio cut more funding for its preschool programs than any other state this year, a report found.

The study released this week by the Pre-K Now campaign, a national advocacy group, found that Ohio cut the largest percentage of funding for early childhood education of the 10 states that cut such funding. Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia increased or maintained funding for pre-kindergarten education in a tough budget cycle for all states.

Ohio lawmakers cut \$11.5 million in state aid for early childhood education in the two-year budget approved in July. They eliminated the Early Learning Initiative, a preschool program for poor children, and reduced funding for public preschools by one-third.

GroundWork, an early childhood education advocacy organization in Ohio, said the cuts will eliminate early learning opportunities for about 12,000 children.

"The cuts made to Ohio's early childhood system will result in many of our most at-risk children entering school without the tools they need to be successful, an outcome that will cost our state much more down the line," said GroundWork Director Katie Kelly.

Amanda Wurst, spokeswoman for Gov. Ted Strickland, said that despite the cuts, lawmakers were still able to increase state spending on public preschool programs beyond the level of two years ago.

She also said that 7,500 out of the 12,000 children who were cut from the Early Learning Initiative have moved into subsidized child-care programs, while others started kindergarten this fall.

"The resources in a very, very challenging economic situation were limited," Wurst 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."

But the report said some states, including Ohio, failed to put programs over politics.

"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."

Ohio lawmakers are currently faced with a roughly \$850 million hole in the budget they approved in July, after the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that a plan to put slot machines at race tracks is subject to a voter referendum. While the Ohio House has approved a plan to delay the last round of planned income tax reductions, the Ohio Senate hasn't yet said what it will do.

Some lawmakers would like to balance the budget through additional cuts.