

## Senators cite advantages for children, society

Casey, Clinton push for early-education money

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Calling it an economic issue as much as one of fairness and moral imperative, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey Jr. joined Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton yesterday to promote federal funding of pre-kindergarten education.

"The evidence has caught up with the advocacy," said Clinton, D-N.Y., who recited a litany of facts including lower crime rates, fewer high school drop outs, higher incomes later in life and greater economic productivity.

"Now it is abundantly clear that we have to invest in early childhood if we expect to remain competitive in a global economy, if we expect to honor our obligations to poor children, children of color ... so that they too can have as good a chance as possible to fulfill their dreams," she said.

Money or ideology?:

Addressing an audience of educators and early childhood advocates at the Center for American Progress, a think tank in Washington, Casey and Clinton hoped to draw attention to the need for government support, such as the \$75 million Pennsylvania included in this year's state budget for early childhood education.

The two Democrats have sponsored separate bills that would put a greater emphasis on pre-kindergarten education.

Casey's "Prepare All Kids Act" proposes to spend \$35 billion over five years to help states pay for at least one year of pre-kindergarten education.

The bill, which has attracted only one co-sponsor since he introduced it in May, would be open to all children, but would be free for children in families of four earning \$40,000 or less.

"I don't think this is one of those situations where the money isn't there. I think it's just a matter of ideology," Casey said during an interview. "The obstacle in terms of funding is ideology and partisanship. ... That's something we're going to have to work through," he said.

Nathan Benefield, policy research director at the Commonwealth Foundation in Harrisburg, called the benefits overrated and the costs high. "We think offering scholarships or tax credits for low-income parents to help them afford preschool and give them choice is a better -- and much more affordable -- alternative," he said.

Clinton, however, said studies, including one from the Federal Reserve Board in Minneapolis, show that children who receive quality pre-school education are less likely to be held back a grade, need special education, be on welfare or involved in crime. "The money we don't spend on our children before kindergarten we end up spending in special education, crime, welfare, unemployment, lower productivity," Clinton said.

Casey, who would fund his program by repealing tax cuts for people earning over \$200,000 a year, said his proposal is likely going to be a long-term effort that's unlikely to be enacted until 2009 at best. Noting President Bush is unlikely to support such an expansion of government funding, Casey said, "I'm going to fight for this whether it takes a year or many years ... but I'm hopeful a Democratic president in 2009 will sign on to this."

Clinton is proposing shifting existing education spending. "Much of what we spend money on in school reform is not proven to be as effective as early childhood education," she said. "By taking our federal, state and local dollars and beginning to shift them into early childhood, we will actually get better results."

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