

A New Mexico Referendum Could Be A Model For Improving Early Education

After Washington fumbled the care agenda, the states can pick up the slack.

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Advocates are hopeful a referendum in New Mexico to provide hundreds of millions of dollars a year in additional funding for early childhood education can provide a national model for other states to follow after Congress failed to pass a long-hoped-for boost to child care.

The referendum appears on a smooth path to passage. There is little organized opposition to the idea, and polling indicates a solid majority of the state's likely voters support it. But the unusual funding mechanism – it draws cash from a \$26 billion trust fund powered by oil and gas revenue – means similar proposals could face a more challenging road elsewhere.

But as much as the policy details matter, the possibility of recreating the coalition behind the movement – with childcare and early education workers themselves at the forefront, bringing in even traditionally conservative groups like the business community – excites advocates.

“We are fighting as a national movement, state by state, partner by partner, in making certain that folks that work in childcare centers are compensated, that childcare centers are elevated to basically the status that they deserve, that they are a cornerstone of our economy,” said Jennifer Wells, the director of economic justice at Community Change, a progressive group that co-

hosted a gathering of child care workers and advocates to plot strategy last weekend in Albuquerque with the ECE Organizing Network and Child Care for Every Family Network.

The coronavirus pandemic, combined with the subsequent inflation, has created an ongoing child care crisis, with prices rising and spots for children rare in many parts of the country. Increased wages in other fields have lured underpaid child care workers out of the industry, exacerbating the problem.

The problem is national: A [May study from the Center for Law and Social Policy and the National Women's Law Center](#) found a 10% decline nationally in the number of child care workers since the start of the coronavirus pandemic – five times greater than the decline in the overall number of workers. Forty-eight of the 50 states saw drops, according to a Community Change analysis, with 17 states seeing a decline of more than 15%.

The push for expanded, affordable, quality child care and early education at the federal level, like so many other major Democratic goals, fell by the wayside as negotiations with Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W. Va.) whittled down President Joe Biden's agenda. Advocates were careful to note federal action will eventually be necessary even if the states begin to act.

New Mexico, traditionally one of the nation's poorest states, has especially acute needs. One out of every four children in the state lives in poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked the state 50th for child well-being, though advocates say that ranking is based on data from 2019 and 2020 and does not reflect gains from post-pandemic policy shifts.

New Mexico is likely the first state to make big child care moves since the pandemic. An [Albuquerque Journal poll](#) conducted in August found that 69% of the state's likely voters supported the constitutional amendment to increase early childhood education funding, with just 15% in opposition.

Support for the proposal is broad, with 79% of Democrats, 70% of independent voters and even 56% of Republicans backing the initiative.

Getting there was a slog. Andrea Serrano, the executive director at the New Mexico progressive group OLE – an acronym for Organizers in the Land of Enchantment – said the fight started over a decade ago. Getting the constitutional amendment on the ballot meant passing the proposal through the legislature, which meant lobbying and supporting challenges to obstinate legislators.

“The first families who we got involved in this fight, their children are in high school now,” she said. “Change doesn’t happen overnight.”

Erica Gallegos first got involved as a child care worker herself. She worked for 2-to-4-year-olds for three years at the beginning of her career but could not earn enough to make ends meet. When she became an organizer with OLE, she was in a position to help change the image of childcare providers.

“When we first started going to the legislature, the professionals who work in this field were called babysitters, or told ‘you don’t do this for the money, you do it for love,’” she said. “Many said, ‘I can’t pay my bills with love, unfortunately.’”

A new levy from New Mexico’s permanent fund will pay their bills instead, which takes royalties from oil and gas production on state lands and invests them. The state pulls 5% of the fund annually to spend on education. The constitutional amendment will increase that to 6.25% – an increase of about \$230 million a year – with 60% of the money going to child care and early childhood education, including pre-kindergarten programs and at-home visits for new mothers. The remaining 40% will go to K-12 education.

Objections to the measure in the legislature mainly focused on the long-term

effects of drawing down money from the fund. The Albuquerque Journal noted spending more of the fund now means the state will get less cash each year from the fund in 20 years than they would otherwise.

Replicating New Mexico's unusual funding mechanism might be the most significant barrier to passing similar referenda or initiatives in other states: Advocates acknowledge the sell would be more challenging if it meant a hike in sales, property or income taxes. But they say convincing the public the cash is worth it is possible, noting studies have shown every \$1 spent on early childhood education can save \$7 down the line.

"Think of a child who hasn't had those early interventions from birth to five or quality education," said Cara Cerchione, the director of a child care center in the Miami suburb of Margate. "And then think about, later on, how much more money it costs to get them caught up, K-12."

Cerchione is one of the childcare providers hosting events next week dedicated to raising the profile of child care as a voting issue ahead of the midterm elections. Events organized by Community Change Action will also take place in Washington, D.C., Minnesota, Texas, New York, Georgia and California.

Gallegos, who is now the co-executive director of the National Child Care for Every Family Network, noted that not every state has a pot of money to fund child care and early education. And even if they did, many states don't have initiatives or referenda for voters to weigh in. But what is replicable, she said, was the broader strategy.

"We have to center the parents, families and workforce that this issue is affecting," she said. "Then, build the power that we need to shift the narrative around the importance of the issue."

There is another group of people closely watching the referenda: Democratic strategists. While expanding and improving child care has typically polled well, turning it into a vote-changer has proved difficult. Democrats are hopeful that putting the issue on the ballot can change that and win over GOP-leaning voters who support the idea. Strategists mentioned Michigan and Ohio as possible targets for future votes.

In New Mexico's governor race, incumbent Democrat Michele Lujan Grisham has made child care a priority. She created a government department dedicated to early childhood education. She used money from the American Rescue Plan to make child care free for nearly all families in the state.

In a debate on Friday night, Grisham boasted of her work and backed the constitutional amendment.

"If we want to deal with reading in the third grade, second grade, first grade, kindergarten, we need our kids better prepared," she said. "That means quality Pre-K education – every 3-year-old and 4-year-old in those classrooms. That means paying those educators more."

Grisham's opponent in blue-tinted New Mexico is Mark Ronchetti, a well-known former television meteorologist in the state. He said he would oppose the amendment.

"I think right now you look at where funding is, especially where funding is for early childhood, we have enough funds for it right now," he said. "So, to me, it would make more sense to wait and see what happens with this. I personally would not support it."

Ronchetti's campaign did not respond to a request for comment. Still, his position might be out of step with his voters: 55% of Ronchetti voters backed the amendment, according to the Albuquerque Journal survey.

