

Idaho Legislature

Bill would slash kindergarten funding

A Gem County lawmaker says the state should pay only for kids who need it.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

Emmett Republican Rep. Steve Thayne says Idaho needs to decide what it's trying to accomplish with programs geared at Idaho's youngest students.

"Are we providing day care or are we providing an academic environment?" he asked. "If we're paying for day care, I think we could find some less expensive teachers."

His plan, introduced

Tuesday, would largely gut the roughly \$50 million annual budget for public kindergarten and leave about \$17 million for school districts to focus on at-risk students who have not been prepared for the first grade at home by their parents.

Students who already have the skills to succeed in first grade could spend as little as three weeks in kindergarten, while districts could offer the full 36 weeks to students who do not yet have those skills under the bill.

While Thayne contends his plan would require parents to become more involved with their children's educa-

tion, critics say it would force some parents to pay for private kindergarten or, in the case of families where both parents work, force on them to quit their job.

"I interpret this as nothing more than a tax on parents," said Rep. Brian Cronin, a Boise Democrat who noted that his own children would not be in kindergarten if the plan is adopted.

"We're really just passing costs onto families at a time when families are really struggling."

Funding for kindergarten programs is under threat in several states as lawmakers try to make up for losses in

revenue and plug budget holes. New Jersey, Illinois, Virginia and Pennsylvania are among states that have considered cuts.

Thayne argues the more than \$30 million his plan would save could be funneled back into the state general fund and spent filling in budget gaps in grades one through 12.

"In this case, we might actually improve the education system by doing a little bit less," he said.

School districts now receiving money for 36 weeks of kindergarten would only get enough money for about 12 weeks under the plan.