

After-school programs on chopping block

My Central Jersey by Hanna Hadley & Suzanne Russell

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Trump's proposed budget includes the elimination of \$1.2 billion in funding to 21st Century Learning Centers, which include more than 50 after school and summer programs in NJ Viorel Florescu/NorthJersey.com

School districts across New Jersey are bracing for potential cuts to after-school programs next year under the president's proposed federal budget, worrying families who say they depend on the care and academic help these programs provide.

President Donald Trump has called for cutting \$1.2 billion in grants for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which includes after-school and summer programs in high-poverty areas, as he seeks to reduce Department of Education spending by more than 13 percent.

Close to 16,000 students across New Jersey benefit from the tuition-free program, including 200 at Joseph E. Soehl Middle School in Linden, where students daily participate in homework tutorials with teachers and paraprofessionals, enrichment and recreation programs in addition to getting a sandwich, juice and snack to keep them fuel up for those afternoon activities.

Plainfield also runs a 21st Century Community Learning Center.

“The possibility of funding elimination for the 21st Century Community Learning Center is a great concern to me,” said Isabella Scocozza, Soehl Middle School vice principal and program director.



Photo: Courtesy of Plainfield Public Schools

“I have seen first-hand the positive impact our after school program has on our district, community, students, families and staff. Our after-school program is an extended learning opportunity for our middle school students and has been active in the Linden community for the past 12 years.”

About one-third of the school’s 590 students participate in the after-school program from 2:45 to 5:45 p.m. She said the three hours is broken into three parts, for homework, rotating enrichment for math, language arts, character education, physical education, media technology and STEM, and then recreation time for gym, yoga and meditation, crochet and robotics.

Scocozza said there are monthly class trips to art studios, bowling and roller skating, as well as

family class trips, parent workshops, family night activities and some weekend trips. She said Linden also offers a summer STEM program.

Counseling services, mentoring as well as community service projects, such as participating in the Jersey Cares coat drive and creating a Little Free Library where students can lend a book and give a book, also are part of the program.

“It’s all free,” Scocozza said.



Linden students participate in the Jersey Cares coat drive as part of the 21st Century Community Learning Center program at Soehl Middle School. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Linden Public Schools)

She said the program has helped students on the brink of retention as well as reinforced the daytime modifications made with special-education students in the after-school sessions.

Scocozza, who has written the grant applications, said she's worried about the program continuing, adding that she already has had requests for the upcoming summer program.

"There is such a need for this type of program. I'm worried we won't be here," she said.

In Linden, a high number of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of poverty.

The \$425,000 the district receives each year for the five years of the grant is used to pay teachers, paraprofessionals, other staff, transportation to field trips, administrative fees and curriculum.

Since April 2010, more than 1,100 students have been served by the Plainfield Public Schools 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school and summer learning program, according to Zelda Spence, Plainfield supervisor of special projects and 21st Century Community Learning Centers director.

“With only 25 percent of high school students graduating with the skills needed to succeed in college or career, Plainfield Public Schools is committed to improving personalized student learning my way of its after-school and summer learning programs,” said Spence, adding that the mission of the project is to provide customized instruction that leverages technology linked to 21st-century skills.

She said students produce intentionally planned, sometimes theme-based projects that are aligned to the school day and the school year curriculum.

The Plainfield program takes places at seven schools for after school and two summer school sites.

The districts and organizations get the 21st Century grants through a competitive application process managed by the state. They have to prove that their centers will offer academic support and activities in areas such as arts education, technology, science, math and drug and violence prevention.



Plainfield 21st Century Community Learning Center students and actors after showcasing play holding certificates, the culmination of a 10-week play-writing project facilitated by Kean University Premier Stages. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Plainfield Public Schools)

Academic help

White House budget chief Mick Mulvaney defended cuts in after-school programs at a March 16 news conference, saying there was “no demonstrable evidence they’re actually helping results, helping kids do better at school.”

The president’s “Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again” also states that the “programs lacks (sic) strong evidence of meeting its objectives.”

But the [Department of Education’s own analysis of the program](#) in the 2013 and 2014 school year shows progress. The report claims students in the program got better grades in math and English and did a better job completing homework.

New Jersey contracted with American Institutes of Research to do a state-level evaluation of its 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs in the 2009-10 school year.

Researchers found that students who attended the center for 70 days or more days performed better on state exams in math than peers, and that those with multiple years in the program did better in both reading and math.

But the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, has argued that data and studies are lacking to determine how well the programs work.

Scocozza said an outside program consultant conducts evaluations. There also are surveys and analysis of data. She said the programs track students’ language arts and math grades for each marking period.

“It’s a way of accountability,” she said, adding that the program offers small and individual tutoring in the math and language arts subject areas. “We have a lot more time in the afterschool program.”

In Plainfield, students that participate in the program either after school or summer for two years or more experience fewer disciplinary infractions, fewer out-of-school suspensions, higher report-card grades, higher standardized test scores and are more likely to graduate high school and obtain a vocation and/or go to college, and establish stronger relationships with adults than their non-participatory peers, according to Spence.



Students in the 21st Century Community Learning Center at Soehl Middle School in Linden installed a Little Free Library on the Henry Street side of the building to promote literacy in the city. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Linden Public Schools)

Taxpayers seek relief

Originally created in 1994 through the Elementary and Secondary School Act, and expanded in 2001 through No Child Left Behind, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide students in high-need, high-poverty communities the chance to join after-school programming.

It's one of many education programs that would lose funding in Trump's budget, which calls for \$9.2 billion in cuts to the Department of Education. The plan also includes cuts to college financial aid, teacher professional development grants, and federal "work-study" that provides students with approved jobs that pay wages subsidized by the federal government.

But not every area of spending will be cut. "School choice" programs could get a big boost in the budget with \$1.4 billion in new spending for vouchers for private schools, charter schools and funds that follow students who go to the public school of their choice.

Many Americans say they want to see cuts to federal spending, yet cuts to education programs remain controversial.

“If the proposed Trump budget blueprint passes Congress, it would be devastating for just about 2 million school-aged children in low-income communities throughout the U.S. It would be equally distressing for us here in Plainfield,” Spence said.

“Parents and school-day teachers rely on the evidence-based instructional practices to help boost students’ acquisition of a grade-level concept or skill. More importantly, children use this opportunity to grow their relationships with their peers, school officials and pursue academic and enrichment goals that they are unable to achieve during the school day. It is frightening to conceptualize our Plainfield children being disengaged and/or unsupervised during after school (3 to 6 p.m.) and in the summer (8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) when local police reports inform us most criminal behavior takes place,” she said

Spence said the “21st CCLC provides a safe and fun learning environment where we hide our academic rigor and children learn to become their best by focusing on their K-12 experience in a positive, strength’s based, supportive way.”

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