Trump would eliminate some parents' only source of affordable childcare [1]

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Despite his pledges to make childcare affordable, Trump's budget would undo federal funding for afterschool programs.

Wanda Hill couldn't work last year for the simple reason that her kids couldn't get into a free afterschool program.

She cares full-time for one of her children and four of her grandchildren, three of whom are old enough for free afterschool care. When she realized they couldn't get in, she called around to see about getting daycare for them before and after the school day. But the center she found wanted $350 a week for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon.

She decided instead to simply care for them herself. "For all of that, I might as well stay home," she said.

"I wasn't able to work, because there's five of them and daycare for five children is just unreasonable," she said. "There's no way."

Everything changed this year when her kids got into the program. That meant she was able to get a job as a part-time bus driver. Even though she doesn't get done with work until 5:00, she now knows her kids will have somewhere to be and then a bus will bring them home. "If my bus happens to be late, I don't have to worry," she said.

Hill says the children see a lot of benefits: They get their homework done and even get extra help from the afterschool teachers, who can provide more one-on-one attention. They can get outside and move around. They build social skills by interacting with different children in a more intimate setting. They're even about to take a free field trip to learn about Harriet Tubman and walk the trails she used for the Underground Railroad.

"They're learning, and they're doing homework, and they're socializing," she said. "It's just a plus."

There's just one problem: President Donald Trump doesn't seem to agree with her.

The afterschool program that Hill's children attend is funded by a little-known federal initiative called the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. It's the only federal source of money to run afterschool and summer programs.

On the campaign trail, Trump spoke about the issue of childcare, bemoaning the high cost and promising to offer a plan that would make it more affordable. He's picking up the issue again now that he's in office: On Wednesday, he promised that his administration would be "fighting to make sure that all mothers, and all families, have access to affordable childcare." Free afterschool care is as affordable as it gets.

But in his so-called "skinny budget" outline released this month, Trump called to eliminate 21st Century funding entirely, saying in the document, "The programs lacks strong evidence of meeting its objectives, such as improving student achievement."

21st Century doesn't entail the federal government running afterschool programs itself. The money gets doled out to states based on how many low-income students they have, and states then hold competitive bidding processes for groups that want to run an afterschool or summer program. The grants last anywhere between three and five years, and then recipients have to apply all over again.

States get to set the priorities for what kinds of programs they want. "There's a lot of state flexibility and control," said Erik Peterson, vice president of policy at the Afterschool Alliance. Some might prioritize STEM education, while others may focus on physical education.

The process of programs getting the funding is incredibly competitive — for every grant that gets awarded, about three or four quality programs are turned down on average. "There's tremendous need out there and the need just continues to grow in terms of the number of applicants… versus the amount of funding going to awards," Peterson said.

The program is designed to let applicants use the grant money to get up and running and then find other sources of funding to keep it going so they don't have to keep reapplying. But while some programs are able to pull this off, it can be difficult to find additional funding in other areas. "Particularly in rural communities where there are less funding resources, less foundations, less corporate support, it's harder for those programs to become sustainable," Peterson said.

Even programs in urban centers can struggle, because costs—finding space, hiring staff, paying for transportation, even buying snack food—are higher, yet the average grant per center across all states is just $122,000. “In urban areas where there are more resources in theory to be able to… continue without the funds, the costs are considerably higher,” he said.

“It gives me breathing room and a little peace of mind.”

City programs are just as valuable to parents as those in rural areas. Kyeatta Garrett-Bey doesn’t want her daughter taking the Newark public bus to and from school, worrying that it’s too dangerous. But before her daughter was in an afterschool program, she would either have to leave her job as a special education teacher early or find someone else to pick her up from school.

“There’s only one or two people I can count on a regular basis to pick my daughter up from school,” she said. “On days when I wasn’t sure if they were available or not… I’d have to leave right on time to try to get out. That’s stressful because at the end of the day when there’s only 20 minutes left to dismissal I have to start packing.”

Even though Garrett-Bey’s students leave at 2:30, her work isn’t done. Dismissal is an important time for her to catch up with parents about any issues encountered during the day. She had also signed up to oversee an extended learning program after hours to make extra money, but she had to quit in the middle of the year because she couldn’t balance it with picking her daughter up from school.

The afterschool care funded by 21st Century allows Garrett-Bey to focus on her job. “I don’t have to run out the door in the afternoons,” she said. “It gives me breathing room and a little peace of mind.”

And it gives her daughter academic and social enrichment. She’s able to get her homework done, work on science projects, take dance classes, and build relationships with her peers. “She has something constructive to do after school,” she said.

All of that would disappear if her program closed its doors. “It would be a hardship,” she said. She’d have to arrange for her daughter to get picked up by someone else the two days a week she has to stay at work late, and the other days she’d have to run out the door and still likely be late to get her daughter.

It’s hard to say exactly what would happen if Trump really did succeed in eliminating the 21st Century program. His budget document was only a preliminary outline and would need Congressional approval to become reality.

But we’ve already had a small taste. When sequestration’s automatic budget cuts went into effect in 2013 and then the government shut down later that year, programs closed up shop. “We saw programs basically shutting their doors not knowing when funding was going to come,” Peterson said. Even now, with funding uncertain, many states hold off on the competitions to award grants. “That leads to programs not wanting to commit to open their doors for the school year next year, which really creates challenges for parents.”

If 21st Century funding were eliminated, Peterson thinks some communities would be able to find funders to at least cover some of the kids in their programs, if not all. But others would just have to shut their doors completely. In Wyoming, for example, the state used to offer its own funding, but that’s disappeared amid budgetary problems related to falling energy prices. There isn’t a lot of private sector funding. “You take away this federal funding stream, there’s no back-up plan in Wyoming right now,” Peterson said.

“There will be whole states without this infrastructure in place to build supports for the programs,” he added. “It’ll be really devastating to kids and families.”

The programs Wanda Hill’s children attend will be among those to disappear. Kat Stork, who oversees her program and two other sites in Caroline County, Maryland, notes that it’s a low-income, rural area. There aren’t many charitable or private resources to fall back on—there’s just one community foundation that serves five counties. There aren’t enough parents who could afford to pay any sort of fee to carry entire programs. Her programs rely entirely on 21st Century Community Learning Centers money and one state stream.

“If we lose 21st Century funding, then there will not be any afterschool programs,” she said. “There’s no local funding to backfill the loss of that federal funding.”

Hill’s life would completely change if funding were rescinded. “I would have to quit my job, because I wouldn’t be able to afford daycare,” she said. “It would hurt the children.”

Indeed, although Trump argued that there isn’t evidence that 21st Century produces positive outcomes, that’s not the case—for parents or for children.

The talking points against 21st Century date back to a study published in 2003, just a year after the program was reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind omnibus bill. 21st Century was subject to NCLB’s focus on test scores as a primary measure of successful outcomes. The 2005 study found “limited influence on academic performance” when it looked at reading and math test scores and grades for children who were in afterschool programs compared to those who weren’t.

Since then, states have conducted their own evaluations of these programs and found different results. In California, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington, for example, students in afterschool programs improved their performance on state tests.

Stork has her own data. She’s required to conduct an independent evaluation of her programs that looks at the impact on academics, and it has found that children who consistently attend afterschool and summer programming demonstrate academic improvement, specifically on standardized tests.

Soft skills matter, too. She says she’s seen many students anecdotally who might be struggling in school but get positive reinforcement in afterschool that builds their confidence, “which can cycle back into more positive outcomes in day school,” she said.

It's silly to make test scores the primary outcome measure for a program that only reaches students for a couple of hours a day versus the five to eight they spend in regular school. Instead, Peterson argues, afterschool helps other positive outcomes for children. "The idea is not to replicate what's going on during the school day, but to complement and reinforce it," he said. Students learning fractions in math class, for example, might keep those lessons going with a cooking class that uses those skills in afterschool. That bolsters their overall learning.

The programs have a big impact on attendance, given that students who like afterschool have to show up at regular school to be able to go. That helps improve academic and classroom outcomes. They have also been shown to improve factors like behavior issues and even physical health thanks to sports and P.E. offerings. States' evaluations have confirmed many of these benefits.

"There are so many valuable outcomes from these programs that are never going to show up in a GAO report," Peterson said. "It is such a cost-effective way of achieving a whole host of outcomes."

Scott Blood is a single dad whose kids have seen these benefits firsthand. He has two children in afterschool. "I've noticed quite a few [benefits], social and academic," he said. They read books together in their afterschool programs, do science projects, and get math help on areas where they struggle. "It's really an educational thing, versus fun time after school…. They learn quite a bit."

"Without that program, I wouldn't have any childcare."

He says his children love the program, but he's also a big fan. As with Hill, it allows him to work. His kids get out of school at 3:40, but his work often isn't done until 5:00. "Without that program, I wouldn't have any childcare," he said.

And its disappearance would have cascading consequences. "I would either pay for regular daycare for after school, or I'd have to cut my days short to be home with them, which is losing on hours at work and less money coming in," he explained. The latter option could end up hurting the small business he works for — there are only two other employees, including the owner. "If I had to leave early, that essentially ends the workday or slows down the workday, which is less money for the company overall," he explained.

But spending more on daycare so he could stay at work longer would be "more money I'd pay out of my pocket in order to be able to work my normal schedule… Really just spinning the wheels in the mud."

Work factors heavily in why parents care so much about these programs. In the Afterschool Alliance's survey it publishes every five years, America After 3pm, 85 percent of parents whose kids go to afterschool says it gives parents peace of mind while they're at work, while 83 percent say it helps them keep their jobs. "We ask parents…why do you value afterschool programs," Peterson said. "Being able to work is always at the top of the list."

There's a strong argument to be made in favor of expanding, rather than eliminating, funding for 21st Century.

There are still more than 11 million children each day who end up unsupervised at home after school. The demand for these programs consistently outstrips their availability: approximately 19.4 million children who aren't in an afterschool program would be enrolled if one were available. That number has steadily climbed since 2004.

Stork's programs in Maryland are only able to serve three of the five elementary schools in the county. Parents often ask to expand into those other schools, but the funding just isn't there. Meanwhile, there's almost always a waitlist in the existing programs.

"Overall, I would say that there's probably double the need to what we're able to meet," Stork said. "We have never been in a situation where we've gotten enough 21st Century money to fund the entire community need."

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Region: United States [3]
Tags: funding [4]
after school programs [5]
labour force participation [6]
