

Trump budget would cut programs for 20,000 Indiana kids

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Federal program offers low-income students help with school work, meals and safe place to be after school



(Photo: Mykal McEldowney/IndyStar)

Local nonprofit leaders are raising their voices to speak for disadvantaged children in Indianapolis who they say would be hurt by federal budget cuts proposed by President Donald Trump's administration.

The 53-page budget summary released this past week is light on details, but proposes eliminating the [21st Century Community Learning Centers](https://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html) program, which serves 20,000 children in Indiana and 1.6 million children nationwide in before- and after-school programs.

It's part of a bigger push to cut federal education spending by \$9 billion, or 13.5 percent, in 2018. At the same time, funding for charter school and voucher programs would grow by \$1.4 billion nationwide.

While supporters say the shift in spending would give poor children access to better schools, critics of the cuts think it would do more harm to struggling public schools.

Rick Whitten, executive director of the [Boys & Girls Clubs of Indianapolis](http://bgcindy.org/), is among those preparing for a fight, drafting a letter of concern this week with his board to be sent to U.S. legislators.

Our Children: [Carmel teen honored for her work with the poor](/story/life/2017/03/23/carmel-teen-opens-pop-up-store-poor-indy/99497306/)

Our Children: [Indy police armed with food fight crime, build trust](/story/news/2017/03/19/indy-police-armed-food-fight-crime-build-trust/99209366/)

More: [Faith & Action: 'This is life and death work we're doing'](/story/life/2017/03/19/faith-action-life-and-death-work-were-doing/99183488/)

"We need to take action to connect with federal legislators to let them know how important the funding for this program is," he said.

The \$20 million in cuts statewide, which would eliminate programs for low-income students offered through the Boys & Girls Clubs, the YMCA, school corporations, parks departments and community centers, suggest that "poorer folks are being devalued," Whitten said.

For thousands of children in Central Indiana, the 21st Century funding means a safe place to go after school, where they get tutoring, mentoring, health and fitness education and a meal — things they might not get regularly at home. The goal is to improve academic outcomes in the short and long term. And while opponents say there's no proof such programs work, a 2013-14 [Indiana University study](http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/21stcclc/in21st-cclc-statewide-results-idoefinal-draf.pdf) says otherwise.

The study looked at after-school programs serving 23,298 (K-12) students in Indiana and found that students from disadvantaged households who attend after-school programs 60 days or more a year achieve higher grades and have higher pass rates for ISTEP+.

Among teachers of Indiana students participating in after-school programs (who needed to improve in the classroom), 74 percent reported that students improved their academic performance, and 66 percent reported an improvement in completing homework.

No Child Left Behind

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants grew out of the Republican-led [No Child Left Behind Act](http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html), signed by President George W. Bush in 2002. The major focus of No Child Left Behind was to close student achievement gaps by providing all children with a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The legislation evolved into the [Every Child Succeeds Act](http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/every-student-succeeds-act/index.html), signed by President Barack Obama in 2015.

In Indianapolis, federal grants administered by the state's Department of Education pay for many after-school and summer programs, including those offered by the Boys & Girls Clubs, several township school districts, [Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center](http://www.maryrigg.org/), [John Boner Community Center](http://jhbcc.org/) and, starting in June, the [Martin Luther King Community Center](http://mlkcenterindy.org/).

The MLK Center, 40 W. 40th St., recently received a four-year renewable 21st Century grant worth \$150,000 per year, allowing it to double the capacity of its program in June to 60 students from 30 and hire eight staff members.

Without the grant, Allison Luthe, executive director of the center, said half of those kids will not be able to participate, and the center will lose the program location it has at nearby IPS School 43, along with direct access to teachers.

U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly's staff told Luthe this week that Congress holds the purse strings, and legislators need to hear from program advocates.

'These kids deserve a quality program'

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Whitten's organization relies on the grants, valued at \$695,000 this year, to operate its six school-based sites. Three additional sites are scheduled to be added this summer.

Inside the Martin Luther King Center

"Without that funding, we would be forced to close those programs," Whitten said. "That means that about 1,000 youth would not have an out-of-school-time program to attend during the school year. That's really sad."

The programs operate in areas of the city that are the most economically challenged, he said.

"If you look at the programs being cut, it's the most disadvantaged populations who will be hurt. These kids deserve a quality program, and families deserve to know their child has a safe and welcoming place to go after school."

The economic impact alone is far-reaching, Whitten said. Low-cost after-school and summer programs enable parents to work without worrying if their child is safe. "And if we can increase a child's performance in school and help them to graduate, they're going to perform better as an adult."

Focused on education

Arien Jackson counts on one such program to help her 15-year-old daughter Samaria stay focused. Samaria attends the after-school HUB program at Washington High School, operated and staffed by [Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center](http://www.maryrigg.org/) on the west side.

It targets middle school and older students to keep them engaged in their education, offering homework help, a computer lab, a money-management club and volunteer opportunities, the kinds of things some kids might take for granted.

For Jackson, a single mother who lost her retail job in January, the free program four afternoons a week offers peace of mind.

"I know there are a lot of women and some men in the same situation I am; they don't have the funds to put their kids in the Y or summer camps."

But families have to do their part to keep kids away from trouble, she said.

"Parents need to play a bigger role, be more consistent, more grounded, vs. trying to be their child's friend."

Samaria knows she is expected to work hard and be respectful in school, her mom said, but HUB reinforces that message and "fills in the gaps."

"It's not so much that the program is doing the job for us," she said. "We're working together."

The [Indiana Afterschool Network](http://www.indianaafterschool.org/), a nonprofit that advocates for after-school and summer learning programs, is urging its membership to contact their U.S. representatives to voice their protest. The network planned to hold a statewide call Friday to discuss a more focused response to the proposal.

Lamont Hulse, director of regional engagement for the Indiana Afterschool Network, said the cuts would hurt 20,000 kids in the state. "We absolutely need to enlist full support by Congress to preserve this essential support for Hoosier kids and families."

Rep. Andre Carson, a Democrat who represents Indiana's 7th District, which includes much of Indianapolis, said the proposal to eliminate the program is "short-sighted, counterproductive and will hurt Hoosiers. Too many children in Marion County encounter guns, drugs and gang activity every day."

By preserving funding, "thousands of students and families across Indiana will continue to benefit from quality after-school and summer learning programs that keep kids safe, inspire them to learn and help working families," Carson said.

While conservatives may support the idea of downsizing the Department of Education, lawmakers are sure to hear an earful from their constituents who want to preserve funding.

Republican Rep. Susan Brooks, who represents Indiana's 5th District, had no comment on the proposed cuts to the program. A spokeswoman said Brooks was busy with pending health care legislation.

IndyStar also contacted the office of U.S. Rep. Todd Rokita, who represents Indiana's 4th District, but did not receive a response.

A memo from budget director Mick Mulvaney instructed Cabinet heads and agency officials not to elaborate on the proposed budget.

Kimberly Coveney, director of development at Mary Rigg, said programs like the HUB at Washington are vital for the students they are trying to keep engaged in their education.

"A cut in that kind of program could have an impact on the neighborhood that would affect a lot of families and the community at large," she said. "If we aren't willing to invest in these programs, it's hypocritical to complain that students aren't engaged."

MLK Center director Luthe remains hopeful that the 21st Century grants will survive the chopping block.

"I have my fingers crossed that they will do the right thing. It's an evidence-based program that is achieving results."

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