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Trump budget casualty: Afterschool programs for 1.6 million kids. Most are poor.

By [Emma Brown](#) March 16 at 5:01 PM

Every weekday, 700 children from some of the poorest parts of the Atlanta area stay after school for three hours with Wings for Kids, a program that aims to bolster not only academic performance but also social skills, relationships with caring adults and a sense of belonging at school.

The kids get a safe and enriching place to spend the afternoon and early evening, and their working parents get child care. But now Wings for Kids and thousands of programs like it are on the chopping block, threatened by President Trump's proposal to eliminate \$1.2 billion in grants for afterschool and summer programs.

"It's heart-wrenching," said Bridget Laird, chief executive of Wings for Kids, which serves 1,600 children in Atlanta, Charlotte, Charleston and rural Lake City, S.C. She said Thursday those programs would be eliminated or gutted without federal aid. "I can't imagine if that were turned off, all of those kids running around the streets."

The program Trump is seeking to ax — known as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers — helps school districts, churches and nonprofits serve more than 1.6 million children nationwide. The administration argues that there's no evidence the program has been effective. But Heather Weiss — who has studied afterschool programs for nearly 20 years — said that's not true.

"There is a lot of evidence," she said. "Engaging kids in high-quality afterschool and programs, many of which are supported by 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, results in kids doing better in school. They're more likely to graduate and to excel in the labor market."

The proposal is one cut among many in a budget that would slash federal education spending by \$9 billion in 2018, or 13.5 percent. Trump aims to eliminate billions for teacher training and scale back or end several programs that help low-income students prepare and pay for college.

At the same time, Trump is seeking to shift a historic amount of money — \$1.4 billion — into charter schools, private-school vouchers and Title I "portability," a controversial form of choice that would allow \$1 billion in federal funds to follow poor children to the public school of their choice. Advocates hope it would give poor children access to better schools and critics fear it would dilute funds available to the nation's neediest schools.

“The budget places power in the hands of parents and families to choose schools that are best for their children,” Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said in a statement. It is “the first step in investing in education programs that work.”

Some conservatives hailed the budget as a sign that Trump intends to make good on his campaign pledge to downsize the Education Department.

“I see this as a good step toward limiting federal intervention in education and restoring state and local control,” said Lindsey Burke of the Heritage Foundation. “It’s not appropriate for the federal government to be funding and managing afterschool programs.”

But the budget proposal drew condemnation from many in the education world, including teachers’ unions, superintendents, school boards and representatives of state education chiefs and urban school systems.

John King Jr., who was education secretary under President Barack Obama, said the proposal would “move our country backward,” disproportionately harming the poor and children of color. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said it would “take a meat cleaver to public education.”

Even some advocates for charter schools — which would get a 50 percent funding increase — rejected the blueprint: “Charter schools are part of—not a substitute for—a strong public education system,” Greg Richmond, president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, said in a statement. “Charter schools cannot succeed without strong teachers and a seamless, affordable path to college for their graduates.”

Adding to the unease is the fact that more reductions are yet to be identified. Those disclosed in the two-page budget summary do not add up to the \$9 billion total the administration proposed.

“There are a bunch of cuts we don’t know about,” said Chris Minnich, executive director of the Council of State School Officers.

Minnich said state education chiefs are “deeply concerned” that the budget prioritizes school-choice experiments over existing programs that serve all students. Among the chiefs’ top priorities is saving the money for teacher training.

The administration proposed eliminating the \$2.4 billion program, arguing that it is “poorly targeted and spread thinly across thousands of districts with scant evidence of impact.”

“There’s obviously ways we can improve the ways we can spend that money, but it doesn’t mean we cut the money,” said Minnich. “We should be talking about using that money to make sure every kid has a great teacher.”

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of 68 urban school systems, said his members rely on the fund mostly to reduce class size, which is allowed under current rules.

Casserly estimated schools in his coalition, including those in the District, receive about \$600 million from the program, which pays the salaries of thousands of teachers.

Several observers said it's too soon to predict how Trump's proposal will play in Congress. Despite the Republican zeal for shrinking the Education Department, lawmakers are likely to face pressure to preserve funding for their constituents.

Trump's push for choice is also likely to face political headwinds: Democrats almost uniformly oppose vouchers. So do some Republicans. And the president's proposal to allow \$1 billion in federal funds to follow poor children to the public schools of their choice — while thin on details — sounds a lot like a proposal that failed to pass the GOP-led Senate in 2015.

“It's unclear to me that the politics of that has changed just in the last year and a half,” Casserly said.