

Freehold Borough's education program in limbo over Trump budget cuts

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(Photo: STEPH SOLIS/ASBURY PARK PRESS)

FREEHOLD BOROUGH — Melanie Guzman's eyes followed the blue gadget as she maneuvered it with two batons and a string. She tossed it, watching the pair of dome-shaped discs and axle spin in the air before landing in front of her.

Between language arts and math enrichment classes, Guzman spent her day practicing Chinese yo-yo, a performing art that is popular in Asia and Europe, which you can see in the video above.

"It was definitely a fun and new experience," said Guzman, a rising eighth-grader at Freehold Intermediate School. "I got to hang out with my friends. Not only that, but I got to learn new tricks I didn't think I would ever be doing."

The courses offered at Freehold Borough's 21st Century Community Learning Center program range from dance to computer classes to Chinese yo-yo — and, as of this fall, Mandarin. But the federal program, designed to close the achievement gaps in low-income, struggling school districts faces an uncertain future as Congress mulls over education cuts in budget talks.

"Whenever you see that it (the program) could be in jeopardy, it makes you anxious," said Ronnie Dougherty, principal at Freehold Intermediate School. "It makes you sad that somewhere people are not realizing the impact this has on students."

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Freehold Borough Schools was one of the first districts in New Jersey to join the 21st Century program 12 years ago, Dougherty said. Now it's one of three in Monmouth County and 56 in the state. Freehold Borough's program hosted more than 300 students after school, and that excludes the dozens more who joined this summer for Chinese yo-yo lessons, academic enrichment and field trips.

Chinese yo-yo and lion dances are classes offered through a partnership with the Fidelity Chinese School in Marlboro. Volunteers say it gives students from the predominantly Hispanic school district a chance to explore Asian culture — a rare opportunity for the severely underfunded school district where most students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

On the chopping block

Earlier this year, the Trump administration recommended eliminating the 21st Century learning program, which serves more than 1.6 million children in poor, low-performing school districts. They argued the \$1.2 billion program wasn't effective, though school officials and education advocates argue otherwise.

"We were alarmed because the 21st Century program, as proposed by the Trump administration, was specifically cited as a program that doesn't work," said Superintendent Rocco Tomazic, whose district receives \$500,000 for its local program. "Obviously, when all of these things are up on the chopping block, it's very unnerving."

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There's a chance the program may not get axed in the next fiscal year. The budget bill approved by the House Appropriations Committee recently recommended cutting roughly \$200 million (<https://appropriations.house.gov/uploadedfiles/23920.pdf>) from the 21st Century program, rather than totally eliminating it.

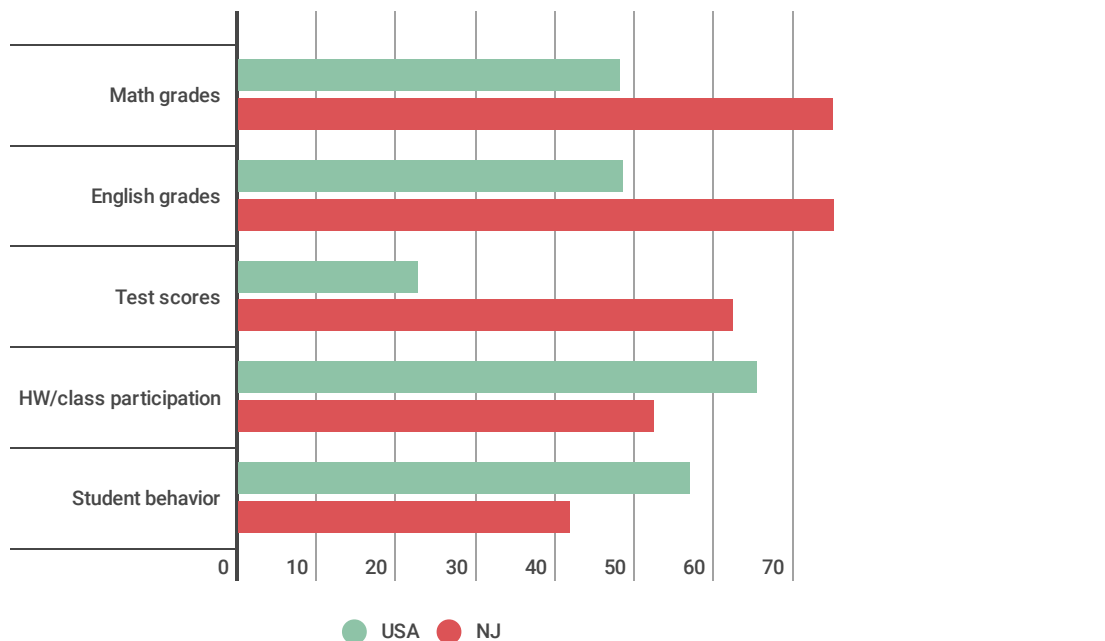
Catherine Brown, a policy analyst at the left-leaning nonprofit Center for American Progress, said even that amount of cuts would affect 200,000 children nationwide involved in the program, including 4,200 in New Jersey.

"It (the program) provides vital enrichment services for students and vital support for working families," Brown said. "It would be a real travesty if the program got slashed."

A federal evaluation report for 2014-15 shows NJ students involved in the program improved in math, English, standardized test scores and behavior, exceeding those across the country.

What impact does the 21st Century Community Learning Center program have on students?

A 2014-15 evaluation report by the U.S. Department of Education looks at the percentage of students who showed improvements after taking part in the program.



*The federal program exists in 50 states, D.C., and three territories, but the data does not reflect all assessments: 18 states/territories did not report data on math grades, 17 states/territories did not report

Freehold Borough did not have the same data available, but a district report evaluating the program in the 2015-16 school year notes that most students show "modest academic improvement." The report also noted students showed improvements in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) activities, social development and leadership skills.

Emily Martinez, a rising eighth grader, says she explored various sports through the program's fitness class. Martinez now runs on the track team and, after learning about Chinese yo-yo, ordered a kit on Amazon.

Most of all, she said, the program gave her a chance to spend time with friends who are bullied during the school day.

"It's important to have friends and bond with kids who may not even have friends or who may not feel safe," said Martinez, 13.

Students involved in the program sign up for classes in language arts, dance and computer programming — courses rarely offered in a low-income district that's 50 teachers short and overcrowded.

A common refrain for school officials who lobbied for more state aid, based on the school funding formula, is that its students lack the resources that their peers in neighboring towns get and end up far behind when they reach the regional high school district.

In the meantime, Dougherty said, the 21st Century program has helped close that gap

"They're not sitting in an empty house while their parents are working. They're not roaming the town," Dougherty said. "They're fully engaged in a safe environment, and they're being enriched."

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Students from the Chinese Fidelity School in Marlboro taught Chinese yo-yo as part of the Freehold Borough Schools' 21st century learning program. (Photo: STEPH SOLIS/ASBURY PARK PRESS)

The latest partnership involved classes on web design, data analysis and video production taught by students from the Fidelity Chinese School. But some Freehold Borough students say they learned most from cultural activities such as the Chinese yo-yo and lion dances.

"My father's from Mexico and my mother's from Bolivia, so I've learned different things," said Guzman, who expressed an interest in Asian cultures. Her first introduction was manga, a style of Japanese graphic novels. "I want to be diverse and learn other people's cultures so I have a better understanding of them."

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