

Jackson-area educators and parents worry about possible loss of funding for Head Start programs

Published: Wednesday, March 16, 2011, 5:30 AM

By **Tarryl Jackson** | Jackson Citizen Patriot

Jackson resident Jenny Scott wanted to make sure all six of her children got an early start on their education.

Her oldest daughter, 9-year-old Ashley, is a straight-A student at Townsend Elementary School. Her youngest, 4-year-old Ariel, is becoming a fast learner who loves to read.

Scott credits her children's success to Head Start, a federally funded child-development program that serves primarily low-income children ages 3 to 5. Head Start helps those children get a jump on the basics before kindergarten.



Nick Dentamaro | Jackson Citizen Patriot Sylvia Warfield shares a moment with Ariel Scott, right, Tuesday in a Head Start classroom at Lincoln Elementary School.

Hearing that the program's funding was on the federal chopping block was not good news to Scott.

"Not giving (children) that extra education would be a sad situation," said Scott, 29.

As Democrats and Republicans debate how to pare the government's \$14 trillion debt, the future of Head Start hangs in the balance.

House Republicans recently proposed trimming \$1 billion from the federal program's budget. Its current funding is \$7.2 billion.

Community Action Agency administers the Head Start and Early Head Start programs for 866 children in Jackson and Hillsdale counties, receiving about \$7 million for the programs.

Mary Cunningham-DeLuca, the agency's director of children's services, said she does not know how big the cuts would be at the local level.

"The biggest challenge is that we don't know anything," she said. "We're just forging forward."

Children who complete Head Start are prepared for kindergarten, excited about learning and confident about their abilities, officials say.

Currently there are 300 children on the waiting list for Head Start and 125 children on the list for Early Head Start, which is designed for pregnant mothers and eligible families who have children 3 and younger.

The Head Start program was created in 1965 and provides education, health, nutrition and parent-involvement services.

The local Head Start program, which began at Lincoln School, 154 W. Clark St., in 1985, is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Head Start has about 17 local sites.

Cunningham-DeLuca said Head Start is a safeguard for many low-income families in the area.

"We make good use of taxpayers' dollars," she said. "We don't take anything for granted."

U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, said when groups ask him why their budgets were picked to be cut, he asks them, "What would you cut?"

"We are looking across the board at all areas of the budget," Walberg said.

He added that the cut to Head Start was just one piece of the Republicans' proposal, and the program was not singled out for a separate vote.

"It was just one of those things," he said.

Carol Kostrzewa teaches a Head Start classroom with fellow teacher Mildred Smith at Lincoln School. Kostrzewa said a cut to the program would be heartbreaking.

"(Head Start) is such an amazing thing," Kostrzewa said. "(The children) love school. It's a great foundation for their future."

— *Staff Writer Chris Gautz contributed to this report.*

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