

Head Start could get left behind

By: Evan Goodenow - October 8th, 2012

Working lunches are a daily job for Maria “Terri” Arriaga.

“What’s that white stuff on the pizza?” Arriaga, a longtime Head Start teacher, asked students during a class last month. “Where does the cheese come from?”

“From Walmart?” answered 4-year-old Yeidiel Rolon.

An amused Arriaga explained how cheese comes from milk that comes from a cow’s udder. She quickly moved on to the children’s fruit dish, asking them where pineapples come from.

Arriaga tries to make learning fun for her students, many of whom are poor and speak limited English. Arriaga said she usually has 17 students in the morning class and 17 in the afternoon. The federal program, run locally by the Lorain County Community Action Agency, provides education and meals to poor children from birth to age 5, as well as health and nutritional education to pregnant women and young mothers.

LCCAA serves 1,027 children throughout the county, according to Shauna Matelski, the agency’s Head Start director. That includes 40 in the Early Head Start program, which assists pregnant women and young mothers and their babies. The overall program has had a waiting list since 2009.

The rise of poverty in America since the Great Recession and an increased educational focus on early learning has increased demand for Head Start, but money for programs like the one in Lorain County may decrease next year due to \$109 billion in automatic federal budget cuts slated for January.

Matelski said she would try to do everything possible not to cut the number of children served, but it would be difficult.

“We’re concerned for our children and families,” she said.

The cuts are part of a 10-year, \$1.2 trillion deficit reduction plan agreed to last year by President Barack Obama with congressional Republicans who were threatening not to raise the debt ceiling, triggering a government shutdown. The cuts, congressional leaders

say, are necessary to reduce the deficit and national debt, now at about \$1.17 trillion and \$16 trillion, respectively.

Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans are working on a compromise plan to avoid the cuts, the New York Times reported last week. Negotiations would take place after the November election.

If a compromise can't be reached, Barbara Haxton, Ohio Head Start Association executive director, said the cuts would be "devastating" to Head Start children and their families. She noted that even without the cuts, only about half of the approximately 50,000 preschool-aged children in Ohio and only about half of the preschool-aged children around the nation attend Head Start.

"We should be doing much better than that," Haxton said. "They aren't getting the comprehensive services that are offered in Head Start."

Head Start began in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." It has served some 30 million children, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the program. Roughly 1.11 million children and pregnant women nationally were served in the 2009-10 fiscal year, according to the National Head Start Association.

Head Start proponents say it helps poor children succeed despite the corrosive effects of poverty they experience, but critics question its effectiveness. Citing a 2010 department report that found little positive effect for Head Start children past the first grade, Neal McCluskey, associate director for the libertarian Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, testified to Congress on July 25 in favor of the cuts.

McCluskey, whose group contends it's unconstitutional for the federal government to administer or pay for education programs, said Head Start's positive effects were "essentially nonexistent" and it has "long suffered from serious waste and abuse."

Haxton said most Head Start children in Ohio pass school readiness tests when they enter kindergarten and the program can't be blamed if they don't perform well in first or second grade. She said Head Start needs to partner more closely with local schools to ensure students retain what they learn in the program.

Regarding waste and abuse allegations, Haxton said the corruption involving Anna Taylor-Carter, a former Lorain County Community Action Agency president, was "regrettable." In 2004, Taylor-Carter was convicted of theft in office, theft, falsification and tampering with evidence. She was sentenced to three years of probation.

Haxton said abuse happens in any large, publicly funded program but rarely in Head Start.

"There are Head Start programs in Ohio that are so squeaky clean you can see your face in their reflection," she said. "It's not pervasive and it's not a fair assessment of how Head Start programs are operated."

LCCAA leaders say the Head Start program has been cleaned up. Anonymous complaints of inflated enrollment made in December were found to be unsubstantiated by the Ohio Development Services Agency, formerly known as the Ohio Department of Development.

Matelski said Head Start staff work closely with the parents of students to improve their children's education. Arriaga, who has worked for Head Start since 1996, said she occasionally works with parents who were her students.

Arriaga said the program got a boost when it added a dual language component last year. She said her ability to speak Spanish helps her connect with students like Yeidiel, who is Peruvian and Puerto Rican.

His first language is Spanish, but he is becoming proficient in English. While most students enter the program speaking some English, Arriaga said some students, like 4-year-old Pablo Rodriguez, speak no English.

"You'll get it buddy. You'll get it yet," she told Pablo during a painting exercise to help children learn about colors and fruits and how to say them in English. "You're going to learn some English."

Arriaga, a Mexican American, has taught children from the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Peru.

"When we all start talking, there are so many different dialects of Spanish that it gets crazy sometimes," she said.

Arriaga said children are more computer savvy, outspoken and world-wise than when she began as a teacher. She said some children come to school hungry. Some are the children of illegal immigrants, which makes their parents reluctant to seek help for their children if they have learning problems because of fear of deportation.

Arriaga said she gets frustrated with the paperwork that comes with the job but doesn't let it distract her from teaching. She said she finds it especially rewarding when children tell her they love her or miss her, or when parents ask her to teach their children.

"When they tell me I'm a good teacher, I love it and it makes me feel good," she said. "There's no money in teaching so you've got to love children and I love kids."

If congressional Democrats and Republicans don't cut a deal, \$109 billion in automatic, across-the-board spending cuts begin in January, including \$287 million less for the Head Start program. Thousands of poor children in Ohio would lose eligibility and hundreds of Head Start workers would be laid off.

By the numbers — Head Start cuts

In Ohio

\$22.4 million less
3,608 fewer children served
752 fewer workers
In Lorain County

\$557,000 less
86 fewer children (including 4 in Early Head Start)
17 fewer workers