



Philly's Head Start programs would be among casualties of going over fiscal cliff

By Holly Otterbein - October 24, 2012

Bonnie Li says that before her four-year-old daughter, Pearl, started preschool, she was "lost."

"She was very scared, very shy. Like, even when she see a stranger, she would just cry," says Li. "But nowadays, she become like very friendly."

Li says the school, Children's Village in Chinatown, also helped improve her daughter's verbal skills.

Pearl's tuition is covered by Head Start, the preschool program for low-income children. For now, at least.

During last year's debt-ceiling showdown, Congress and the president agreed to make a deal to reduce the deficit, or else. Now, the federal government will face huge, automatic budget cuts in less than three months if Congress fails to act. This situation is known as the "fiscal cliff."

Automatic, across-the-board cuts looming

Philadelphia officials say that local Head Start programs would lose more than \$3 million under that scenario. A school administrator told Li about the potential cuts.

"That means Pearl would have to go home," she says. "I would guarantee you that most of the time that she spent at home would either be watching TV or be on the computer."

Hundreds of children potentially affected

Terry Gillen, Philadelphia's director of federal affairs, says that if the cuts happen, approximately 400 out of 6,000-plus kids in the city would be cut from Head Start.

She says that would be "pretty bad for Philadelphia, where we have such an education problem."

Supporters of Head Start say it reduces dropout rates and boosts educational performance.

Critics, however, point to a federal study that says the benefits of Head Start largely disappear by first grade. Neal McCluskey, associate director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, argues that Head Start should therefore be phased out.

"It has no demonstrated track record of success, of giving kids lasting benefits," he says.

Gillen says local defense jobs could also be on the block. The Community Services Block Grant and the Foreclosure Prevention programs would potentially face cuts, too.

"Possibly, those are 80 people that will not be able to keep their homes as a result of being in foreclosure or bankruptcy," she says.

Ultimately, Gillen thinks the dramatic cuts probably won't come to pass.

Mayor Michael Nutter is lobbying for Congress to strike a deal that incorporates both cuts and new revenues.