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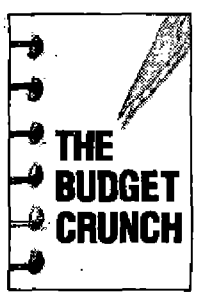
Cuts Dull After-School Plans

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By Nick Chiles
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Budget cuts have ravaged after-school programs across the city, including those intended to help raise student reading scores.

Programs have been eliminated or severely curtailed in many districts, another victim of the budget slashing that Schools Chancellor Harold Levy has imposed to make up a $400 million budget shortfall.



"We couldn't cut teachers, guidance counselors, paras [paraprofessionals] — there's not much left except for after-school programs, materials and supplies," said Angelo Gimondo, superintendent of School District 30 in Jackson Heights.

Gimondo, who has cut more than $5 million since August, had to eliminate the after-school portion of Project Read, a program to help children in the early grades who are having difficulty learning how to read. He said he will have to find other ways to assist teachers so that the cut won't affect the district's performance on the standardized reading tests.

Districts clip sports, reading programs

Deputy Chancellor Anthony Shorris said the districts had flexibility to implement the cuts the way they saw fit.

"That makes sense to us because the needs of the districts differ and their approaches differ," Shorris said. "None had an easy time with it. They all understand our shared underlying objective is trying to help kids meet the [state learning] standards. They have to make the best judgment they can to take the money out and do minimal harm."

After-school sports programs have been particularly hard hit across the city, especially in the middle schools. Middle schools have become a systemwide concern because of flagging student performance. Advocates and educators say the sports cut is unfortunate because it is in the middle school years when sports can keep many students engaged and interested in school.

"These programs have a real impact on kids," said Anita Malter, executive assistant to the superintendent of District 21 in southern Brooklyn, which saved about $75,000 by cutting sports from the middle schools. "Those programs created an atmosphere conducive to learning, a positive alternative to being on the streets, a reason to come to school. We've gotten calls from parents who are very upset."

Noreen Connell, executive director of the Educational Priorities Panel, said there's a reason that prestigious private schools and good suburban schools place such an emphasis on sports in the pre-adolescent years.

"When you go to these schools, what are they doing all day? Playing sports," Connell said. "Why? Because it's part of a strategy for learning, to start developing leadership and self-confidence."

Connell, whose group closely follows budgetary issues, questioned whether the cuts had to fall so heavily on services to students. She said Levy pursued a strategy of having the cuts immediately impact students to prevent Mayor Rudolph Giuliani from cutting further.

"Because the cuts were immediately apparent and unpopular, they did stop the mayor from cutting further," she said. "It's sort of sad."

But Shorris said that with more than $400 million in cuts to make, the chancellor couldn't avoid impacting services to students — particularly after he had already cut $100 million from central administration during the summer.

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