

EDUCATION WEEK

How the Shutdown Is Starting to Impact Schools

By Denisa R. Superville on January 13, 2019 3:00 PM

More than three weeks into what's now the longest federal government shutdown in history, school district officials are making plans to cope with the impacts on students, families, and their own operations should it drag on.

The current closure is different from earlier shutdowns because the agencies from which school districts receive critical federal dollars—chiefly the department of education—are funded during the partial shutdown.

But there is still a lot at stake for school districts if the shutdown persists for months—as President Trump had threatened during a meeting with Democratic congressional leaders earlier this month.

The biggest concern right now is the National School Lunch Program, which is administered through the Department of Agriculture and served more than 30 million children in 2016. The USDA said that it has enough money for reimbursements for the program, which provides free-and-reduced-price lunches to low-income children, through March.

What does this mean for school districts?

It doesn't necessarily mean that children who rely on the food program will go hungry, said Noelle Ellerson Ng, the associate executive director for policy and advocacy at the AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

"No superintendent is going to deny a child lunch," Ellerson Ng said. "What it means is that the superintendent is going to find money elsewhere, which means something else gets cut: Maybe money for an afterschool program, maybe money for a summer program."

Districts may also have to dip into rainy day or emergency funds to come up with the money if the shutdown goes beyond March, said Jeff Simering, the director of legislative services at the Council of the Great City Schools, the Washington-based organization that represents 74 of the nation's largest school districts.

Seventy percent of the 7.3 million students enrolled in the districts that are part of the council are eligible for the federal free-and-reduced-price lunch program.

Still, Simering said, "I don't think they are thinking, at least at this point, they are going to be put into that situation."

Even with the uncertainty on the horizon, state and district officials were taking steps in recent days to ensure that parents affected by the shutdown know that they can apply for the federal free-and-reduced-lunch program if they have fallen on hard times.

The Alexandria City school district in Virginia, which is just outside of Washington, sent notices to parents to encourage them to sign up for the program if they were impacted by the shutdown, including if they had been previously denied such benefits.

Across Maine, school districts are doing the same.

"It's a whole new ground, which we don't want to be on," said Walter Beesley, the child nutrition director at the Maine Education Department, which circulated an application for impacted parents last week. The state advisory was sent out after several calls from districts asking for guidance on how to assist parents impacted by the shutdown.

"This is the best thing to do for the kids," Beesley said. "We have to put the kids first."

While Maine does not have as large a federal workforce as Washington or other areas of the country with military installations and bases, it has hundreds of federal employees who work for the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, the United States Coast Guard, in the national parks, and as border patrol agents, Beesley said.

The department produced the guidance with not just federal employees in mind, he said. When federal workers don't have money to spend locally that affects local businesses, including other parents who may work in restaurants or in service-oriented jobs, Beesley said.

"It's a ripple effect, so the kids are being affected all the way through," Beesley.

Helping Students and Families Cope With Financial and Emotional Stress

As nearly 800,000 federal workers missed a paycheck last week, the worry in some districts is less about the federal grants that may be at stake and more about helping students whose parents' finances have taken or will take a hit.

"Our biggest concern is the financial and emotional impact to kids and families," said Brian Woods, the superintendent of Northside Independent School District, the largest district in the San Antonio area. "That's where we are better able to assist."

The city is home to several military installations, including Fort Sam Houston, Randolph Air Force Base, and Lackland Air Force Base, and about 7,000 military-connected students are enrolled in Northside ISD.

While the district has information on students whose parents are in the military, it's harder to ascertain how many students have parents and guardians who work as government contractors and are also not getting paid during the shutdown, Woods said.

Woods said principals, social workers, and teachers will be actively involved in trying to find those students and families who need both financial and emotional assistance.

The district will shift some of its resources—such as clothing closets and food pantries—to schools where large numbers of affected students are enrolled, he said.

"That takes folks paying attention to kids' needs and changes in the family dynamic and reaching out and saying to the parents 'How can we help? And these are the things we can offer to assist,' " Woods said. "It is going to take a collective effort to look for where the need really is."

Woods thinks the district is in a position to weather some cuts in federal funding this school year should that come to pass.

"Even if we had a loss of funding in some areas, we would be able to shift local dollars to support it—at least in the short term," he said.

Of course, he said, his answer could change if the stalemate continues for three or four months.

In Bibb County, Ga., Superintendent Curtis Jones has a similar worry about how the shutdown's impact will filter down to children. He is worried that students may pick up on their parents' anxieties and then take those stresses to school.

Warner Robins Air Force Base is about 20 miles from Macon, where the district's headquarters are located. About 15 percent of the district's students' families work in the agriculture sector, including in dairy production and cattle farming. Those families' livelihoods have already been impacted. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that farmers were not receiving federal payments meant to blunt the effects of tariffs the administration placed on China, and some farmers may have been unable to apply for loans because local farm service centers, which also function as lenders of last resort and help farmers apply for federal aid, were closed.

Children pick up on such uncertainty, especially when routines change, Jones said.

"It just spreads through the family, and students recognize it and are able to feel what's happening," he added. "They know things aren't normal."

"We have counselors, we have behavior specialists," he said, "and we will make those available not only to the students, but we will also start looking at the impact on the families."

The district will also work to ensure that families know how to access resources from local foodbanks and other social service organizations, he said. Jones said the district may even have to think about how it applies its discipline policy if it's determined that student behavior can be traced back to what's happening at home as a result of the shutdown.

Districts Keep Close Watch on Shutdown

Despite the uncertainties, the superintendents and district officials interviewed by Education Week late last week described their level of concern about the shutdown's direct hit to their operations as low to moderate.

That's not surprising given that the large federal grants districts rely on—such as Title 1, which goes to schools serving large numbers of students in poverty, IDEA for special education, and Head Start—are housed in federal agencies that are currently funded.

"Folks in the past didn't know when they would be able to get their most sizeable grants and that was a concern, especially if they were going to have to front the money if the shutdown lasted a sizeable period of time," said Simering.

"I think it just hasn't reached a critical level for any of the programs that they are operating at this point," Simering said.

In Onslow County, N.C., which sustained an estimated \$125 million in damages from Hurricane Florence, officials are cautiously watching to see how this will play out.

Nearly 35 percent of the district's enrollment is connected to the military, and about 49 percent of students are eligible for free-and-reduce meals, though the district has been offering free breakfast to all students since last year's hurricane.

The district also received about \$14.2 million in federal grants last school year. And it's unclear whether a protracted shutdown will affect its applications for reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, for storm damages. So far, no scheduled meetings had been cancelled or postponed, a district spokesman said.

"While we have not had any immediate impact, if the shutdown were to persist, we certainly could be impacted" said Brent Anderson, the spokesman. "District staff are closely following the situation, keeping a close eye on how things are progressing and any looking for any potential impacts for the district."

In Great Falls, Mt., Superintendent Tammy Lacey is worried about how a prolonged shutdown could affect the funds the district receives for its Indian Education Program and through Impact Aid, which provides funds to districts to compensate for the loss of property taxes because of federal activities like military bases. (The district received \$310,000 for the Indian Education Program and \$841,000 in Impact Aid funds last year.)

The district will be able to move money around in its budget to get through this school year if any federal funds are in jeopardy, she said. But it will make it more difficult for the district to close its financial books at the end of the year and apply for future grants, she said.

"The uncertainty is causing us to wonder what those year-end processes are going to look like," she said, "what the application processes are going to look like for next year, and if there would be the potential for us to discontinue or suspend some of the programs that we utilized federal funding for."

In Maryland, a Break for Furloughed Parents

Bob Sickels, who owns Kids After Hours, a before- and after-school program in 26 locations in Montgomery County, Md., is doing his part to help parents who are not receiving a paycheck during the shutdown.

Federal employees will be able to keep their children enrolled in the program and pay the tuition once they start receiving a salary.

"It was a wonderfully caring and humane thing to do," said Stacy Rabkin, who works at the Environmental Protection Agency and whose 6-year-old daughter is enrolled in Kids After Hours.

Rabkin, a single mom, is not receiving a paycheck, but her bills are still coming in: mortgage, homeowners' association dues, and electricity.

Kids After Hours, which costs about \$500 a month on average for parents who use it five days a week, is Rabkin's single largest monthly expense after her mortgage.

She's been cutting expenses wherever she can and volunteering at her daughter's school.

Sickel's offer relieves some of the anxiety she was feeling about dipping into her savings, and it will allow her to put that \$500 towards other expenses.

"None of us federal employees wants to be used as a pawn, and none of us wants to have financial challenges," she said. "It was a truly kind thing to do. It shows that he cares for the kids and the parents, which is very nice."

Sickels took the step—something he had done during a previous shutdown—after hearing from some parents that they may have a difficult time making the tuition payments.

"We see our kids every day for six years, from the time they are in kindergarten through 5th grade," Sickels said. "We are a huge part of their lives, and they are a huge part of our lives for six straight years while their kids are in elementary school. So, you can't not help. You just have to."

The program's expense can be prohibitive for families where both parents work for the federal government and may have more than one child in the program.

"We are able to make that offer," Sickels said. "Their mortgage company, their cell phone company, the electric company is not going to do that for them. But we can at least try and make life a little easier."

About 3,500 children use the program—2,000 of whom use it every day—and as of Thursday about 130 parents had indicated that they intended to take advantage of Sickels' offer, he said.

The temporary tuition waiver could cost Sickel about \$100,000 a month, he said, but he thinks the company can absorb the cost of the waiver for about two to three months.

After that, he's not sure.

"I've got to be honest, I think more with my heart than with my head; so, I didn't actually sit there and do the math to say we can do this for three months or four months or six months," Sickels said. "I thought that at some point in time, someone is going to have to grow a brain in the government and solve this problem... I guess I am holding my breath just like everybody else."