

Immigrants Brought Riches to Urban Schools. Now They're in the Shadows

By Erica L. Green

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BALTIMORE — Mary Donnelly, the principal of John Ruhrah Elementary/Middle School, has watched with pride for 18 years as new languages proliferated in the hallways, different countries were added to her social studies work sheets and the student population nearly quadrupled.

The influx of poor immigrant families brought a flood of resources as the school's official poverty rate rose above 90 percent: an after-school program, three interpreters and a steady infusion of federal funding.

But in recent years, as the Trump administration's immigration crackdown began to reverberate through the nation's public schools, the students who had been such a fiscal asset have turned into a budgetary liability.

Education leaders in Baltimore say White House policy proposals are prompting immigrant families to forgo services that they fear could land them on Immigration and Customs Enforcement's radar or jeopardize their path to citizenship. And because the school district here uses families' participation in government assistance programs to measure poverty rates, John Ruhrah, at least on paper, suddenly looks rich.

The southeast Baltimore school lost more than \$240,000 for the next school year after it was [dropped from a federal antipoverty program](#), called Title I, which doles out billions of dollars to the country's poorest schools. That loss is a fraction of its \$4.8 million budget for next year, but the money covered three staff positions and kept class sizes in the 30s. The Title I status also attracted teachers, who were eligible for tuition grants from the federal government for teaching poor children.

"We're angry," Ms. Donnelly said. "But we're going to make sure the kids don't suffer. Here, they count."

In this cash-short school district here, official poverty rates in at least a dozen schools serving high populations of English-language learners have plummeted in the last

four years, while the material well-being of many of those students has not really changed.

“We have families under duress, who now have to weigh the cost-benefit of being counted,” said Sonja B. Santelises, the chief executive of the Baltimore school system. “The distrust level rises now with every piece of paper, with anything official-sounding.”

Across the country, education leaders have warned that Trump administration immigration policies could send school budgets into tailspins.

[Under one proposal](#), the administration would broaden the range of public assistance programs — such as Medicaid, food stamps and housing vouchers — used to determine whether immigrants seeking to become legal residents would be “public charges” on the country. That would effectively expand the programs that some immigrants may seek to avoid as they erase themselves from government assistance. Administration officials said the change would “promote immigrant self-sufficiency and protect finite resources.”

Another [rule would evict undocumented immigrants and their families](#) — even family members in the country legally — from public housing, including 55,000 children. And the administration’s decision to ask on the 2020 census whether respondents are citizens stands to skew official poverty rates, the single most important data point for federal education funding, by depressing the response of immigrants — documented and undocumented. The Supreme Court [will rule this month on the legality of the census question](#).

Trump administration officials say these proposals will give policymakers a better sense of the country’s population while preserving scarce resources for people living here legally. But schools are in a squeeze: By [Supreme Court decree](#), they have no choice but to educate children, regardless of their immigration status.

In a [Supreme Court filing protesting the Census Bureau’s new citizenship question](#), the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation’s largest urban school districts, noted: “It would be ironic indeed, if the bureau was not required to count noncitizen children when this court has held that public school districts, including council members, are constitutionally compelled to educate those same children.”

Michael Casserly, the executive director of the council, said the cumulative effect of the administration’s immigration policies would be extensive.

“I can’t recall a time where the convergence of policy decisions has had such a broad impact on public education,” he said. “I think the folks who made these policies had no appreciation for the breadth and impact they would have on institutions that were never part of the conversation in the first place.”

Already, advocates point to “[chilling effects](#)” on immigrant families seeking services: [a sharp decline in participation](#) in the federal food stamp program among children with immigrant mothers and [immigrant families pulling out of Medicaid](#).

As a result, schools are bracing for students who show up to their doors homeless, hungry and unhealthy.

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, which represents 13,000 school superintendents, said [school systems have reported parents asking that their children be disenrolled from the school-based Medicaid programs](#) and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP.

“While school administrators try to explain to parents that their children are entitled to Medicaid or CHIP and that they will not be sharing this information with immigration enforcement agencies, school administrators have not been successful in convincing families,” the group wrote.

Educators are particularly worried about Title I, the largest K-12 antipoverty program that for 54 years has supported everything from early childhood programs to guidance counselors. The Education Department relies primarily on childhood poverty rates derived from the census to allocate the program’s annual budget of about \$16 billion.

Using the Census Bureau’s own estimate of a 5.8 percent decline in response rates among noncitizens, the Council of Great City Schools said the undercounting of students from immigrant households would result in a \$151.7 million national misallocation of Title I funds.

The Clark County School District in Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, would lose \$1.1 million a year, most of which would come from its prekindergarten programs. Miami-Dade County schools in South Florida would see a \$1.4 million cut and the loss of hundreds of staff positions. New York City, which uses its Title I funds to bolster academic support services, enrichment programs and before- and after-school programs, would lose \$10.7 million.

“We’re going to do what we need to do to serve our kids, but it’s going to be a strain on local dollars,” said Jesus F. Jara, the superintendent of the Clark County School District.

The New York City schools chancellor, [Richard A. Carranza](#), said that the loss would be “devastating” to the 87 percent of city schools that receive Title I funds.

“This goes to the heart of what we do to support our most fragile students,” he said. “Hope is not a strategy, but we’re really hoping the courts will do the right things here.”

Mr. Carranza, the grandson of Mexican immigrants, said the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown “has definitely sent a wave of fear into our communities.”

Ms. Donnelly — a 45-year veteran of the Baltimore school system, 25 as a principal — said she was looking to salvage what she could of the resources under threat. At John Ruhrah, where more than 80 percent of families identify English as a second language and more than 60 percent of students qualify for English-language services, she can’t afford not to.

Despite what the paperwork shows, the shelves of the school’s monthly food bank go empty in a day. Recently, the school’s employees took up a collection to help a family stave off eviction.

“The need is still here,” Ms. Donnelly said. “It’s just not documented.”