



**By Laura Krantz/Daily News staff**

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FRAMINGHAM - Federal budget cuts known as sequestration will close classrooms, lay off staff and shorten the school year by five weeks at the local Head Start preschool program, according to its director.

Head Start, run in MetroWest by the Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council, offers free preschool to children whose families are at or below the federal poverty line, which for a family of four is \$23,550.

The federal budget cuts this year will slice 5 percent, a little more than \$183,000, from the program's \$2.2 million budget, forcing it to eliminate 28 spots for students. Preschool will end May 16 instead of May 30, and start in the second week of October.

The cuts also will close an 18-student classroom in the Head Start Marlborough facility and eliminate 10 home-based preschool slots. Four full-time staff and one part-time staff member will be laid off. And the five fewer weeks of school will mean 50 staff members will receive five fewer weeks of pay.

Head Start Director Philip Fokas said he saw the cuts coming. He was officially notified March 1, hours before President Barack Obama signed the sequestration March 1. Fokas said this is the first time in his 15 years as director that the program's federal funding is being cut. But on the other hand, federal aid hasn't lately increased, either, even as the price of everything from health insurance to bus fuel continues to rise.

"Our programs have been really squeezed for a long time now," Fokas said.

In all, the MetroWest Head Start program, run through SMOC, served 362 children this year, 126 in Framingham and others in Ashland, Marlborough, Hudson, Milford, Medway, Grafton and Northbridge.

Following guidelines handed down from federal Head Start officials, Fokas and his team decided to cut weeks out of the program instead of reducing the types of services they offer. Those guidelines came in a memo from the federal Head Start office. It estimated 70,000 children nationwide will lose access to the program because of the cuts.

The cuts affect all Head Start, Early Head Start, American Indian and Alaska Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start grants. Fokas said Head Start has become more academic to compete with private schools.

"When Head Start programs get cut like this, there are not other options for these families, realistically," he said.

He explained that poorer families must compete with more affluent parents who send their children to academically rigorous – and more expensive – preschools.

Emily Reenstierna, 30, is an Ashland mother of three living off child support. Her 4-year-old attends Head Start preschool and also eats breakfast and lunch at the program.

"When they lessen, the only ones losing out are the kids," she said of the cuts.

Reenstierna said Head Start teachers are excellent but the program often relies on parents to bring in basic supplies such as Kleenex and paper. She has watched the program become more academic, but she said private school was better, when she could afford it.

"You get more out of the school that you pay for," she said.

In addition to schooling, the service provides children ages three to five breakfast and lunch, health and dental care, special education and parent skill workshops.

In Framingham, Amy Hartland's 4-year-old attends a SMOC home-based daycare. Her daughter is on the waiting list to attend Head Start preschool in the fall. Hartland depends on childcare in order to keep her job as a school bus driver.

"Without that, it's like a circle, you know, a never-ending circle. No work, no school, no money," she said.

Fokas said this year there were 150 children on a waiting list.

"We always have more kids that needed to come in than we're able to take in," Fokas said.

He said federal officials have told Head Start programs to expect this cut to stay in place for at least five years.

"When you hear that from the feds themselves it's discouraging to say the least," he said.