

San Mateo County child-care programs hit hard by statewide funding losses

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Marissa Rosales, 3, plays basketball on the playground of the Plaza Child... (Dan Honda)
Children play in the Plaza Child Development Center in Redwood City, Calif. on... (Dan Honda)
Stephanie Mata, 5, hangs upside down on the monkey bars at the Plaza Child... (Dan Honda)



Ana Diaz of Redwood City loves everything about her son's preschool, the Plaza Child Development Center.

It is minutes from her house, the teachers are great and, most important, her son has made big strides in his behavior since enrolling in the program in August.

"He was hyperactive in the beginning," Diaz said. "Now he has changed for the better."

Unfortunately for Diaz and others like her, the center, which is run by the San Mateo-based nonprofit Peninsula Family Service, is set to close for good by the end of this month -- a casualty of the cuts in the state budget that Gov. Jerry Brown signed last week.

State-subsidized child care services across San Mateo County will be hit hard by the reduced funding. More than 100 children countywide -- many of them from low-income families such as Diaz's -- face losing their space in preschool and after-school programs, and the number of families placed on a waiting list for those services is expected to grow.

Further cuts to child care loom if revenue projections in the state budget don't pan out.

Currently, child care and development programs statewide are seeing a decrease of more than \$180 million, including nearly \$131 million to providers such as Peninsula Family Service, according to state Department of Finance spokesman H.D. Palmer.

The funding loss affects about 130 local children ages 2 to 12, according to Sarah Kinahan, executive director for the Child Care Coordinating Council of San Mateo County.

There are already about 7,000 children in the county on a waiting list for services, Kinahan said.

The council -- which works with families and child care providers -- is losing about \$1 million of its funding in the 2011-12 fiscal year, she said. But if midyear cuts happen because projected statewide revenues fall short, the council may have to absorb an additional \$2 million loss.

Peninsula Family Service itself is contending with a loss of about \$400,000 in child care funding in 2011-12, according to Laurie Wishard, the organization's president.

That shortfall led to the decision to shutter Plaza, a full-day, certified preschool program that opened 15 years ago and serves 24 children each year, Wishard said.

"It was a really hard decision," she said, "but all we had were bad choices."

While half the children at Plaza are moving on to kindergarten, the others will still need preschool services. Peninsula Family Service is working to find those children spots in its other programs or at centers operated by other nonprofits, Wishard said.

Stephanye Mata, 5, has enjoyed going to Plaza the past two years. "I like to play with my friends," the girl said. Of the school's closure, she said, "It makes me sad."

Without Plaza, Diaz is unsure where she will take her son. "I don't have anywhere else to put him," she said.

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Students facing consequences of budget cutbacks

\$180 million: Level of statewide cuts to child care and developmental programs

More than 100 students: Number of students facing reduced funding countywide

\$400,000: Amount in child care funding cuts facing Peninsula Family Service in 2011-12