

Principals May Win Control Of Millions in School Funds

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The New York City school system is planning to give principals new discretion over the spending of millions of dollars that until now have been specifically earmarked for a wide range of arts programs.

The change would be part of an effort by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein to give principals more say over how they run their schools and spend their money. It has prompted an outcry from groups that have been fighting for years to resuscitate arts programs that were decimated during the city's fiscal crisis three decades ago.

David Cantor, an Education Department spokesman, said the department had not firmly "locked into a decision" about how to handle the \$67.5 million in annual Project Arts money. But he added, "In line with what we're doing with everything else, we're inclined to detach it from arts education." Officials say that the Project Arts money accounts for only a part of the department's total arts spending.

The Project Arts money pays for everything from arts supplies to teacher salaries to dance programs to artist residencies in schools. Although some principals might keep the programs, they all would be able to shift money to different priorities.

Richard Kessler, executive director of the Center for Arts Education, a nonprofit group that has donated more than \$40 million to the city schools for arts education, said that such flexibility for principals would be a "catastrophe in the making." Mr. Kessler said he feared that principals whose schools had the neediest children and the lowest test scores could be the most inclined to scrap arts programs in favor of more academic programs.

"These are the kids who need the power of the arts, in terms of what it does for attendance, what it does for self-confidence, for habits of the mind, for building bridges between cultures."

Elements of the plan were discussed at a meeting on Friday at which Chancellor Klein and other Department of Education officials briefed representatives of arts groups on changes to the school system, and their effect on the arts.

Several people who attended the meeting said they were concerned not only about the money, but also about the fate of 10 regional arts supervisors who oversee arts in the schools. As part of a new decentralization of the school system, the 10 regional offices where the supervisors are based are being eliminated. Mr. Cantor said it was not yet clear whether similar positions would exist under the new system.

Arts programs in the New York City public schools have never fully recovered from the blow they suffered in the 1970s. But in recent years, particularly under Mr. Bloomberg, a generous patron of the arts, they have made a comeback. For example, the Education Department has put in place new standards in the past few years that set out what students pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 should be learning in visual art, music, dance and theater.

"What we've seen over the last few years has been this really remarkable arts structure the likes of which hasn't been in the schools for 30 years," said Steven Tennen, executive director of ArtsConnection, a nonprofit group that is receiving about \$1 million of the arts money this year to run programs in the schools. It also raises several million additional dollars.

Now, he said, "I think that we're going to have trouble, particularly without a reminder in the individual school budgets that the arts are important."

Some Project Arts money was already freed up this year for more than 300 "empowerment schools," where principals have significant freedoms; that group will be expanded next year. Mr. Cantor said that this year's empowerment schools are spending all but 15 percent of Project Arts money on arts.

At Friday's meeting, according to some attendees, Chancellor Klein and other officials also explained how the arts would fit into school report cards. According to Mr. Kessler, officials said that the arts would be one factor in judging "school environment," which will account for 15 percent of a school's grade.

David Shookhoff, chairman of the New York City Arts in Education Roundtable, an organization that provides services for more than 100 city arts groups, said that with "the meaningful accountability" being in math and English, the incentive would be "to spend unrestricted monies in those areas. I don't like to be a Cassandra, a prophet of doom, but I am deeply concerned."

Mr. Cantor of the Education Department said in a statement, "We don't earmark funding for reading or math -- we just demand results. The same should be true of arts."

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