Democracy Dies in Darkness

Virginia

An after-school program in Trump's backyard struggles to survive DOGE cuts

Seven miles from the White House, a Northern Virginia nonprofit serving low-income families is in limbo after it lost funding for AmeriCorps service members.

Today at 6:00 a.m. EDT

By Teo Armus

It would have been hard to see much of a crisis brewing at the Arlington Mill Community Center, given the joyful stream of middle-schoolers bolting inside last month.

But it was there in the way 11-year-old Mason Soto greeted his teacher, Andrew Gelsinger.

"Mr. Andrew!" yelled Mason, running into the classroom. "You're still here!"

Less than a week had passed since Gelsinger abruptly lost his position at the free after-school program in Northern Virginia — one of tens of thousands of roles funded by AmeriCorps that were slashed in cuts to that federal agency.

Gelsinger sat in the classroom with his students, some of them weeping, as they were told they would not be able to come back to Aspire Afterschool Learning to start their homework, grab a snack or play volleyball.

Just a few days later, Gelsinger's bosses tapped into surplus funds to bring him and most other teachers back through the summer. How much the nonprofit's budget could stretch after that, though, was uncertain.

In April, the Trump administration's U.S. DOGE Service canceled nearly $400 million in AmeriCorps grants, effectively firing service members at Aspire and more than 1,000 other organizations across the country. Those groups were told the lost funding "no longer effectuates agency priorities."

(The Washington Post)

White House spokeswoman Anna Kelly has said AmeriCorps, an independent federal agency, was "a target-rich environment for President Trump's agenda to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse" after failing eight consecutive audits.

Less than seven miles from the Oval Office — past the diners, taquerias and hair salons along Columbia Pike — here's a sampling of what could be eliminated:

Aspire teachers such as Gelsinger, who makes less than $30,000 a year, would lose their year-long positions. People such as Mason's dad, a construction worker whose shifts often end past the final bell at his son's middle school, would go without free child care and have to find and pay for it elsewhere. And students such as Mason, a mischievous kid in thick, rectangular glasses, would no longer have someone to teach and care for them after school. Instead, they would spend the afternoon alone.

The nonprofit's leaders estimated that, following DOGE's cuts, Aspire would be forced to serve as many as 50 fewer students per year.

On the day he and his teacher returned to class, Mason shifted his gaze to a laminated sheet pinned up in the back of the classroom, where Gelsinger was marking the boy's attendance with five green dots.

"Mr. Andrew, what's the schedule today?" he asked.

"We're doing phonics," Gelsinger answered, pointing to the whiteboard at the front.

The word of the week, scrawled in big, black letters, was "DISASSEMBLE: To take apart, to come apart, to disperse/scatter."

Gelsinger fixated on the definition. It was, he later said, an apt summary of what might happen to Aspire.

Help for families in need

Aspire was created in 1994 to serve families that fall outside the more widely known image of Arlington County, a wealthy D.C. suburb that is home to lobbyists, federal workers and the Pentagon.

The Arlington parents who send their children to the nonprofit — at no cost — are the nurses, day laborers and janitors who make this community function for everyone else. Many of them can't afford tutors or summer camps. In some cases, recently arrived immigrant parents rely on Aspire's teachers to help their children pick up English.

Over the past three decades, the organization has grown from a shoestring operation inside a church basement to a nonprofit with a dedicated space in a county community center, where a group of largely Black and Latino students — most of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — come after school for extra lessons in math, reading and writing.

Juan Jose Soto, Mason's father, said it was an easy decision to send the 11-year-old and his older brother there, given the difficulties in finding someone to watch them. He and his wife worried about them walking home alone after the older son, Joseph, was hit by a car while heading back from the bus stop by himself.

"Work doesn't allow us to be on top of them all the time," Soto said. "They don't have anyone to watch over them. They're safer here."

Mason would get distracted easily at school, but at Aspire he was able to catch up and pushed his grades toward a mix of A's and B's.

A big part of that, Soto noted, was the teachers. Most classrooms had a pair of them, and in this case Gelsinger and his co-teacher, Dakota Yoon, managed to coax a restless kid who often blurted out comments in class to jot down his thoughts in a notebook instead.

Gelsinger, who moved every few years for his parents' jobs, wanted to stick around the D.C. area after graduating from the University of Maryland. Earlier in the pandemic, he worked for a company that distributed coronavirus vaccines.

But every day felt monotonous there. Looking for a change, he applied at Aspire last year.

The position paid a "stipend" amounting to little more than the Virginia minimum wage — plus some student-loan relief. But seeing the children's progress, week by week, made it feel worth it, Gelsinger said.

The eldest of four siblings, he loved working with the middle-schoolers, giving shout-outs to students who made big improvements so the rest of the class could hear.

"Now they'll come in and, like, rush over to show their math test," he said, "and it's an 85. Which for most kids isn't the greatest thing in the world. But for some of these kids, that's a huge step forward."

A dreaded email arrives

The three-sentence email arrived in Paula Fynboh's inbox on a Monday afternoon in April, around the time Gelsinger and Yoon would have been leading their middle-school classroom in their daily "free choice" period.

"Pursuant to this notice of termination, all activities related to your grant should cease immediately," the email read.

AmeriCorps already had been cutting programs across the country in reaction to the Trump administration's efforts to cut government spending. Fynboh, who is Aspire's executive director, had a bad feeling her program would be next.

The notice meant that Aspire's 17 AmeriCorps service members, most of whom lead classrooms from third grade to middle school, could no longer get paid.

That afternoon, she allowed the classes to carry on as normal and offered the AmeriCorps service members the chance to return the following day — purely as volunteers — to wrap things up with their students. When the children got the news, some could not hold back their emotions.

A worried Mason did not know what to do. He had so many homework assignments the next week, he told his teachers, and now he had no idea how to finish them all.

He and Gelsinger sat together for an hour and a half, tackling as many of his math problems as they could.

At night, he told his parents that he did not understand. "Why are they doing this? Why are they taking this away from me?" Soto recalled him asking.

At home in Greenbelt, Maryland, Gelsinger asked himself similar questions. He sent out four job applications that night.

"Everyone there is serving for not that much, and we have a $3 trillion budget as a country. You can't pay to help the kids?" he said. "They're smart. They care. Their parents just don't always have the means to help them."

Families trying to pitch in

The program's directors joined a lawsuit against the federal government. They appealed to county lawmakers, who offered words of support but no financial assistance.

The Aspire board of directors decided to hire back the AmeriCorps service members, funding those positions through the end of its summer program. Come August, it could convert some positions into full-time staff jobs, using the rest of Aspire's budget: $1.4 million that comes from state and local grants and corporate and personal donations.

But the math was unavoidable: If Aspire wanted to maintain reasonable class sizes — about a dozen students per teacher — the 150-child program would have to shrink by about a third.

Fynboh pulled out a sketch of a dollar bill one student had drawn, meant as a contribution to the program's coffers. Even cash-strapped families were trying to pitch in as the organization scrambled to raise money, she said.

"It's so touching because our parents may have very little," Fynboh said, "but they still want to try to help."

She was concerned that some students could miss out on reading and math help because they would have to take care of younger siblings after school, she said. Others might go without a hot meal in the afternoon. Families — most of whom would be eligible for a 75 percent discount on Arlington's summer-camp programs — might not be able to afford even that sharply reduced cost.

Down the hall in the middle-school classroom, some students munched on plates of meat loaf and cucumber salad. A group of girls crowded around Yoon as one showed her photos from a cousin's sweet 16 birthday celebration.

She and Gelsinger gathered them to start a phonics lesson, a routine they have followed since August.

"We're so excited to have you all back," Gelsinger told them. "We're so excited to be back."

How long that would last, though, he was not sure.

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a strong opposition to the AmeriCorps funding cuts, emphasizing the negative impact on after-school programs like Aspire, which provide essential support for working families. Many commenters criticize the Trump administration for prioritizing the wealthy... Show more

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