



YMCA

We build strong kids,  
strong families, strong communities.

## **Children & Youth Committee Hearing August 5, 2008**

Good afternoon, I am Barry Martin from the PA State Alliance of YMCAs. I would like to thank Rep. Bishop for inviting us here today. I would also like to thank Rep. Wheatley for taking on a subject that is critical to the needs of families in Pennsylvania.

### **YMCA's History as a Provider of After School Programming**

- YMCAs have served youth and young adults for more than 155 years in a variety of programs including after school enrichment, aquatics, arts, camping, health and wellness, sports, service learning, and teen leadership and club programs.
- For more than 50 years Pennsylvania YMCAs have been engaging children in after school programs. Today, of the nearly 1.2 million Pennsylvanians served by YMCAs, 45% are children and youth under the age of 18, that's 540,000 young people.
- As schools across the Commonwealth prepare to open their doors, working parents once again find themselves searching for safe, quality after school programs to complement and supplement their children's in-school learning. With 156 YMCA branches operating hundreds of child care programs, the Commonwealth's YMCAs are a leading resource for parents looking to find meaningful and fun afternoon activities.
- The guiding philosophy of YMCA childcare is to provide child-centered programs with a commitment to quality. Because of this approach, we have grown to become the largest providers of childcare in PA and in the country which enables Pennsylvania YMCAs to rely upon a national network of experts in the field.
- YMCA programs and centers, which are certified through NAEYC, Keystone Stars and NAA, provide support for the entire family including infant, pre-school, and school-aged childcare.
- By partnering with groups such as Head Start, the JCPenney After School Alliance, and the Readers Digest "We Love Reading Initiative" no one is turned away due to financial limitations.

## **About YMCA After School Programs**

- Non-academic does not mean non-educational. Activities that strengthen, expand and provide real life context to information learned in the classroom are important to children's learning. For example, soccer helps in developing an understanding of geometry, cooking projects help to teach fractions and journal writing helps to develop writing skills and stimulate creative thinking.
- Most YMCA after school programs include elements that promote artistry, social skill development, emotional development, nutrition and physical activity, character development, sports, service-learning, as well as literacy, math and science hands-on activities.
- Our programs are grounded in group work, relationship building, a child/youth-centered approach, experiential learning, and hands-on activities—all of which have a positive impact on youth development and learning.
- YMCAs aim to build self-esteem and provide the concrete tools youth need to be happy and productive in life. As such, our after school programs are designed to focus on the abilities of youth rather than their shortcomings or deficits. YMCA programs also help youth to develop skills such as self-regulation, communication, problem solving, negotiation and critical thinking that make learning easier.
- YMCA staff and volunteers also understand that each youth needs significant adults beyond family to relate to and rely upon for support and guidance. As such, YMCA staff are carefully selected and trained to be good role models.

## **YMCA's Holistic Approach to After school Learning**

- YMCAs are committed to developing the whole child. YMCA staff and volunteers know that kids have different wants and needs from their after school program than what they need or get during the school day.
- YMCAs believe it is important to strike a balance between academic enrichment and playful, recreational activities for children. Our programs do not emphasize academics exclusively at the expense of time spent socializing with peers, in reflection, and engaging in games and activities in the gym or on the playground.
- This approach to child learning includes the offering of programs that support children's learning across several areas including social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development.
- Because YMCAs operate from a unique mission and use a different, holistic approach to children's learning than do schools, we are confident that our programs are differently—designed to attract and engage youth who are disenchanting with school, harder to reach or who do not excel in the traditional ways schools teach and measure learning outcomes.
- That said, with *No Child Left Behind*, failing schools, and the fact that too many kids are struggling with learning has prompted many YMCAs to expand their traditionally recreational offerings to include tutoring and mentoring programs, 21st Century Community Learning centers, supplemental education services, and additional family and youth support services.

## **YMCAs as a Partner in Supporting Children's Learning**

- YMCAs are partners in supporting children's learning. Across the country and in Pennsylvania, YMCAs collaborate with schools, community-based organizations and other youth development organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, Junior Achievement and more.
- For example, the results of a 2005 YMCA School-Age Child Care Survey found that more YMCAs are collaborating with schools than ever before. More than 80 percent of school-age programs are located at schools, and 71 percent of YMCAs collaborate with elementary schools.
- As schools across the country have faced budget cuts resulting in the elimination of recreational programming such as sports and physical education, YMCAs have also stepped up to the plate to help provide these activities. In fact, hundreds of YMCAs provide PE instruction for schools and home-schooled children.
- YMCAs are building strong communities by helping to prepare a future generation of workers with 21st century work skills, by reducing juvenile crime in the out-of-school hours and by ensuring students have the knowledge and skills to succeed in a knowledge-based economy.

## **Increasing Participation / Decreasing Barriers**

- Youth report that they participate in after school programs to have fun with friends; learn new skills in sports, arts, community service, and recreational activities; be around caring adult role models; and feel safe. In fact, almost 40% of elementary and middle school youth become involved in some type of peer-centered organized activity, whether it be a club, lessons, or an after school program.
- Of course, the potential benefits of after school programs cannot be achieved if youth do not attend. Unfortunately, low attendance is the norm in many after school programs for middle and high school youth due to busy schedules and family lives, claims of boredom, or the desire for freedom. Other barriers include the need for a teen to work, family responsibilities, transportation issues and safety concerns.
- Legislative solutions to these problems include:
  - Increased funding and friendlier regulations for centers that provide more space and time for recreation, snacks, and talking with friends
  - Creation of programs located out of the students' school to provide a "change of scenery"
  - Programs that include structured employment preparation, résumé writing, and volunteer or paid work experience for middle school and high school students
  - Increase the number programs that offer a rich variety of experiences, activities, and opportunities to develop new relationships with peers and adults
  - Allow for more parental and student choice in the selection of the types of programs offered.
  - Create grant programs that address the transportation and safety

I would like to end by focusing some comments on the continuing crisis of obesity in our communities that is making it's way into our youth population at alarming rates and how we can address this crisis through after school youth programs.

### **Recreation and Obesity**

- As kids across the state head back to school and back to sitting at their desks for six or more hours a day, it is critically important that parents find additional ways for their children to stay active before, during and after school.
- Experts such as the Journal of Pediatrics, the CDC, and the US Department of HHS agree that school-age children need to be moderately to vigorously active for a minimum of 60 minutes a day. Unfortunately, the majority, almost two-thirds of our nation's youth, are not reaching this goal.
- As a result our children are increasingly obese or overweight. The latest data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey published in the Journal of the AMA shows the percent of children who are overweight continues to increase. Among children and teens ages 6-19, 16 percent are overweight, or triple what the proportion was in 1980 and unfortunately Pennsylvania is not an exception.
- In fact, Pennsylvania ranks 24<sup>th</sup> on the CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System with a staggering 63% of our citizens listed as obese or overweight. That means that there are nearly 8 million Pennsylvanians, nearly 1.6 million of which are children, who are obese or overweight. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, the current generation of American children could be the *first to lead shorter lives* than their parents.
- Physical activity reduces the risk of developing obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease; helps build and maintain healthy bones and muscles; and reduces feelings of depression and anxiety and promotes psychological well-being. (CDC, 1996 Surgeon Generals Report on Physical Activity)
- Unfortunately, hectic work and family schedules allow little time for kids to participate in physical activity and schools that are struggling to improve academic achievement are dropping physical education and physical activity and assigning more homework, which leaves even less time for sports and other forms of physical activity.
- After school programs are feeling the pressure to shift from physical activity programming to academic class time. Even recess – the only unstructured play time for kids – is being squeezed out of the school day. Television, computer games, the internet and text messaging are deactivating our kids. Diminished public funding for parks, playgrounds and sidewalks that encourage and facilitate active lifestyles along with concerns about neighborhood safety contribute to inactivity.
- So, in conclusion, and in addition to the recommendations previously presented, as this committee examines the issue of after school care we urge you to consider the importance of increased physical activity for our children and families.

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