

AFTER-SCHOOL'S NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

BY SEAN RUCK

Students returning to an in-person learning experience after pandemic restrictions lifted were, by many accounts, different than what educators were used to pre-pandemic. Students' time out of the physical classroom setting, along with severely reduced face-to-face socializing opportunities, took a toll. They came back with greater behavioral problems, gaps in academic proficiencies and for the youngest, a lack of critical social skills. For some students, a regular school day didn't provide enough opportunity to get back on track. For many educators, it felt like the standard school day just wasn't long enough. If only there were more hours in the day. . . . Of course there are more hours, but they fall beyond the standard school day, and that's where after-school and out-of-school programming jumps in.

Respective Solutions Group

Hillary Yahner, principal of Cambria Heights Elementary School in Cambria County, is among the administrators leaning into after-school programming to help students in need of additional educational support. Her school uses programming from Respective Solutions Group (RSG), a nonprofit specializing in after-school and summer programs.

"We see kids referred for learning support and the program helps kids get back to where they need to be by providing extra time and extra attention from teachers they know. They also get to connect with other kids too – sitting together, eating snacks together, doing experiments, helping each other."

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69%
OF STUDENTS IN
PA AFTER-SCHOOL
PROGRAMS ARE
GETTING HELP
WITH THEIR
HOMEWORK WHILE
IN ATTENDANCE.*



Students participate in STEM activities during the Wilkes University SHINE program.

IN PA'S
AFTER-SCHOOL
PROGRAMS,
90% OF
STUDENTS
ARE BUILDING
SOCIAL SKILLS
THROUGH PEER
INTERACTION.*



**Source: Afterschool Alliance*

Students display their handiwork during the Wilkes University SHINE program.

Yahner explained that the familiar community is an important aspect of the program. She said that while the staffing is handled by RSG, the onsite educators are teachers from the students' schools. During the school day, they are school employees; after hours, they are RSG employees with connections to the kids and knowledge about the help those students need.

That staffing choice provides an additional benefit when it comes to meeting the need of getting professionals to, literally, get with the program. According to Yahner, the challenge of meeting staffing needs doesn't exist. "We haven't had an issue for a couple reasons – staff really love working with the kids and they like doing extra for the schools, and there's great communication from RSG along with training offered with everything from first aid to STEM kits coming in."

RSG's programming is completely free to students via grant funding the organization obtains. This leaves parents and guardians of participating children only responsible for the transportation

home. Although the program runs Monday through Thursday, families can pick the days that work for them. Yahner points out that since it's actual instructional programming and there are requirements to keep grant funding, students do need to stay the entire time – until about 5:00 p.m.

The elementary program serves K-5 students, while the middle school program covers grades 6-8.

To supplement the teachers' staffing, the program will sometimes bring in other individuals with specific skills to help with activities like STEM lessons or after-school tutoring.

Student success data from the program has been promising. Yahner says most kids who start the program continue with it throughout their educational years. But there are a few drawbacks. "Transportation can be an issue – we think there are kids that can really use it, but they don't have the transportation available," Yahner says.

And the lack of programming on Fridays and teacher in-service days can leave parents searching

AFTER-SCHOOL
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ARE PROVIDING
STEM LEARNING
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AFTER-SCHOOL
PROGRAMS.*

“WITH GRANTS, THERE’S ALWAYS THE FEAR THAT IT’LL RUN OUT OR WON’T COME BACK. IT’S A NECESSITY. WE KEEP OUR FINGERS CROSSED EVERY YEAR THAT THEY’LL GET IT AND WE’LL CONTINUE WITH IT.”

for childcare solutions in order to not miss work. Although RSG does offer summer programming, Yahner says the interest from families is much lower, so her school hasn’t introduced summer programming.

When asked what she learned working with RSG, she said, “I wish we transitioned from basically the paid daycare of our previous program to something that meets our goals earlier. I can’t ever see us doing it ourselves – it’s essentially a completely separate school, 2:30 to 5:30 four days a week.”

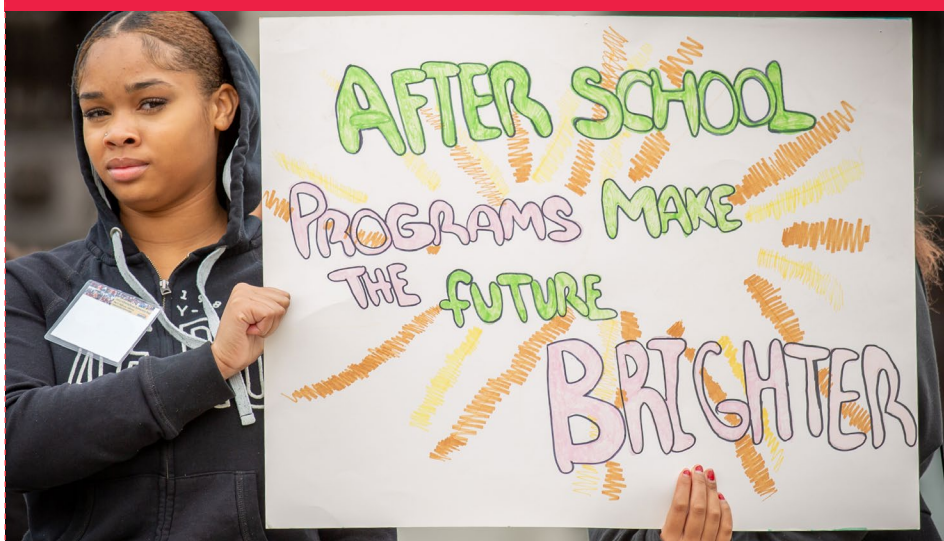
Because these initiatives are such a heavy lift, and with teachers already shouldering much of that burden, she recommends looking at outside organizations like RSG to come in and offer programming, with the goal of having people from inside the district run it.

Yahner did offer some words of caution. While the program gets high marks from her, staff and families, the funding issue lurks in the background. “With grants, there’s always the fear that it’ll run out or won’t come back. It’s a necessity. We keep our fingers crossed every year that they’ll get it and we’ll continue with it.”

SHINE of Luzerne County at Wilkes University

Carol Nicholas is the director for SHINE of Luzerne County at Wilkes University. The program,

AFTER-HOURS EQUITY CONCERNS



An advocate with PSAYDN participates in a rally at the PA Capitol to support funding for after-school programs.

WITH FUNDING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS OFTEN TARGETED FOR BUDGET BATTLES, it comes as little surprise to those in the education profession that after-school programs are faced with many of the same challenges that exacerbate equity issues. While schools and programs are working hard to help students recover from the academic slide caused by pandemic disruptions and other issues, the resources aren’t as easily accessible for every family due to a range of reasons.

REASON 1: COST

Grant funding providing after-school programming for free to students clears the price tag hurdle, but not every program qualifies for grants. Some schools offer waivers for families that qualify, though that’s not an across-the-board situation. Some Pennsylvania legislators are working to provide a fix.

REASON 2: TRANSPORTATION

Even when programs are free, schools often aren’t able to provide transportation after regular school hours due to a mix of cost involved and a shortage of bus drivers. Families may be unable to arrange transportation on their own.

REASON 3: GAPS IN COVERAGE

Programs that don’t run the full work week or those that don’t cover in-service days leave working families scrambling to fill those gaps in childcare. With a shortage of childcare options and the high cost of care when it is available, some families may ultimately end up paying to work.



Students work together on a project at the RSG after-school program at Cambria Heights Elementary School.

After-school in Pennsylvania

Parents in PA agree that after-school programs help students:

81%

Learn life skills

76%

Build positive relationships with caring adults

79%

Build confidence

85%

Be physically active

69%

Access nutritional foods

71%

Stay safe and out of trouble

Source: Afterschool Alliance



developed and provided by Wilkes University, offers after-school STEAM programming for elementary students in grades 1-4 and middle schoolers in grades 5-8 in six different school districts. The program runs Monday through Thursday for three hours a night during the school year: “when the school year starts, we start, when school ends, we end,” says Nicholas. Over the course of the three hours, students receive about two hours of STEAM-based project learning, a hot meal, homework assistance and a chance to socialize with their peers.

Nicholas has been the director almost since its inception about nine years ago. She says it serves about 525 students during the course of the year – 40 to 50 at each elementary site and 100 in middle school sites, with those older students bused from different districts. For staffing, licensed Pennsylvania teachers, along with teaching assistants, keep the ratio at no more than 10 students to one educator, though “we strive to get it better,” Nicholas says.

Although SHINE strives to tweak the ratio, the reverberations from the pandemic have resulted in an always difficult staffing climate becoming even stormier. “Since COVID, it’s been hard. It wore down a lot of teachers and with [students’] behavioral issues, some just need a break after their school day,” Nicholas says.

She says the program tries to pay a fair wage, but because it’s a nonprofit, it can’t match what teachers might make in the district. Instead, to attract staff, a range of training opportunities are offered. Nicholas says SHINE also offers flexibility in scheduling, “they don’t have to work four days in a row – maybe they’ll work Mondays and Wednesdays and another will work Tuesdays and Thursdays, to give them some time to attend to personal things like appointments and other tasks.”

The program takes a holistic approach to education, not only getting current students the help they need, but also working with

parents and guardians through a resource coordinator, to help them get GEDs, sign up for English as a second language classes (ESL), connect to CareerLink, sign up for supplemental nutrition programs, get information on food and clothing banks, and more, including training on helping kids get ready for school and other good parenting proficiencies.

SHINE also involves students from Wilkes University. “Being a university, we’re uniquely positioned. For instance, we have a nursing program and we have built into our pediatric rotation that all the nursing students come to SHINE. They get to see how students in different age groups act, react, what they do dietary-wise, and they help out at the center when they’re there. At the end of their rotation, they provide lessons for kids on a variety of topics, like basic first aid, school bus safety and hygiene assistance. We’ve also had our business school put together a program called Money Matters, where they sit down and talk to kids about planning.”

Money matters in a direct sense for the organization as well. Like RSG, funding is always on the radar. SHINE gets funding from the Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program, The United Way, 21st Century Community Learners Grant, funding from a line item, some money from casino funds and private donations from businesses. “I’m always on the hunt,” Nicholas says.

Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network

Founded in 2004 by the Mott Foundation, the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network (PSAYDN) is one of the after-school networks operating in all 50 states. Contrell Armor is the director for the state and while new to the role, he has decades of high-level experience working with schools and communities, which has served him well in navigating the work of the network.



STEAM activities take center stage at SHINE of Luzerne County.



PSAYDN Director Contrell Armor addresses the crowd at a rally for after-school funding.

PSAYDN PROVIDES RESOURCES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SCHOOL-BASED AND FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS SERVING K-12 STUDENTS.

Armor says the mission of PSAYDN is to promote sustainable, high-quality out-of-school time (OST), to enhance welfare of Pennsylvania children, youth and families. The network has nearly 3,000 members, nearly 6,000 OST providers, and more than 100 partners serving in all 67 counties in Pennsylvania.

While some of the programming runs Monday through Thursday, Armor says most runs five days a week and there is some available on holidays, half days and in-service days. “Sometimes even on the weekends, they’ll open up and do a field trip, or open up for a community event or even host a community event. Typically, between 12 and 18 hours a week is offered to students during after-school time,” he says.

PSAYDN provides resources and professional development for school-based and faith-based programs serving K-12 students. “We don’t turn anyone away who wants to deliver some kind of youth development, so a grassroots program with a retired teacher or neighborhood champion who wants to have a group with 10 kids to grow a garden in the yard and do some agriculture, they’d be welcome to be part of the program,” Armor says.

PSAYDN offers a variety of programming from STEM and STEAM to social-emotional learning and physical activities. But it’s not a turnkey approach like SHINE or RSG where staffing is handled by the organization. Upping the awareness for those in the state and providing the resources and the training to assist others in

accomplishing that supplemental education is more the directive.

“We’re in the second year of our Empower Conference, a statewide out-of-school time conference. It’s the only one in the state and it’s there we try to attract practitioners, teachers, educators, parents and community members to catch up on some of the best practices and establish some of the networking connections they’ll benefit from,” says Armor.

Going beyond the micro of the community to the macro of the state, legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives under House Bill 795 to create the Building Opportunity through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) Grant Program that would create a dedicated, sustainable funding stream to support OST programs. “I think Pennsylvania is one of only 10 or 12 states without that line item, and that funding, if it passes, will open up more opportunities. Currently, for every student enrolled in out-of-school time programs, there’s four others waiting,” says Armor.

That legislation seems like good financial sense, he says. “Every dollar invested in a student in Pennsylvania sees [a return of] \$6.69 in areas like teen pregnancy, delinquency, dropouts and crime. We have data to support those numbers.”

And when you have data pointing to a return on investment as well as increased student success, it should be a slam dunk – because money matters and so do future generations. **B**