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Afterschool and Working Families in Wake of the Great Recession

“Afterschool Programs Could Disappear Under Budget Cuts;” “Costs of Afterschool Programs Prod More Kids to Stay Home Alone;” “Afterschool Programs Face Doom as Economy Falters”

During the past three years of economic hardship, headlines like these have pervaded local and national newspapers, denoting a challenging uphill battle for afterschool programs to maintain funding and function well in the wake of the failed economy. Along with providers, kids are suffering from the paucity of afterschool options with more than 15.1 million children now left alone at home each day after the school day ends – up from 14.3 million just five years ago.ⁱ Similarly, jobs have been sparse, leaving parents unable to fully provide for their children. In fact, today one in nine American children have an unemployed parent as a result of the recession. Additionally, since December 2007, when the recession officially began, the unemployment rate has increased from 4.9 percent to a high of 10.2 percent, and nearly one-third of currently unemployed individuals are parents. The change in employment status for so many parents has increased the number of kids with an unemployed parent by 67 percent.ⁱⁱ As the economy begins to recover, it is apparent that the Great Recession has had dramatic effects on the availability and affordability of afterschool programs, the accessibility of employment and childcare options for parents and, most of all, the education and future of our nation’s youth.

Recession Endangering Afterschool Programs

The stagnant economy has exerted a wide range of effects on the sustainability of afterschool programs. Programs have been forced to lower enrollment numbers, reduce hours of operation, increase fees and drop participants to ensure long term sustainability. Even long-running programs like LA’s BEST are feeling pressure from state and local budget cuts, forcing longer waitlists and decreased program availability.ⁱⁱⁱ A 2009 survey conducted by the Afterschool Alliance found startling results concerning the state of afterschool programs in the faltering economy. The outlook for the future of many of the responding programs was grim:

- About 6 in 10 programs reported a loss in funding due to the recession, with 1 in 10 reporting a significant loss that will cause major cutbacks or lead to the closure of one or more site(s).
- Nearly one-half of program leaders reported that their budget is inadequate to meet the needs of families.
- Nearly two-thirds of program leaders reported that funding in 2009 was down from two years prior.
- Forty-five percent of program leaders reported that funding was not secure for the next one to two years due to the recession.

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- Sixty-two percent of respondents noted that the recession was having a very strong affect on their local community.^{iv}

Schools have also been forced to make difficult funding decisions in recent years. One study found that school-based afterschool and summer learning programs were often on the chopping block. The percentage of schools reducing afterschool and weekend enrichment programs during the recession grew from 8 percent in the 2009-10 school year to a startling 24 percent at the beginning of the 2010-11 school year. The study also found that more than one-third of schools were considering eliminating summer programs in 2011.^v With additional cuts being made across the board at schools all over the country, afterschool and summer learning programs, which promote enrichment, should be further supported not shut down.

Parents are Struggling Too

The economy has caused hardship for both employed and unemployed parents. For those fortunate enough to have a job in this economy, the school day will never be long enough to fulfill their end-of-the-day childcare needs. The gap between work and school schedules amounts to as much as 25 hours per week,^{vi} which presents working parents with the challenge of finding someone to care for their children while they are at work. Formerly afterschool programs had been part of the solution in filling that gap; however, with cuts to afterschool, working parents are scrambling to find ways to replace their children's care arrangements after the school day ends. Staffers at Care.com and SitterCity.com reported huge surges in the amount of childcare requests posted on their sites in 2009 due to the lack of afterschool options. This is especially alarming because parents typically pay \$3-4 an hour for afterschool programs, whereas a sitter could cost as much as \$15 an hour – a cost that is simply not feasible for many working families.^{vii} Additionally many families in lower socioeconomic areas, who previously received relatively low-cost afterschool care from schools and community-based organizations, are finding out that their children have been dropped from programs due to budget cuts.

“Our program is still going strong, but it is not without tweaking and re-tweaking our funding streams... If it weren't for grants, it would be extremely difficult to survive.”
– Herb Higgin – Director, Safe Harbor Afterschool Program

Even when programs are available, parents wind up paying most of the fees. A 2009 funding study conducted for the Afterschool Alliance found that parents are paying the lion's share of afterschool costs:

- On average, parents pay more than three-quarters of the cost of afterschool through tuition and fees, which amounts to \$2,400 per year per child.
- Even in low-income families, which have been hit the hardest by the current recession, parents pay more than half of the afterschool costs, more than \$1,700 per year.
- Meanwhile, the federal government contributes only 11 percent of the cost of afterschool, despite the fact that 29 percent of the children in afterschool meet the federal government's definition of low-income and in need of federal assistance.^{viii}

Furthermore, the other option, commercial child care, can be extremely expensive for some working families. Nearly half of America's working families with a child younger than 13 have child care expenses that consume 9 percent of their monthly earnings on average, and families with earnings below the federal poverty level spend an average of 23 percent of their monthly earnings on childcare.^{ix} It is

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apparent that more investment is needed from the federal government and all other sectors to give parents support in these difficult times and help them provide quality afterschool opportunities for this country's children.

The Drain on Employers

While concerns about unsupervised children pressure families, they also profoundly affect employers. Polling shows that 87 percent of working mothers say the hours after school are when they are most concerned about their children's safety,^x and this "afterschool stress" can lead to distraction that causes lower productivity, high turnover and absenteeism for working mothers and fathers. In fact, as many as 2.5 million parents are overly stressed by Parental Concern about After-School Time (PCAST), and are likely to bring their concerns to the workplace. Additionally, PCAST concerns are intensified for parents who have more responsibility for child care in the household, work longer hours and whose children are older or spend more time unsupervised.^{xi} Finally, workplace stress costs companies an estimated \$50 to \$300 billion in lost job productivity each year.^{xii}

Afterschool programs provide a safe, enriching environment for kids while their parents are still at work, allowing parents to focus on their jobs and ultimately improve family life.

- An evaluation of New York City's Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth initiative found that 74 percent of parents of participants agreed that the program made it easier for them to keep their job and 73 percent agreed that they miss less work than they had previously because their children attended the program. In addition, 71 percent of parents reported that they were able to work more hours because their children were in the program.^{xiii}
- An evaluation of LA's BEST found that three quarters of the parents surveyed indicated that they worried significantly less about their children's safety and that they had more energy in the evening since enrolling their children in the program. A clear majority also indicated that the program resulted in sizeable time savings.^{xiv}
- While at work, parents feel confident that afterschool programs are having a positive effect on student academic performance. Three of four North Carolina working parents (76 percent) believe that afterschool programs strengthen students' academic achievement. More than two-thirds (69 percent) believe that afterschool programs improve school attendance and reduce dropout rates. Two of three working parents (66 percent) believe that afterschool programs improve students' behavior while in school.^{xv}

Children Have Been Hit the Hardest

In 2009, more than one in five children were poor, and from 2009 to 2010 that number grew larger still – increasing by nearly 1 million children.^{xvi} It has become apparent that while some recovery efforts are coming to fruition, for many – especially for children – the recession is not over.

- More than 8 million children under the age of 18 live in families with an unemployed parent.
- Children are disproportionately affected by the recession. Whereas 7 percent of adults were unemployed in 2009, one in nine children (11 percent) had a parent that was unemployed.^{xvii}
- It has been estimated that the number of children in poverty may rise by 5 million in the next five years.^{xviii}
- Children who enter poverty as a result of the recession are 15 percent less likely to complete high school and 20 percent less likely complete college than those above the poverty line.^{xix}

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- Studies show that impoverished children are more likely to suffer maltreatment, sexual abuse and injuries from other youth.^{xx}

The after school hours can be a precarious time for children of all ages. Nationwide, 15.1 million youth regularly care for themselves after the school day ends and before parents get home from work:^{xxi} the peak time for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex.^{xxii} Even more startling, in families that are below the poverty line, more than 7 percent of children aged five to eight and more than 13 percent of children aged nine to 11 are latchkey kids.^{xxiii} Children are also losing many of the learning opportunities they used to enjoy during the school day due to major budget cuts. One survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators found upsetting results:

- One-quarter of the schools surveyed (26 percent) reduced elective courses not required for graduation for the 2010-11 school year, up from just six percent in 2008-09.
- More than half of schools surveyed (57 percent) increased class sizes for the 2010-11 school year, while two-thirds (62 percent) anticipate increasing class sizes for 2011-12.
- Nearly one-third of schools surveyed (31 percent) cut extracurricular activities for the 2010-11 school year, while nearly three in ten respondents (27 percent) eliminated summer school for summer 2011.^{xxiv}

Facing harrowing poverty levels and dramatic reductions in learning opportunities at school, the children and youth of the recession need safe and enriching afterschool programs now more than ever.

Helping Those Who Are Particularly Disadvantaged

While Wall Street is back to booming and many are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel of economic woes, it has been estimated that lower-wage families are not going to see a recovery for five years or more. Even before the recession, one in four low-wage workers was earning less than \$8.70 an hour, or \$16,704 per year, in jobs that provided few basic benefits such as health care, sick pay, disability pay and paid vacation.^{xxv}

“We are still not charging even though we could really use the dollars. The majority of families could not even pay a minimal fee. We have lost a ton of kids because parents don’t have gas money to pick them up.”

**– Sherry Comer – Director,
Project PASS, Camdenton, MO**

In addition, 30 million low-wage workers are heading families that include 20 million children. Over 20 percent of white workers, 30 percent of African-American workers and 40 percent of Latino workers are members of the low-wage workforce.^{xxvi} This large proportion of American workers, who rely on overtime and steady employment to keep their families afloat, cannot afford to leave work early to meet kids at the bus stop or at home. They are not able to take time to call their kids to see if they made it home safely or remind them to lock the door and do their homework. Afterschool care is an absolute necessity for America’s low-wage workers.

- Low-wage workers often have erratic schedules, with no two weekdays having the same schedule, leaving many families struggling to fill the gaps in childcare.^{xxvii}
- One study found that 30 percent of low-income workers had disruptions in their work schedules in order to meet family needs in a single week.^{xxviii}
- In another study, almost half of the low-wage parents responded that they had been sanctioned at work due to family care responsibilities.^{xxix}
- Many of these same families also experience food insecurity, with the USDA reporting in November 2010 that children were food insecure at times during the year in 4.2 million households. By providing breakfast during before-school programs and a nutritious snack or

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meal during afterschool programs, the debilitating effect of hunger can be lessened for these students.^{xxx}

Unfortunately, only 24 percent of low-income children are currently enrolled in an afterschool program. However, another 50 percent of those not currently participating would enroll if a program were available to them. Additionally, after lack of need, cost is the number one barrier to afterschool enrollment.^{xxxii} It is apparent that one major way to help ease the burden of America's workforce is to provide additional resources for afterschool programs. Enabling America's low-wage workforce to focus on their jobs and boost productivity is one positive step toward economic recovery.

How Afterschool Programs Are Integral to Recovery

While some families may not need afterschool now, because of current unemployment, many hope to return to the workforce, and will need afterschool when they return. The 8.1 million kids whose parents are unemployed now are more likely than other kids to experience homelessness, suffer from abuse, fail to succeed in school and live in poverty as adults. Even though some parents are physically home, these kids can still benefit from the stability, social and emotional supports and academic enrichment that afterschool programs can offer.

- Research shows that students who participate in afterschool programs, including those funded by the federal government's 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program, show improved school attendance, engagement in learning and improved grades and test scores.^{xxxii}
- Scores of evaluations provide evidence that afterschool programs keep kids safe, healthy and on track to success by reducing their likelihood of drug use and involvement in criminal activities.^{xxxiii}

"Because of [the afterschool] program, I can stay at work and I can earn extra hours. I work two jobs, and that program allows my kids to stay in school while I get the necessities taken care of."

– Irma Villarreal – Parent of two sons in the Harms Elementary School After-school Program in Detroit, MI

Additionally, afterschool programs provide benefits to youth that reach well beyond the school day, offering avenues to college and the workplace by exposing youth to global issues, providing opportunities to develop and use technology, promoting cross-cultural understanding, collaborative thinking, leadership and civic participation. The extra learning time, and time to develop leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills, provided by afterschool efforts is essential to ensuring that today's youth are prepared for tomorrow's workplace.

Lastly, afterschool programs have a positive return on investment for public and private funders, which is especially important considering the propensity for spending restraint in this economic climate:

- One study found that every dollar invested in afterschool programs saves taxpayers between \$2.19 to \$3.22.^{xxxiv}
- An analysis conducted by UCLA of the LA's BEST afterschool program estimated that every dollar invested in the LA's BEST program saves the city of Los Angeles \$2.50 in crime-related costs.^{xxxv}
- A study of Minnesota programs estimated \$2.72 of benefits per dollar of spending on quality youth mentoring programs.^{xxxvi}

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- Another Minnesota study estimated that every dollar invested in quality early intervention programs with high-risk youth would provide \$4.89 in benefits.^{xxxvii}

Afterschool is a sound investment that can truly help turnaround the economy and ensure that all youth are staying out of trouble and learning, so they can become productive members of the recovering 21st Century workforce.

Conclusion: Afterschool Funding is Critical for Working Families

Despite the proven need for afterschool programs to help recovery efforts for many families, far too many states, cities and towns are cutting funding. Even the federal government has proposed policies that could drastically reduce the number of programs available to children and working families. Federal proposals from both the Obama Administration and Congress suggest merging the 21st CCLC initiative with efforts to support a longer school day or year, which would considerably cut the funding of many afterschool programs across the country and leave many families without the care they desperately need. Estimates suggest six federally funded afterschool program sites would be closed in order to subsidize one federally funded extended learning time site.^{xxxviii} Particularly in these difficult economic times for working families, and with millions of students unsupervised and at risk each day, we need to increase the funding for expanded learning opportunities, not pit one approach against each other.

In this time of drastic adversity, while families are still being hit hard by the lasting swells of the Great Recession, the nation's children need afterschool now more than ever. Afterschool programs are helping kids and families weather the recession and access ample opportunities to learn and grow. Federal funding sources such as 21st CCLC and the Child Care Development Fund are essential to help states and local communities establish support systems that make afterschool programs and the extra learning time they provide an expectation, not an afterthought.

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