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Obama aide lauds CPS program

By Ben Fischer • bfischer@enquirer.com • June 26, 2009

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An emissary from the Obama administration today praised Cincinnati Public Schools' expanded summer-school program as a creative way to keep kids in class longer, a major administration priority.

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During a tour of Pleasant Hill Academy in College Hill, where students were finishing their last day of Fifth Quarter summer school, Jim Shelton credited CPS for finding a good use for increased federal aid included in February's economic stimulus package.

"We're trying to get different districts and schools to think about different ways to increase learning time," said Shelton, assistant deputy education secretary for innovation. "And they seem to be really creative about it, and think systemically about it as a district."

Since mandatory classes ended in May, Cincinnati's 13 most persistently failing schools have invited students back for an extra month.

The stimulus included a two-year, \$21 million boost in regular aid for high-poverty schools for CPS, allowing the district to expand its usual summer programs.

The Fifth Quarter classes last a full day, include students' own teachers from the school year and make extensive use of quasi-academic enrichment programs like gardening and nutrition lessons to augment reading and math instruction. The expansion cost CPS \$1.5 million.

During Shelton's tour, Pleasant Hill students were planting flower pots, learning how plants grow, while in another room, students were making salads and learning about the food groups. The YMCA of Greater Cincinnati oversees the out-of-class curriculum at most of the schools.

This year, about 250 of the school's 760 students came back - up from about 80 in previous summer sessions, said Pleasant Hill Principal Chereese Clark.

"My son wakes me up in the morning to tell me it's time to go," said Leonard Dean, a parent at the school.

Later in the day, older students from all 13 Fifth Quarter schools went to Paddlefest at Coney Island, where they did environmental science projects and celebrated the end of classes.

CPS is using the rest of the stimulus' boost in poverty aid to overhaul its three "redesign" schools, Superintendent Mary Ronan said. Those three schools, Mount Airy, Rothenberg and South Avondale, will start classes earlier, shrink class sizes and offer foreign-language classes.

The Obama administration is pressing districts to use its stimulus dollars to experiment, rather than fill existing budget holes. Then, after the money runs out, they can replace less effective programs with the experiments, if successful, Shelton said.



Photos by Amie Dworacki/The Enquirer

TeZah'Wise (left), a fourth-grader, plays dodgeball at Westwood School. It is one of 28 CincyAfterSchool programs in Cincinnati Public Schools. The demand for such programs exceeds the number of open slots, and money is being cut back this year.

After-school programs squeezed

Tighter money, fewer spaces pose problems

By John Johnston
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Darrick Evans, a single father from Westwood, doesn't fret about what his 11-year-old son and 13-year-old daughter do after school.

When their classes end at Westwood School, the children stay put for a few hours.

The school is one of 28 Cincinnati Public School sites in the CincyAfterSchool network, led by the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati. It partners with other non-profits to provide after-school activities with an emphasis on academic enrichment.

"I depend on it," said Evans, an electrician, "and I'm happy (my children) have somewhere to go where they can mix with other kids and I don't have to worry about them being in trouble."

A few years ago, though, his children attended a school that didn't have an after-school program. Lacking other options, Evans and the children's mother — they are divorced — had to juggle work schedules so one of them could be home with the kids after school.

Quality after-school programs benefit parents, children and the community as a whole, but as a new school year begins there's a shortage of such programs locally and nationally, after-school advocates say. The problem is being exacerbated by funding cutbacks tied to the recession.

Nationally, some 14 million children are on their own after school, according to the After-school Alliance, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. In Ohio, nearly 600,000 children are unsupervised after school; in Kentucky, about 138,000.

Studies show that the hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. are prime time for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sex.

The alliance surveyed 1,447

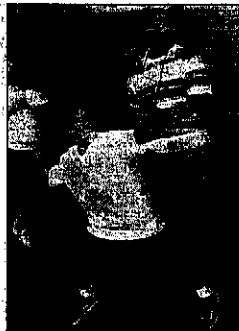
Picking a program

4C, a child-care resource and referral program, offers parents this checklist of what to look for when choosing an after-school program:

- An energetic staff that is flexible and fun.
- Low staff-to-child ratios that allow for quality individual attention and small groups.
- Schedules and lesson plans posted with a mix of innovative activities that are both staff- and child-initiated.
- A variety of activities that include group games, arts and crafts, sports and dramatic play.
- A safe, clean environment stocked with age-appropriate materials.
- Well-balanced and nutritious snacks.

Red flags:

- A program that doesn't encourage parents to observe.
- Children are moving about for 30 minutes or more without staff interaction.
- Staff spends most of the time scolding children.



Fourth-grader Jacob Leath (front) throws a ball during a game of dodgeball in Westwood School's after-school program.

wide last spring and found that six in 10 programs had reported a loss in funding due to the recession. Nine in 10 programs expected the recession to impact their programs in the 2009-2010 school year.

In the past two years, Ohio earmarked \$20 million in federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families money for after-school programs. But in the two-year budget Gov. Ted Strickland signed last month, that money was eliminated.

Among the affected organizations are the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Cincinnati, which operates five freestanding clubs and four school-based, after-school programs. The agency will lose about \$440,000 over the next two years, or about what it costs to run one of its clubs, said Emily Sandui, community affairs director.

In Kentucky, legislators last year cut the budget for extended school services, which includes after-school programs, from \$31.4 million to \$13.2 million. The

said that meant as many as 88,000 students would no longer receive such services.

"These programs are so important to families and working parents," said Liz Nusken, director of the Ohio Afterschool Network, a Columbus-based advocacy group. "It's hard (for a parent) to either stay on a job or do a job well if your kids are not in a safe place."

True, said Megan Wilson, an after-school specialist with 4C, a child-care resource and referral service. "The 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. time is when we see a decrease in parent productivity in their jobs, because they're worried about where their children are, or they're getting calls from their children who are home alone."

A 2006 Brandeis University study found that parents concerned about their children's after-school care miss an average of eight days of work a year.

For many working parents, the costs of after-school programs — and finding a way to get children to and from them — are

CincyAfterSchool programs, which serve up to 125 children at each site, are appealing because most are free — only a few sites charge a small fee — and they are located in a school.

Last month, Cincinnati Public and its CincyAfterSchool partners announced they received \$11.9 million in federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grants. That combined with funding from United Way and community agencies, allowed the program to expand by six sites, to 28 total.

That still does not come close to meeting the community's needs, said Rebecca Kelley, the YMCA district vice president. "At most of our 21st Century sites, we're able to serve about 20 percent of the Cincinnati Public Schools students," she said.

Helen Poynton of Pleasant Ridge landed on a waiting list last year when she tried to enroll her son, Sebastian Armstrong, who is now 7, in the CincyAfterSchool program at Pleasant Ridge Montessori.

Although she and her husband could afford to send him to another after-school program, she knew many other parents could not. So she joined a parent committee that worked with the school's resource coordinator. A partnership involving the Cincinnati Recreation Commission and YMCA was forged, resulting in increased capacity at Pleasant Ridge Montessori. Poynton's son was admitted in January.

"You want your kids to be somewhere they're not just going to be sitting in front of a TV," she said. "You want a quality program."

In the 2007-2008 school year, nearly half of students in CincyAfterSchool programs increased their reading and math scores. Data for the 2008-2009 school year is expected next month.

While engaged in after-school art and environmental activities last year, Sebastian Armstrong may not have known there was an academic aspect to it all. Regardless, he enjoyed learning about the water cycle.

"He thought that was the coolest thing," she said.