



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

You can subscribe through iTunes or Google Play.

The ABCs of After-School Programs | OAS Episode 24 | Dec. 20, 2017

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

So more than 10 million students take part in after school programs in this country, but another 11 million plus children take care of themselves when the school day ends. In this episode of Our American States, we’ll take a look at the accessibility, quality and benefits of these programs and talk to two experts on the issue. Later in the podcast we will talk to Texas State Representative Trent Ashby (R) about how after school programs work in his state.

First we are joined by Jodi Grant, who is the executive director of the AfterSchool Alliance, a nonprofit public organization dedicated to providing after school programs to children across the nation. Jodi, thank you for being a guest on our program.

Jodi Grant:

Oh, thank you so much for having me.

Gene: So first tell us about the AfterSchool Alliance and describe what your organization’s mission is.

Jodi: The AfterSchool Alliance is a nonprofit. We were created in 2000 really because while there are many nonprofit organizations that have a stake in after school, there was no one organization, particularly at the federal level, that was focused on making sure there was funding for high-quality after school programs. And by 2000 we had a federal funding stream, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, that was really starting to grow and make an impact in communities.

So we were established and we’ve grown very quickly to be an umbrella, to be a national voice, to really constantly share best practices, improve the quality of after school across the board, and to educate policy members first and foremost at the federal level, but now very, very much

so working with 50 state after school networks at the state level and even at the local level, so that we can create as many opportunities as possible for all students to have access to high-quality after school.

In your opening you mentioned the sad fact that today when the school bell rings, we're going to have more than 11 million kids that are unsupervised. But the number, the demand is even higher than that. For every child that's in after school, an additional two have parents that want them in a program, but there's not one available in their community or they can't afford it. So we have our work cut out for us.

Gene: So tell us, Jodi, what does a typical after school program look like? Who does it serve and what are the benefits?

Jodi: I love that question because the answer is: there is no typical after school program, and that's not quite true. A typical after school program is going to be comprehensive, so there are going to be opportunities for enrichment, there are going to be opportunities for help with schoolwork, there are going to be opportunities for physical activity, there is going to be some kind of snack or meal, there are going to be caring adults in a safe place.

But beyond that, the reality is that each after school program is really tailored to the community it's serving by the community that's serving it. So you might see in Fairbanks, Alaska, I saw a great, great class curriculum that was being run by a local museum on Native American and indigenous culture, and they were talking about all the different furs and how they might use the different furs in practice.

Another program might have a ski team. I know in Lexington, Kentucky, some of the kids actually get to horseback ride because it's horse country. It really depends on the uniqueness of the community and where the resources are to work with kids.

I think more and more we're seeing a huge growth of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), whether it's coding, robotics happening in the after school space; more and more thought going into programs. But having said all that, the reality is that of those 10 million kids that are in after school programs each day, the vast majority of them are in these programs because their parents could afford to pay for them.

And I would say that in my experience, some of the best programs out there are actually ones where the parents can't afford to pay because it is so competitive to get public and private dollars that these programs just blow your mind with the way they leverage different resources to make the sum much greater than each of the different parts.

So you might have federal dollars providing food and you might have U.S. Soccer coming in and doing soccer with the kids, and a library working on a reading program with the kids, and the YMCA doing swimming with the kids, and all sorts of maybe local businesses doing internships with the kids, but all sorts of partners working together.

And the average federal grantee, so this is in all 50 states, has nine partners working in an after school program, whether they are school, community based organizations, faith-based

organizations or businesses, and ideally and usually a combination of all of the above to provide resources to kids.

Gene: And are any state dollars devoted to these programs typically, Jodi?

Jodi: There are. And it really varies from state to state. We have a couple of very promising states where we're hoping there will be more activities. You know, it's your audience that are champions that are making that happen. California leads the pack. So California's ASES program is now up to about 600 million dollars a year going into after school. And what's interesting there is because the state funding stream has been able to focus on K through 8, they use their federal dollars now for high school and for summer learning programs. But it's still not enough, even in California.

Then New York State has some state funding. Ohio uses some TANIF dollars. Tennessee has unused lottery dollars. So there are definitely states that have some resources, but the only one that really is putting in enough resources to even come close to meeting the need is California, and there it's still not enough, but it's making a big dent.

Gene: So you mentioned some states there that are politically different. Do you see a difference between the political parties on how they approach after school programs right now?

Jodi: The answer to that is yes, but not a big one. I mean one of the wonderful things about after school is it really is the best of a local community providing for its local citizens. And when it's done well, you have the support of the police chief; you have the support of the local businesses who want to employ our students.

One of the interesting new voices we have is military leaders, because it's staggering... more than 70 percent of our 17- to 24-year-olds are ineligible for the military. And if they're ineligible for the military, what else are they ineligible for? And the reasons they're ineligible are all things we combat in after school. So it's being physically fit, it's not passing the tests and we help with academics, and it's having an incarceration record which kids in after school are much less likely to get into trouble with the law and it can be an alternative to incarceration.

So I think that when we have a strong program in a community, it builds that support. And I would say if you look in Congress, some of our greatest champions come from the far right and the far left. In fact, the most recent vote in the House of Representatives to restore funding that had been cut to 21st Century, we had the head of the Freedom Caucus voting on an amendment by Rosa Delauro, who is one of the most liberal members of Congress.

This has never been a partisan issue. The challenge we have is I think that in tight budgetary times, it can be a real struggle to find the resources for after school even though we know for every dollar that we invest, we are saving so many more.

Gene: You talked about the number of children who are taking care of themselves and the number of people who would want programs in their regions. Are there disparities in the quality of programs across the country?

Jodi: Oh, of course. I want to say especially those numbers that we have, we have them for every state. So anybody listening to this can go to our website www.afterschoolalliance.org, see the numbers for your state and we also break it down between rural and urban because there are real differences in some of the challenges facing rural communities. We have special reports state-by-state on access to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), on access to physical activity and nutrition, so a lot of really good resources.

And then the truth is the quality, of course the quality varies. The 50 state networks are really leading the effort across the board in trying to improve quality. As I mentioned, I think in general the programs that are funded by philanthropy and funded by government dollars tend to be some of the strongest ones, because there is a lot of oversight there and there are a lot of requirements and we know that for every federal grant that's given, there are at least three more applicants that were qualified that didn't get it.

And I think if you look at middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, some of those programs are really just meant to keep kids safe. So they're not bad; there are kids running around a playground and maybe doing a little homework help, but they're not as thoughtful as some of the federally funded programs.

Gene: There are obviously benefits to the parents and to the students. Do you have data or studies to show what the value of after school programs is?

Jodi: I wouldn't even know where to start, we have so many. This is all on our website. We have a compendium that has a bunch of studies, but the reality is that we have studies of programs across the board. The reality is that they have a huge impact on student success, so improved academic performance, improved grades, improved likelihood of promotion.

The stuff that I'm really excited about because obviously we're not an academic-only program – it's enrichment, it's nutrition, it's whole child – is the fact that kids who come to our programs are much less likely to miss school, which is one of the early indicators of all sorts of problems including dropping out. They're much more likely to improve their in-school day attendance. Their behavior improves. There is more of a positive outlook. There's a boost in the motivation to learn itself.

That's some of what I see. I mean, I've had the benefit in my 13 years on this job to visit programs. I'm probably pushing about 40 states right now, so I haven't been to every state yet. And I've seen extraordinary, extraordinary work. And I've seen it from South Dakota to Miami to Topeka, Kansas to Fairbanks, Alaska to the Big Island of Hawaii; I mean just all across the board in urban, rural and suburban communities, programs that are literally changing the lives of kids. They are giving parents peace of mind, knowing their kids are safe and doing something productive. And they're really strengthening communities.

Gene: What items do you believe state legislatures should pay attention to when they're developing after school policies?

Jodi: Obviously funding, and one of the things that I think is a hot topic and real in tough fiscal times is to look at some of the juvenile justice numbers and the cost of incarcerating children and adults, because the reality is that a high-quality after school program more than pays for itself if

you're incarcerating fewer kids and for kids that are nonviolent offenders as an alternative to incarceration.

I was shocked – I was working with our Kansas team and a huge number of students in Kansas were incarcerated for truancy. Right? So if you can get kids coming to school, that's much better. And then instead of paying to incarcerate them, you could pay to be building skills that are going to help them succeed in the workplace.

I know in Kansas it was about \$90,000 a year to incarcerate a child; it was \$900 a year to put them in an after school program. If you want to talk about a special program, in New York State it's \$350,000 a year to incarcerate a child. A PAL (Peer Assistance and Leadership) program is \$3,000 a year and that's where police officers are actually part of the program, but it doesn't feel like police; it's much more of building community and community relations, but they literally are there for some of these kids as an alternative to parole and incarceration.

So I think there are resources there to look into because, you know, the vast majority of adult prisoners, which is a huge expense, were incarcerated as youth. So if we can stop that pipeline into our prisons, we can save our states a lot of money.

So I would say legislators should absolutely look for funding resources in addition to the federal funds because they're not enough. They should be looking into when you're doing after school, we absolutely want our programs to be accountable and measured, but look into realistic ways to measure these programs because for many of us in after school, you need that fundamental infrastructure. So are the programs improving attendance at regular school? Are we improving kids' attitudes about learning? Are kids more motivated? So looking at some of those non-academic skills that lead to success, not just in academics, but success later on in life in the workforce... so I would look into that.

I think that partnerships in places where you can have partnerships are key, so the more you can leverage different actors in a community, not just one actor, whether it's school or CPO, but encourage them to work together, that's much stronger for the kids and the community. Obviously the more communication we can have between teachers during the school day and the after school program, that leads to benefits to everyone.

A lot of this is actually outlined in the ESSA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) law. And then I'd say any kind of law, I would leave some room in for real professional development. We might have the best coding curriculum in the world, but if we don't have someone to teach an after school, that's a problem, so making sure that we can have that professional development of the staff.

Gene: Jodi, this is great information. As we leave, do you have any final thoughts or pieces of...?

Jodi: Well, my final thoughts are we're here to make it easy for legislators. So our office, The AfterSchool Alliance, is a resource to all of you and we have sample legislation that we can share that's been successful in all sorts of states, all different dynamics. If you're not already working with your state network, we can coordinate on that and really facilitate the opportunities to bring more after school programs to each state and each community.

Gene: Jodi Grant, Executive Director of the AfterSchool Alliance, we appreciate you being a guest on Our American States.

Jodi: My pleasure. Thank you so much.

Music

Gene: So we now continue our conversation on after school programs with Texas State Representative Trent Ashby. Representative Ashby, welcome to the program.

Rep. Trent Ashby:
Thank you Gene. It's good to be with you this morning.

Gene: And tell us, Representative Ashby, how long have you been in the Legislature and how did you get interested in after school programs?

Trent: I have been in the Texas Legislature now in my third term, so going on six years. I became interested in after school programs really as part of my work on public education in general there in the Legislature. Prior to serving at the state level I served for a number of years on my local school board and, with a couple of kids currently in public schools at the time and still today, public education has always been an issue that has been a priority for me.

Gene: Tell us about the status of after school programs in the State of Texas. Are citizens and legislators finding value in them?

Trent: Absolutely. I think increasingly both our legislators and our citizenry across our great state are seeing the value in our after school and summer programs. Just to give you some numbers, in Texas alone currently there are more than 880,000 children and teens that are enrolled in after school programs and surprisingly, at least to me when I saw that number, I asked: Well, how many more students do we have that are interested in taking advantage of those opportunities? And we have waiting lists across our state that I've been told as many as 1.5 million additional children would like to take part in an after school or summer program.

So I think the demand certainly is there and that largely has driven some of the policy decisions that we enacted earlier this year during the Texas legislative session.

Gene: And what do you think, Representative Ashby, are some of the barriers to getting some of those programs implemented across the state?

Trent: One of the barriers is, as is always the case, is just funding. In many cases these after school programs are being conducted by nonprofit organizations that run on a shoestring budget and they need help both from their communities and their constituency of people they serve. And I think it's important from a state perspective that we look at the return on investment and the value in what these opportunities for after school programs bring to our state and to our children more importantly.

And when you look at numbers that have been cited such as that nationally every dollar invested in after school programs saves nine dollars by increasing their earning potential and

improving their performance at school as well as reducing crime and juvenile delinquency, I think that it's important that states such as Texas and others take a look at this and see if this makes a good, smart investment of public dollars and, of course, in Texas we've seen that it's had quite a bit of value and we're looking forward to seeing hopefully those programs expanded in the near future.

Gene: And tell us about your colleagues there in the Texas House and Senate. Do you see them addressing after school programs in the future? Do both parties find value in this issue?

Trent: Absolutely is the answer to that. I'm pleased to report that I would hope in every state, not just in Texas, that when you talk about educational outcomes for our students, that's a nonpartisan issue. Everybody should support that goal and certainly as we moved a bill through the legislative session earlier this year in Austin, we saw that firsthand. It was very much a bipartisan issue with all Ds and Rs agreeing on the importance of looking at this after school program and in terms of the reporting data that is shared with our education agency and our commissioner, to see in a demonstrative fashion what those numbers look like.

And so I'm excited about what the future holds for the expansion of after school and summer programs here in Texas because I know it's a good value for the taxpayers and certainly, most importantly, it's something that's going to improve the educational outcomes for all of our children.

Gene: So based on what you've learned in Texas, what advice would you give your state legislative colleagues across the nation in terms of addressing after school programs?

Trent: I'm a big local control guy. As I said, having come from a local school board, I'm always reticent to look at a one-size-fits-all policy. So I would just suggest to my colleagues around the country as they consider how they might improve upon the structure they have, the public education structure they have in their respective states, that they look at this issue of after school and summer programs. You know, how readily available are those in their states?

Again, when you look at the data, there's no question that it holds great value and it certainly has improved educational outcomes and then many other ancillary issues outside of the classroom in terms of civic involvement and teaching leadership and addressing some challenges that we all face looking at the STEM-related (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), fields. And I just think there's great value in it.

So I would just again encourage my colleagues to take a look at it and see if it's something maybe that could be expanded in their states, and as a first step, look at maybe what we're doing here in Texas with at least reporting the data from our school districts to our education agency in terms of how many children are participating, and then following those children through the process and looking at those educational outcomes. And if it's working, great, then we've made a good decision. If it's not working as suggested, then we can always take a step back and see how we can do better.

Gene: And let me pick up on one of the phrases you used there: civic engagement. Do you see having this type of program actually helps students be better citizens?

Trent: Absolutely. There's no question that these after school programs engage students, enriching the experiences that foster leadership and collaboration and responsibility. That's something that we always are striving to teach our kids and invest in our kids. So there's no question that in a day when a lot of our youth are holding a cellphone and going home and looking at a TV screen and playing games constantly, I think it's good for youth to be involved in activities such as after school programs that allow them to develop skills such as communication and collaboration and build friendships and just improve their social skills.

That's something that's vitally important in a dynamic world. I think our after school programs can play a key role in that.

Gene: We've been talking with Texas State Representative Trent Ashby. We appreciate you being a guest on Our American States.

Trent: I just appreciate the opportunity to be with you today and would just again encourage my colleagues across the country to consider after school programs, take a look at them, and see if it's something that works for their state in terms of expanding and improving. If there are any questions, I'm an easy man to find. People can feel free to reach out to me and I'll be glad to visit with them directly.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.