



Articles by Subject

After-Life for After School

When federal CLC money runs out, some programs do quite well, thank you.

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by *Erika Fitzpatrick*

Bricca P. Sweet doesn't want another federal after-school grant.

Don't misunderstand: They've helped her in the past. But now that her community controls funding for North Carolina's Northwest Three Afterschool (NCNW3) Consortium, her program is free to offer the kinds of comprehensive after-school services that Sweet believes the area's rural kids need – and might not get under the restrictive state rules for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) grants.

Sweet's program, which serves 250 youth across a 950-square-mile stretch of three counties, is among the former CLC grantees profiled in a new report that describes how those programs sustained themselves after their federal grants ran out.

While CLC has seeded thousands of new programs, some administrators say their programs flourished when they were out from under the yoke of federal and state requirements tied to CLC dollars.

Heather Padgett, who co-authored the report produced by The Finance Project (TFP), says maintenance of after-school programs requires "true" collaborative partnerships, diverse funding – including participation fees – and evaluations to document outcomes. Most agree that sustainability requires planning, and the earlier that planning starts, the better.

Many of those that survived after federal funding expired "did it through accessing ... local [school] district funds in some way," by getting allocations from other federal sources or through "general fund dollars," says Padgett, a senior program associate at TFP. The Washington-based nonprofit consulting firm interviewed 22 CLC recipients in 2005 and 2006 to see how they achieved financial independence.

Started in 1994 with \$40 million, CLC has grown into a \$1 billion annual program that helps underwrite after-school, summer and academic enrichment programs in an estimated 8,750 schools and communities, according to the Afterschool Alliance, a Washington-based advocacy organization. Youth-serving agencies are encouraged to partner with schools to access the money. Congress appropriated about \$980 million for CLC in fiscal 2006 and is on track to provide the same amount for 2007.

Sweet notes that learning to live without that federal resource is a struggle. "Don't plan to sleep much," she says.

But, she adds, "we are no longer interested in ... the 21st Century federal grants."

Prepare for the End

Karen Dewey, director of Claremont 21C – a comprehensive school-based program serving 400 to 800 children and families each year in Claremont, N.H. – had a positive experience with her CLC grant, but says groups that view it as anything other than seed funding do so at their peril.

Claremont 21C addresses a gamut of challenges for children and families, including prenatal and child

care, parent education, dental services and youth employment. "We existed [with that philosophy] before the federal grant," Dewey says. After the grants ended two years ago, "we survived because we were that first."

Dewey's program is backed by the school district and the school board and partners with civic groups and other organizations to bolster enrichment services.

Being funded by CLC brought temporary benefits beyond money. Dewey says the federal grant process exposed Claremont 21C to youth development program literature and data-collection systems that helped it become more sustainable.

One key to survival: charging a user's fee.

Some youth-serving agencies took the federal money, offered before- and after-school services for free, then were shuttered when the support ended. "That is shooting yourself in the foot, and I think that has been proven true," Dewey says.

"There was always a fee for our service" for those who had an ability to pay, she says. "We used that [CLC] money building, but we didn't totally rely on it."

"Plan ahead: The day you mail that grant [application for CLC], be planning."

Changing the fees, as well as bringing in other federal grants and large private donations, helped Columbine Elementary School in Denver broaden its before- and after-school program after its CLC funds expired last year, says Aaron Hartfield, the school's site coordinator. After the program lowered its fee from \$25 every two months to \$10, its total fee income declined, but participation rose from 100 children last year to 170 this year.

In North Carolina, NCNW3 organizers planned for sustainability well before they received federal grants, which kept the program afloat through an economic downturn that started in the late 1990s.

But the grant expired June 30, says Sweet, executive director of Educational Leadership Beyond Excellence, the Sugar Grove, N.C., intermediary organization that directs the initiative.

By then, the consortium had bolstered local support in a variety of ways: publicizing the program through the media, engaging in strong local partnerships – especially with the school system – and "building a competitive edge" to win grants from outside the tri-county area, Sweet says.

The consortium kept its evaluation component through a partnership with a professor from Appalachian State University and tapped volunteers from among retired teachers, police and fire departments, church groups, and music and visual arts.

The "NCLB" Effect

Accepting CLC funds has its drawbacks. Program changes at the state level sometimes clash with efforts to build local sustainability and provide comprehensive services. The 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act transferred program administration from the federal government to the states, and encouraged the programs to focus on children in high-poverty, low-performing schools and to help those children meet state and local academic standards.

As CLC "became much more heavily academic-focused," some grantees said their program options were limited, report author Padgett says.

For example, CLC funds in North Carolina must be spent on youths who are functioning below their grade levels. That disqualifies the NCNW3 model, which serves kids with many risk factors. "Research on kids who are at risk says they need, most of all, a continuous web of support," Sweet says. "Our schools don't serve only those kids who are below grade level."

That restriction not only hurts kids, it undercuts program sustainability, Sweet argues. "We were dismayed and outraged, really, to see them implement those requirements," she says.

Other states have used their flexibility under federal rules to make changes that grantees like. New Hampshire now offers CLC funds over five years, so that grantees have time to build broad local support. (States may offer three-, four- or five-year grants.)

As next year's NCLB reauthorization approaches, organizations like TFP and the Afterschool Alliance say the CLC program requirements might need adjusting to encourage sustainability.

Others say the biggest change needed is more funding. "This problem could be solved with more money," says Jodi Grant, executive director of the Afterschool Alliance. "At every level, not just federal dollars, [but more] state dollars, local dollars, private dollars."

A recent survey by the alliance found that five years of stagnant funding – annual CLC appropriations don't approach the authorized level of \$2.5 billion per year – has left many after-school programs at or above maximum capacity, forcing them to raise fees and imperiling services for the neediest children.

TFP's new report is at www.financeproject.org; the Afterschool Alliance survey is at www.afterschoolalliance.org.

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