

# Faces & Places – A Parent Perspective on Afterschool

How does a parent who works multiple jobs, speaks a different language than their children's teachers, lives in a dangerous neighborhood, and can barely afford the food on their table, let alone piano lessons and club soccer fees, provide the opportunities, support and resources their child needs to succeed in school and in life? How does a single mom putting herself through college, and working to support her family, have the time and space to get to know her child's friends and their parents? How do we establish a trusting safe community for our children to run, play and grow in, when we don't know our neighbors, and we lack the opportunity to get to know each other? And what is that worth? These are all questions that come to mind when thinking about what parents, and our communities, are facing in their roles of raising the next generation.

The saying *"it takes a village to raise a child"* comes to mind when I reflect on the conversations that occurred in our parent focus groups this winter. From Portland to Medford, parents talked the struggles they face in raising healthy, academically well rounded, and socially successful young people, and how the programs they participate in enhance their ability to do this difficult job. Despite the variances in discussion groups (rural versus urban, middle versus low income, Spanish versus English speakers), each group identified similar challenges. Demanding work schedules, a decreasing trust and familiarity with their community, increasing academic demands and lack of accessibility to enrichment activities and academic support, are all challenges families are facing. As one parent put it, "in this day and age, its hard to educate, entertain and raise your children."

This winter, with funding from the Gates Foundation, OregonASK partnered with evaluator Michael Coe, to facilitate parent focus groups around the state. The goal of the focus groups was to gather information on parent opinion around the important elements of afterschool programs, and their general opinions and experiences with afterschool. Using a set of structured questions, and one activity, we created conversations with groups large and small, from rural and urban locations, and different walks of life. From a YMCA in Portland, to a Community Based program in Medford, to school-based 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC programs in Woodburn and Falls City, parents shared their experiences and thoughts.

Before going in to the focus groups, there were some comments we expected to hear: "I need a place for my child to go after school because I'm working", and "the afterschool program gives my child the opportunity to experience things he wouldn't otherwise get to." But, we also heard things we didn't expect, "the afterschool program is the only place my child gets to play with her friends, because I don't trust others' parenting styles, and I don't have the time or opportunity to establish relationships with other parents" and, "in school kids are separated by age, and academic ability—the afterschool program gives kids the chance to socialize with people they normally wouldn't interact with.

Whether parents had access to a quality program or not, most recognized the benefits programs could provide to not only their children, but to themselves as well. When asked to vote on the most important aspects of afterschool programs, parents agreed that having a safe place for their kids to be after school, and getting help on homework or

subjects covered in school like math and reading were critical. The second most important aspects were generally socializing with other kids, and building life skills such as communication and teamwork—both things that a quality program enables through a risk-free environment where hands-on enrichment activities are being facilitated. For Spanish-speaking parents with limited English proficiency, homework help is critical. Language barriers, on top of content comprehension barriers that many English-speaking parents face, prevent parents from helping their children with homework at home. Many parents talked about the opportunities their children are getting at afterschool programs, cooking, photography, LEGO Robotics, activities and experiences that parents may not have the resources or knowledge to facilitate for their children on their own. Parents also recognized the constraints schools face, noting the focus on reading and math scores, limited time for play or socializing, and the continued cutting of extra-curricular activities that expose kids to trade skills, such as welding and carpentry.

Many of these observations were not surprising to us, however, these questions brought up something we did not expect: the changing role of community in supporting kids. In generations past, kids ran around the neighborhood after school, going from one house to the next, getting exercise, socializing, building positive relationships with peers and adults and establishing a sense of self. Today, this is not the case. If kids are outside playing, it is within eyesight of a parent. Often times, even this is prevented by the need for a single parent, or both parents, to work through the afternoon. Parents with kids in programs noted a primary benefit being the opportunity kids got to socialize with each other, in a safe environment where they knew a responsible adult was keeping an eye on them. Additionally, the opportunity to explore different interests, to tinker and dabble in things like cooking and robotics, helps kids establish a sense of who they are, and how they fit into their environments.

When the question of cost came up in these conversations, what was normally a noisy room became quiet. Quality afterschool programs are generally very cost-effective, adding up to about \$1,500 per year per student. In the majority of the focus groups, parents were receiving services for little or no cost to them made accessible to them by the federally funded 21stCCLC program, and despite recognizing the value, many felt they could not afford to pay \$5 per day. Most groups agreed that if parents were asked to pay for services, that fees should be implemented based on income level, and that children and families who need these supports the most, are often the ones who can't afford it. This illustrates a challenge we know programs across the state are facing, as state and federal funding is dwindling, and we still facing uncertain times.

The true value of these programs goes well beyond the monetary cost. Leading us to ask ourselves, how can we preserve these opportunities for children to play, grow and learn? What is the value of supporting kids' self-discovery? How about the value of ease of mind at work, knowing that your 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grader isn't home alone after school?

Parents and families need the supports quality before- and afterschool, summer and holiday programs can provide. These conversations with parents revealed a layer of value we hadn't considered before, adding to our list of reasons why afterschool is critical not only to kids, but to parents and communities as well.

Full Report on Parent Focus Group will be delivered at the Afterschool Day at the Capitol.

