

Faces and Places: Facing the Tough Questions

“When I signed up for CAFE I was afraid, but once it started I felt much more alive, what I mean is I made more friends...thank you for all that you do for us.”

“Dear Ms. Susan, I will try to be strong for CAFE. I will miss you very much, and all the people who made me smile with joy.”

“Dear Ms. Susan, CAFE is the best thing and it saved my mom’s job. It is the best thing for me and I don’t want it to end.”

These are the voices of children participating in Metropolitan Family Service Community Schools – Community and Families Enrichment (CAFE) programs in the North Clackamas School District. Participants were reacting to the news that their program is closing. Their voices, the disappointment, genuine sorrow, and the obvious positive impact that has been made drive us to ask: What happens when an afterschool program closes its doors?

After nearly two years of working on sustainability planning with almost half of Oregon’s 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) programs the time has arrived when grants are expiring. Despite hard work on sustainability planning, establishing community teams, applying for grants, assessing fees and potential fee structures, and conducting outreach; many programs are still facing significant funding gaps and are being forced to make very difficult decisions about the future of their program. When analyzing a programs funding sources, and communicating them to the community, we often create pie charts that show the diversity of funding sources. For many programs working on sustainability since Fall 2011, these pie charts have grown to be increasingly colorful – exemplifying their success in creating increased fiscal sustainability. Yet, a large slice of this pie is still labeled “funding gap.” These funding gaps are forcing programs to significantly change program services (either the number of students served or the length of time programming is offered), and in many cases close their doors.

This issue is not unique to 21st CCLC programs. When conducting our statewide workforce survey, OregonASK randomly selected 320 programs out of 806 such programs in our database. Of these 320 programs, 20% were no longer operating. As we update the database, we are interested to see how many programs have closed their doors. Given the current funding climate and what we know of the lack of adequate support for programs, we anticipate the total number of closed programs will be significant.

Sustainability planning, the database update, the workforce survey, parent focus groups and forums lead us to ask a tough question: what happens to communities, parents, and most importantly to kids, when afterschool programs are forced to close their doors due to inadequate funding? A question that is especially difficult to answer in Oregon,

where we know that roughly 50% of our public school students are living in poverty (as defined by free and reduced lunch rates).

To answer this question I'm going to highlight the CAFE program in the North Clackamas School District where Metropolitan Family Service currently serves five schools – four of which are supported by two separate 21st CCLC grants, one of which expires in June. This grant currently serves three elementary schools—roughly 300 students and families who are primarily low-income, English Language Learners, and facing other challenges including foster care, homelessness or single-parent households. This community loves CAFE – school staff, kids and parents say nothing but positive things, and the positive outcomes for students are significant*. Working with this community, you can tell that the staff are an integral part of their school-communities, that they truly care about the students and families they are serving. Like many afterschool programs, this is more than just a job for CAFE staff, and this feeling percolates to participants.

The funding gap for CAFE in North Clackamas is huge—amounting to roughly \$380,000 to maintain current funding and program levels. Efforts to raise funds through grant-writing and seeking business community support have helped some, but like many poor communities facing 21st CCLC cuts, these gaps are simply too large to fill. About six weeks ago, after a few months of Local Sustainability Team meetings, CAFE leadership made the difficult decision to close the majority of its doors in June. Most program services currently offered – enrichment activities, homework support, supper; all provided four days per week for three hours per day – would not be coming back next year. Communications to parents, and school staff explaining this decision were sent out, and a parent forum was held to discuss this decision.

At the parent forum, parents asked questions like *why* and *will services come back* and *can we pay a higher fee to have it continue?* The group was small, and their voices could not be claimed to represent all of the CAFE parent voices. Yet, their concern and disappointment, their questions and ideas paint a picture of what this is like for all parents. They talked about how much they loved the program and gave suggestions for helping it continue such as increased parent volunteerism or increased parent fees. They expressed their reliance on the program for childcare, and how much the academic and enrichment activities supported their child's success in school. What might be more poignant in exploring what it means to close a program is to consider the reaction of the kids.

"I'm going to be sad when we can't come to CAFE anymore because I've been in CAFE since it started here. I'm going to have a hard time doing my homework."

"Kids in CAFE like it. We all are sad that CAFE is ending."

"I'm so sad this is the last year of CAFE...CAFE helps my family because nobody is at home. Plus, it will be hard to do my homework with my little brother around."

These letters, and those quoted at the beginning of the article say it better than I ever could.

In September, when the school bell rings again, families will be facing afterschool hours without CAFE. Where will they go? Some will go to the district's fee based childcare center others may go home to a parent or family member who is not at work, but many will go home to an empty house, some parents may be forced to shift work schedules or quit jobs to provide care for their children. And this is simply addressing the issue of *where* kids will go. We must also consider *what they will do* without the afterschool program? The structure of "power hour" in which kids get their homework done with the support of CAFE staff, enrichment activities like STEM and Health Fairs, and arts activities, and supper every evening will be gone. Will they have access to technology, or fun and educational experiences? Will their grades suffer, or behavior issues increase? Will they be safe at home, or hungry?

These are difficult questions, no one wants to see this happen, and when it does it is often easier not to think about it too much. For thirteen years federal, state and local partners have invested millions of dollars into 21st CCLC programs and having positive impacts on thousands of lives, and yet, we do not know how many of these programs survive after the loss of their funding, we do not know what has become of the lives we touched. As I said before, we know that 21stCCLC programs are not the only ones facing this issue. Changing funding structures – including the use of Employment Related Child Care funds – have and will continue to effect vast number of children and families across our state. Statistically, it is likely that these will be the children and families who need it the most.

In these uncertain times, it is critically important not to lose sight of the positive things these programs have given to communities, parents and kids. The research is there, we know that high-quality afterschool and summer programs work, and it is better to provide services while we can than not at all. Afterschool and summer programs like CAFE are an opportunity. An opportunity to create positive change in the lives of those who need it the most.

In our state's efforts to seize this opportunity, the hard work going on at the Legislature and within the offices of the Oregon Education Investment Board, we must not forget the damage done to communities, parents and students due to closing programs, yo-yoing funding sources and general instability of services. Rather than pushing the difficult questions aside, let us face them head-on, and let them drive our work to create positive change.

* At all three elementary schools, the CAFÉ program met its objective of increased Oral Reading Fluency scores for at least 75% of students identified as needing to improve; significant percentages 50%-76% of CAFE students met or exceeded math standards, while 66%-72% met or exceeded reading standards; and CAFE students are all meeting the state attendance benchmarks.