

Out-of-school time programs need reliable funding

By Megan Nyce
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Guest Commentary

As a Johnson Elementary School parent shared: “My daughter attends an after-school program because I work. I have no one to help me take care of her. It’s as simple as that.”

She is one of many Denver parents who rely on programs such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver at Johnson Elementary.

Thanks to the program, students such as her daughter have an affordable, safe and engaging place to go after the school bell rings.

Since 2005, the club and the school have partnered to provide comprehensive out-of-school time (OST) programming five days a week, offering academic support, healthy meals and more. Unfortunately, without sustainable public funding, the program is under threat of closure at the end of the 2022-23 school year, as is the story for too many Colorado OST programs.

Colorado schools and families and our economy need comprehensive OST programs now more than ever — programs such as Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs and Scholars Unlimited. They are helping youths recover from one of the most challenging periods of their lifetimes and providing additional support to improve academic performance levels, which, for many students, have fallen this past school year and continue to lag.

School districts that partner with OST programs report improved student attendance, behavior and academic performance. Further, research also shows students who attend OST programs are less likely to use drugs and engage in youth violence.

OST programs are also popular among parents: A recent survey found 82% of Colorado parents say OST programs help them keep their jobs and 88% support public funding of these programs. Today these programs are needed to help get people back to work and jump-start our economy.

Despite the fact that partnerships between OST providers and schools have been the backbone of our communities for decades and evidence proves their value, the field is chronically underfunded in Colorado.

This is leaving tens of thousands of youths waiting for an

available spot in an affordable comprehensive program.

In other words, across Colorado, unmet demand for comprehensive out-of-school programs far outweighs the supply for which only patchwork funding streams allow.

Additionally, without a dedicated public funding stream for these programs, OST providers are forced to cobble together public and private funding every year to keep their doors open. They are highly dependent on philanthropic grants to sustain operations and avoid charging families high participation fees. Many sites are forced to close each year because public funding is simply not available.

But we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to support comprehensive OST programs with ESSER funds under the American Rescue Plan, which gives Colorado state, local and school district leaders decision-making power over more than \$1.1 billion to help students recover.

It is a significant funding source that will relieve OST program workers of some of the fundraising burden for the next few years, allowing them to open more programs where they can serve more families and focus their efforts on high-quality programming for youths.

Let’s start there, but then let’s recognize that this is a short-term relief strategy.

Although Denver’s philanthropic community generously supports comprehensive OST programs, more funding is needed, particularly from the public sector, to serve more youths. Without dedicated, sustainable federal, state and local investments, many comprehensive OST programs won’t survive or even open. And who will suffer the most? Our state’s most vulnerable youths and families.

Now is the time to come together and work to solve the systemic funding challenges facing the OST industry — our youths, schools, families and economy depend on it.

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