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RESEARCH, PUBLIC POLICY and PUBLIC IDEAS:

The Importance of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers' After-school Programs as a First Step toward System Building

Remarks prepared for
A Bi-partisan Briefing on 21st Century Community Learning Centers' After-school Programs for Low-income Children and Youth

*By Karen J. Pittman
President, Impact Strategies, Inc.
Executive Director, The Forum for Youth Investment*

March 7, 2003



The Cady-Lee House ■ 7064 Eastern Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20012-2031
T: 202.207.3333 ■ F: 202.207.3329
Email: youth@forumforyouthinvestment.org
Web: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

a division of
impact
strategies, inc.

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Friday, March 7, 2003 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Dirksen Room 430
By Karen J. Pittman
President, Impact Strategies, Inc.
Executive Director, The Forum for Youth Investment
Washington, D.C.

Good afternoon. I want to thank the Senate staff involved and the Afterschool Alliance for arranging this briefing. I hope that it is just the beginning of a dialogue about how to strengthen the infrastructure of after-school programs that is finally taking hold in this country.

We have just heard two powerful stories of the role that evaluation research can play in monitoring and improving program quality. The After-School Corporation and LA's Best are two powerful examples of what can happen when funding for out-of-school opportunities is used to grow a system of out-of-school programs that has the capacity to do planning, training, capacity building and assessment.

We are here today, in large part however, because of the role evaluation research can play in monitoring and improving public policy.

As you know, the Bush administration unveiled its request last month to cut funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) program in fiscal year 2004. This is not good news. But it is not surprising. Dozens of social programs will suffer cutbacks in the next budget as the nation prepares for war, further cuts taxes and adjusts to the expense of operating in a post-September 11 world.

The magnitude of the proposed cut — 40 percent — is disturbing. Many organizations like the Afterschool Alliance will weigh in on how a budget cut of this magnitude will affect the newly scaled-up after-school field and hurt our children. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, for example, has already calculated that the proposed 40 percent cut will eliminate program access for 570,000 children and, therefore, represents a lost opportunity to prevent 41,000 crimes and save taxpayers \$2.4 billion dollars.

In my remarks today, I will focus not on the proposed cut, but on the release of *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program, First Year Findings*, a major federally-funded evaluation study by Mathematica Policy Research that reported that the program was not achieving its intended result of increasing academic achievement. Please note that I underscored the word release. I do not want to debate the evaluation design or the findings. I want to focus on how the release of the study has influenced the debate.

Why focus on the study's release? Because there are two things that can result from the unfortunate timing of the study's release that have short-term and long-term consequences. First, research-based conversations

about how to improve the 21st Century CLC program could be curtailed because of the need to take sides about the wisdom of the cut. Second, the momentum to create an infrastructure for out-of-school learning that has been building over the past few years could be derailed. In my opinion, both of these possibilities are worthy of serious concern.

Scientifically-based research *should* play a more central role in political decisions to expand, redefine or reduce programs. When used correctly, research can be a powerful counterweight to limit the big pendulum swings frequently associated with popular programs, to accelerate the growth of effective programs, and even to curtail the expansion of popular but ineffective programs.

But, just as there are protocols for conducting research, there are protocols for presenting research findings. The Administration did not follow those protocols. I believe that there are three rules that must be taken seriously to ensure the correct use of research in policy discussions. Each, in this case, was broken.

1. **Time for rigorous debate.** After several delays, the Administration released the report. Coupling the release with the budget reduction plan effectively cut off discussion about the scientific validity of the report, the implications of the findings and the practical wisdom of the response. Researchers, including the 12 who wrote the Mathematica study, need to step forward to challenge not the decision to propose cuts but the process. A credible call for a “rigorous, objective scientific review” (ESEA, Title IV) of all relevant research can come from the research community who should argue to have their conclusions heard, regardless of whether the proposal on the table is halving the budget or doubling it.
2. **Consideration of cumulative evidence.** The Administration recommended a draconian cut based on the findings of one study, using one year of data collected on programs that were only a few years old, even with several large, scientifically-valid research studies available. But other studies using experimental and quasi-experimental designs are available that offer different, more positive findings. The Harvard Family Research Project has compiled dozens of evaluation summaries on its Web site. TASC (The After-School Corporation) and LA’s Best have solid evaluations that show significant gains in academic and non-academic outcomes. And recent evaluations of the New York City and San Francisco Beacons initiatives and of other robust out-of-school time programs provide solid evidence that these programs make a difference.
3. **Full disclosure of research findings.** The Administration zeroed in on a set of negative findings about the impact of after-school activities on academic achievement at the elementary level while ignoring findings that identify academic and other impacts (such as increased parental involvement) that could guide program improvement.

For example, while the sample size is small, the Mathematica study found that even light after-school participation by middle school students led to positive changes — increased homework completion, participation in school activities, decreases in absences and tardiness and other behaviors associated with higher achieving students. The program had an impact on classroom behavior: there was an 11 percentage point increase in the number of African-American students that teachers reported being attentive in class, and a 7.5 percentage point increase in the number of African-American students that teachers reported participating in class. And, in a rather stunning finding given the program “dosage,” the program increased middle school math grades, largely because of the significantly larger effects found on Hispanic and African-American youth.

It is unfortunate that the Mathematica evaluation was used to justify the proposed cut. But the good news is that evaluation data was introduced into the debate. And, as you have heard from my colleagues, evaluation has much to tell us about how to improve after-school programs, what to expect from after-school programs. It also has a lot to tell us about how to tailor federal and state funding strategies, create incentives and target funding streams. Let's not throw the report away as we would the card that came with a present we wish we hadn't been given.

Why? Because there is something even bigger than the 21st Century CLC program that will be jeopardized if the timing and twisting of the Mathematica report is allowed to derail more measured research-based discussions of what is known and what is needed. This program has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into communities since its inception. Much more than that, however, it has begun to change the way parents, the public and policy makers think about out-of-school time, out-of-school opportunities and out-of-school learning.

After-school programs are not new. Settlement houses ran after-school programs a century ago. But the idea that *every* child should have an opportunity to be in an afterschool program is new. The idea that there should be stable public funding for these programs is new. The idea that these programs can provide more than babysitting for children and chaperoning for teens is new. The idea that these programs can and should be held to some common standards is new. The idea that they provide a needed complement, and sometimes supplement, to even the best in-school experience is new. The idea that they need to be a part of a sustainable system of out-of-school learning opportunities for children and teens is new.

In short, after-school as a *public idea*, to use Robert Reich's term, is new. Reich reminds us that

"The core responsibility of those who deal in public policy — elected officials, administrators, policy analysts — is not simply to discover as objectively as possible what people want for themselves and then to determine and implement the best means of satisfying these wants. It is also to provide the public with alternative visions of what is desirable and possible, to stimulate deliberation about them, provoke a reexamination of premises and values, and thus to broaden the range of potential responses and deepen society's understanding of itself."

(Reich, 1988, pp. 3-4)

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is not the only funding stream for after-school or out-of-school programs. Programs for elementary school students can be funded by TANF and the Child Care Development Block Grant. Programs for teens can be funded by any of a myriad of federal and state programs created to prevent a problem (delinquency, pregnancy, violence, substance abuse), increase preparation (academic and vocational) or promote civic participation.

But 21st Century CLC is the program that solidified the public and policy makers' nagging sense that this country needed to make a commitment to the preparation and development of its children and youth that pushed beyond the school day, beyond the school building and beyond the school mandate to provide academic instruction. 21st Century CLC is the program that got educators thinking about new ways to expand learning opportunities and new ways to partner with communities. The verdict is still out whether this program, as currently defined, implemented and used by parents, can deliver the results that consistently improve the attendance, behavior and performance of the students most at risk. But the experiment is young. It is time to make changes. It is not time to declare defeat.

It is important to note that the differences between the findings on academic and developmental outcomes presented by the evaluators of The After-School Corporation and LA's Best or the evaluations reviewed by the Harvard Family Research Project should not be chalked up to partisan politics. The differences reflect more than strategic choices of studies that support preformed opinions.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is really more of a funding stream than it is a program. Enormous variation was built in by design — communities were encouraged to work within a large menu of programmatic options to create programs that met their needs. Goals were broad, good practice standards were general and technical assistance was thin. The idea was not to be prescriptive, but supportive of city level efforts to scale up after-school opportunities for children and youth.

There are programs that achieve the kind of success the Administration is looking for. But they are nestled within strong local systems and steadied by their own track records built over time. These systems and programs are simply not numerous enough to be identified in a random national sample of 21st Century CLC grantees. If there is a lesson to be gleaned from the Mathematica study, it is that the system being built is very young and the programs are very uneven.

This is not a surprising lesson. But it is one that requires us to step back, examine the findings from all available studies, and do our best to understand identify the best levers for program improvement and systems change.

Like everyone here, I expect, I am concerned about the impact of the proposed cut on the 21st Century CLC program. But my primary concern is not whether the 21st Century program can withstand a *responsible* budget cut. I believe it can. My concern is whether this emerging public idea of the need for a system of informal learning can withstand the body slam that the “40 percent cut because after-school programs don't work” message currently circulating signals. Let me state for the record that I am equally concerned about whether the emerging system can withstand the challenge that the recent California referendum that could significantly *increase* the budget for after-school programs poses. The other sure way to undermine the creation of a new system is to expand it too quickly.

Politics will always inform the policy process. But science can only inform the policy process if politics are, at least to some extent, left in the hall when decisions are being made about how and how much to reshape programs.

We are on to something as a country. We are on the threshold of reaping the benefits of a decade of work to create a normative demand for out-of-school programs that was started with the Carnegie Corporation's release of *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours*.

I sat on the Carnegie Task Force. I have served on many others since then. I directed the President's Crime Prevention Council in the Clinton Administration, a council that, under a different name, was charged with much the same task as the recently created White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth.

I have been connected to many efforts to strengthen the programmatic landscape for low-income children and youth. Only a few have broken across the Beltway barrier to be embraced by the public. For the first time in my professional career, there is a chance to build a public commitment to expanding informal learning opportunities that is as unwavering as the current commitment to improving formal K-12 education. This

opportunity should not be taken lightly. As James Traub of the *New York Times* stated in his article “What No School Can Do” (January 16, 2000):

“Gingrich understood something important: . . . children need an enveloping environment that is secure and nourishing, as the streets and often the home itself are not. And school is not enveloping enough . . . There’s a strong argument for universally available after-school activities. No less important would be the restoration of the web of church, community and police-sponsored programs that once flourished in big cities . . . we have to ask more of social institutions — and not just schools — than we used to.”

There are roughly 200 federal youth programs on the books, many of which fund out-of-school programs for children and teens. Coordination, consolidation and even elimination are no doubt overdue. But rash cuts will undermine the trust needed to bring departments and agencies together. And rash cuts in visible, popular programs will undermine the public’s trust that long-term solutions can be crafted despite changes in administrations and changes in the economy. A comprehensive response requires a collaborative, disciplined analysis with objective criteria.

If the Congress truly wants to create a “comprehensive federal response . . . to the problems of youth failure,” as the White House Task Force authorizing language suggests, it might want to call a moratorium with the White House on singling out individual programs for budget cuts until the Task Force’s work is done. Instead, Congress and the Administration could establish a range for an overall budget target for out-of-school youth programs, and charge the Task Force with presenting a reasoned plan for addressing youth failure and increasing youth opportunities that builds on the work done by the National Research Council to define the characteristics of quality programs.