

Column: Hawaii's afterschool, summer programs matter

By Paula Adams · Today

One key to the success of the gradual reopening of Hawaii's economy is child care. Working parents, including those looking for jobs, need to know their children are safe and constructively engaged, if our economy is [to recover from this COVID-19 storm](#).

For years now, many parents in Hawaii have looked to afterschool and summer learning programs — not just to care for their children, but to make sure that their out-of-school-time hours are put to good use strengthening their academics; getting physical activity; and building teamwork, problem-solving and social-emotional skills that will help them thrive in the classroom and beyond, all under the watchful eye of caring adults.

Even during the pandemic, Hawaii's afterschool programs have kept kids connected and learning. About half of programs have offered virtual services so students can keep learning from home, while about 10% have remained physically open, caring for the children of essential workers. In addition, many programs are providing food for families in need.

Newly available data from an annual statewide evaluation of afterschool programs supported by federal funding reminds us what a difference these programs make in kids' lives. The evaluation focused on afterschool programs supported by grants from the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) initiative, the main federal funding stream for afterschool and summer learning. Together such programs serve roughly 15,000 Hawaii youth.

The report finds that "Overall, the data collected indicate that students who participated in Hawaii's 2018-19 21CCLC programs made significant gains in all of the areas measured." Two of the more striking findings:

>> Better school attendance: Only 12.6% of regular participants (those participating 30 or more days) missed 15 or more days of school throughout the year, compared to 24% of nonparticipating students attending the same schools.


>> English and math gains. According to the data, 51.7% of regular participants achieved proficiency in English and 40.9% achieved proficiency in math, compared to 42.1% and 30.9% of nonparticipating students, respectively.

Afterschool and summer learning programs are all the more important as we restart our economy. As businesses across Hawaii reopen, more programs will need to reopen their doors, too, to ensure parents can go back to work. Even before the pandemic, 72% of Hawaii parents said afterschool programs helped them keep their jobs.

Moreover, learners will need even more robust support from afterschool and summer learning providers to re-engage, catch up and keep up. Learning gaps may have widened among our most vulnerable youth.

Research on summer learning loss shows that such gaps are exacerbated by time out of school and distance learning — a struggle for some learners, either because they can't access the internet reliably, or simply because they're not yet able to sit in front of a computer for long stretches.

As vital as afterschool and summer learning programs have been and will continue to be, a harsh reality is headed our way.

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Many programs, here and across the nation, have been battered by funding shortfalls resulting from the pandemic. Our programs in Hawaii will need continued, even increased, support to make sure they can keep their doors open, so that every child who needs a program can have one. That's a critical goal in the afterschool world — always has been, and will continue to be until we achieve it.

Policymakers will have difficult choices facing them as the recovery continues. We need them to know that afterschool and summer learning programs need and deserve their continued support.

Paula Adams is the executive director of the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance.

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