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## Column: Hawaii behind on afterschool programs

By Jennifer Masutani • Dec. 16, 2020

Eleven years ago, Hawaii was a national leader when it came to afterschool programs, a designation reflecting high rates of participation and parental satisfaction, based on data in the “Afterschool Alliance’s America After 3PM 2009” report. We slid to 10th in 2014 and in data released this month, we’re now 17th — better than most, but no longer a national leader.

In fact, unmet demand for programs pre-COVID — the percentage of children in Hawaii not currently in an afterschool program whose parents say they would be enrolled if a program were available to them — has increased since 2014. In fact, for every child in an afterschool program in Hawaii, two more are waiting to get in. That’s nearly 75,000 children, 43% of our keiki, who would participate, but can’t, according to their parents, because an afterschool program isn’t available to them.

While afterschool opportunities have decreased, unmet demand and approval of afterschool has reached its highest levels yet. For families fortunate enough to take part in afterschool programs, an overwhelming 99% said they were satisfied with their child’s afterschool program, citing that afterschool programs allowed their children to build social skills, take part in physical activity, get homework help and be supported in a safe environment with knowledgeable and caring staff, among other benefits.

But with investments in afterschool stalled in the state over the past decade, we have seen more barriers to participation, with cost and lack of transportation topping the list. And now, the harsh realities brought on by the pandemic threaten to make things far worse.

Currently, most of our afterschool programs have gone virtual or are serving a small fraction of students in-person, compared to pre-COVID enrollment. With significant decreases in income from parent fees and subsidies that cover the costs for our low-income families, many afterschool providers in Hawaii have significant financial concerns. According to a survey conducted by Edge Research this fall, 78% of programs in Hawaii are concerned about their future and long-term funding, and 50% of programs are concerned that they’ll have to permanently close. Some are on their last legs with the possibility of closing their doors by next month.

Afterschool programs have a proven track record of helping to close the achievement gap, supporting working families, and developing children’s social skills. We need to recognize that afterschool programs can help students catch up and keep up from COVID-19. More out-of-school time programs are needed to help us recover from the many learning and family disruptions caused by the pandemic by providing a safe place for school-age children.

We cannot afford to let any of our afterschool providers close. Not only would we lose critical academic and social supports for our students, but it would be an enormous drag on our state’s economy, forcing parents to choose between staying home to take care of their children or going back to work.

To prevent thousands of afterschool spots from disappearing, state leaders need to act now. Specifically, the state needs to grant more flexibility so we can strategically leverage federal funds already allocated to our afterschool programs. Those funds can keep providers afloat and allow them to continue serving students through community learning centers, supporting their distance learning, until schools fully reopen. We will be severely compromising our state’s recovery when more parents will not be returning to the workforce because they lack child-care options.

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