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Aiming for an A plus afterschool program

School district, Carver Center continue to expand program

By Claire K. Racine
Reporter

A hot meal, swimming lessons, homework help and much more, all for the very reasonable cost of zero dollars. For many students in the Port Chester School District, this is what today's afterschool programming looks like.

In its second year pairing private and federal funding, the afterschool program is back—and better than ever—according to many administrators.

"The program consistency, continuity and quality has significantly improved," said Assistant Superintendent Joe Dumey.

For several years, free afterschool programming was the standard in the Port Chester schools. In 2013, however, the district lost \$1.4 million in federal grant money which funded the programs at all the Port Chester schools, affecting about 800 children. Initially the school district reached out to its many community partners and created tuition-based programs for the elementary schools and middle school.

At the same time, **Carver Center** explored the possibility of getting involved and reached out to some of its donors for financial support. The Dalio Foundation reached back. Based in Westport, Conn., the independent foundation was created in 2003 by the founder of the hedge fund firm Bridgewater Associates, Ray Dalio, ranked 71st on Forbes' World's Billionaires' list.

With Dalio's financial backing, **Carver** ran a pilot program and then took over the programming at Edison School, John F.

Kenney School and the middle school last year. This year **Carver** has branched out, acting as the lead education agency for the gamut of afterschool programming and offering free services at those three schools, as well as the Early Learning **Center**, and subsidized afterschool care at the Park Avenue and King Street Schools.

Between the subsidized and free programming, the school district is back to the same level of enrollment it had four years ago.

"What makes it all work so well is the spirit of collaboration," Dumey said.

A team effort

While the school district and **Carver Center** are the frontrunners, Port Chester Council for the Arts, Open Door



John F. Kennedy School fifth graders Justin Barnett and Brandon Gonzalez work on their homework during the afterschool program run by Carver Center.

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Marcela Lucas, a lunch monitor who stepped forward to teach dancing, gets the students jumping in the hallway when her normal exercise space was taken.

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Family Medical **Centers** and One World United and Virtuous are other key collaborators, Durney said.

The list of community partners involved in the program does not end there, however. Others include Jacob Burns Film**Center**, Rye Country Day School, Manhattanville College, Food Bank for Westchester, the Girl Scouts, Whole Foods Market and Long Island University.

Not all schools have the same partnerships, but all the students benefit from at least some of them and there are new ones being formed constantly. Starting this spring, there are plans to work with the Rye Nature **Center**. “We’re just enhancing the program,” said Mary Norelli, the chief program officer at **Carver Center**.

At the heart of the program are four core tenets: Academically there is support and help with homework; there are enrichment opportunities for math and literacy, as well as the arts and even gardening; there is physical fitness, which includes health and wellness; finally, there is the development of social and emotional skills.

“The reality is moms, dads, guardians maybe can’t help with homework,” said Peter Mutino, who oversees the programming at John F. Kennedy School. It could be because their level of English is not up to the task or they do not understand the new way that math is taught. Whatever the reason, the students have a chance to ask questions about what they learned in school often directly from their teachers, many of whom participate in the afterschool programming.

“It’s good because if you don’t understand your problems, there are math teachers to help you with the problems,” said Valeria Garcia, a fifth grader. In the past, Garcia used to ask her older cousin for help, but now she just goes directly to an instructor.

Even though school is out for the day, the fifth grader does not mind having to do her homework because she knows she will also have a chance to do some fun activities later.

“When you’re at home, you’re bored and you don’t get to do nothing,” the 10-year-old said.

For her, the math problems and reading exercises are more than balanced by the chance to go swimming and practice her dance moves.

Academics and activities

Even though academics are an important aspect of afterschool programming, it is not school, something the instructors try and take into account. For example, to practice English Language Arts, the students might take part in Readers Theater and the students get to read scripts of abridged plays and act them out using a costume and prop box. “Anything we can do to get our kids to read more,” Mutino said.

The students also regularly spend time using SuccessMaker, an online tool which provides reading and math support. On the flip side, the students spend a chunk of their day in various clubs learning about the garden, for example, or working on service-learning projects with One World Club instructor Kristin Pascuzzi. Under her instruction, the students donated toys and made holiday cards for kids at the Maria Fareri Children’s Hospital.

“The kids wrote a letter to their parents explaining why they wanted to do it,” Pascuzzi said, giving all the credit for the project to the students.

As the club activities are favorites of the students, they are more prevalent at the end of the week with Fridays made up of only enrichment sessions instead of academic ones. Even with that, there is still learning to be done, as showcased by third grader John Mogrovejo. “Fridays we have fun,” the 8-year-old said. “Sometimes we do art projects. The last one was about the water cycle. We also learned the different parts of our bodies.”

Teamwork

The ratio of students to adults is quite low, about 10 to one, and Mutino stressed that all the instructors who are part of the afterschool program are dedicated. “The teachers who participate—they don’t phone it in. They’re not just working for a paycheck and it shows,” he said.

As **Carver** developed the programming, staff in the school district stepped forward with talents they would love to share, such as Marcela Lucas, a lunch monitor who loves to dance.

“Now she’s teaching dance for us two days a week after school,” Norelli said.

“And the kids love it,” added Mutino.

Usually Lucas teaches the students in the auditorium, but when bleachers need to be set up for a school concert, she is more than willing to set up speakers in the hallway and bust some moves there. Adaptability is key for the afterschool program as is the understanding by teachers that people will be in and out of their rooms even after classes are over.

“We are the agency managing the program, but we understand that we are in the school district’s facility,” said Joseph Kwasnewski, the chief executive officer at **Carver Center**. Consequently, decisions about the program are a joint effort among all of the players. “We really have communication across the board,” he added.

Not free, but cheaper than before

Even though King Street and Park Avenue School parents have to pay for their children to attend afterschool programming, the cost has dropped. Two years ago it was \$175 per month. Last year it dropped \$50. This year it is even lower, only \$95 per month.

“We’ve significantly reduced it in cost to families this year,” Durney said.

Because of the Dalio funding at the other schools, Durney was able to direct some of the district’s grants to King and Park. There are even more grants the assistant superintendent has applied for to lower the cost even more. It is also possible the Dalio Foundation may commit more money going forward.

“We continue to look in every direction for whatever is possible and viable for providing the least cost program,” Durney said.

The eventual goal is to make all of the schools financially equitable, Kwasnewski agreed, but for the moment, at least, they are all programmatically similar.

For example, a hot meal is provided at all four Dalio-funded locations—John F. Kennedy School, the Early Learning**Center**, Edison School and Port Chester Middle School—and at the Park Avenue and King Street Schools. The Head Start programs at **Carver Center** and on Spring Street, as well as the new Pre-kindergarten program also benefit from the meals. In total, about 1,400 hot meals are made fresh and are served to the children each day shortly after school dismissal.

Besides ensuring the students get a nutritious meal, “snupper,” as it is jokingly called, allows the students to decompress from their day, explained Kwasnewski.

In the end, all the players agree pulling together the various elements needed for afterschool programming is a group effort and one that is essential for the children of Port Chester, something the superintendent summed up in two sentences.

“The **Carver Center** Afterschool Program is part of a critical continuum of services that our largely immigrant and first generation population of children desperately need,” Dr. Edward Kliszus, Jr. said. “Extending the school day to provide artistic and academic enrichment, quality physical activity, and solid research-based educational programs will serve well to provide our children with the support they need to compete in our global society.”