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Free afterschool program back--but only at JFK, Edison, PCMS

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Reporter

After an uncertain year, free afterschool programming is back in the Port Chester schools—at least it is for some of the students.

Carver **Center** is rolling out a program funded through a private grant, but in its first year, only students at Thomas A. Edison School, John F. Kennedy School and the Port Chester Middle School will be enrolled. This year students at King Street School, Park Avenue School and JFK's Early Learning **Center** will have the option of a fee-based program like last school year, but at a hopefully decreased price, until joining **Carver's** free program next year.

"I think the wonderful part about this collaboration is that **Carver** is doing what we do best and the schools are doing what they do best and we're really merging and making it a full collaboration and the people who will benefit are the families and the children of Port Chester," said Jacqueline Pezzullo, director of youth programs at **Carver Center**.

For several years, free afterschool programming was the standard in the Port Chester schools. In 2013, however, the district lost \$1.4 million in 21st Century grant money which funded the programs at all the Port Chester schools. When the school district found out about the eliminated grant money, they reached out to their many community partners to see who could help out. Ultimately, the Port Chester Council for the Arts and One World stepped up, creating tuition-based programs for the elementary schools, as did SER (Service Education Resources) of Westchester for the middle school.

While PCCFA, One World and SER were designated the lead agencies, **Carver** also explored the idea. **Carver Center** Executive Director Joseph Kwasniewski formed an ad hoc committee to discuss the subject with board and staff members. They proposed running a program at Park and JFK as they were the largest elementary schools and also the ones closest physically to **Carver**.

Billionaire's foundation gets involved



Students at Thomas A. Edison School play cards during the test run of the CarverCenter's afterschool program in the spring.

COURTESY OF CARVER CENTER



Students show off the artwork they made during the pilot program at Edison School in the spring.

How to sign up

For John F. Kennedy School and Thomas A. Edison School, there will be a lottery to fill all the open places in **Carver Center's** free afterschool programs. The middle school is operating on a first-come, first-serve basis.

"The criteria that was set up for JFK and Edison was that the children that were already enrolled in the afterschool program would have priority then after that it would be a lottery system," said Jacqueline Pezzullo, director of youth programs at **Carver Center**.

Interested parents can pick up the application at **Carver** and registration will be held at the **center** from 5-6 p. m. on Thursday, Aug. 28, Friday, Aug. 29 and Friday, Sept. 5. Sometime during the week of Sept. 8, those chosen in the lottery will be contacted. The JFK and Edison programs will start on Sept. 22 and run Monday-Friday until around 6 p. m.

For Port Chester Middle School, last year's program organized by SER was first-come, first-serve and Ilse Velez, the SER (Service

In order to fund the program, **Carver** knew they would need support and reached out to some of their current donors. 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.

By the point that **Carver** had all its ducks in a row, however, it was too little, too late, to get a program running that autumn. Still highly interested, **Carver**, with the support of the Dalio Foundation, arranged for the New York

City-based The After-School Corporation to help establish a program. TASC interviewed the school district and all the community-based organizations last autumn. Then in January 2014, Kwasniewski said, TASC contacted **Carver** and said, "After our findings, we find that **Carver Center** would be the best community-based organization to partner with the school as the lead agency to run an afterschool program."

To test the waters, **Carver** ran a pilot program of 60 students at Edison, JFK and the middle school in the spring. Those schools were chosen as they are the highest-need schools in the district with the greatest number of children who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Everything checked out with the pilot and the Dalio Foundation gave the go-ahead to move forward to serve 460 students this year at those three schools.

"If I had my druthers, of course, we'd try to do a program evenly across the district, but sometimes the funding doesn't come that way," said Assistant Superintendent Frank Fanelli. This is a good start, he added, and the plan is that next year, **Carver's** free program will be expanded to Park, King the ELC and hopefully the high school, too.

A community collaboration

PCCFA and One World, in addition to running the tuition programs at King and Park this year, will still provide art and character education at the **Carver**-run programs. Other community groups including Open Door and Family Services of Westchester will continue to be involved in the afterschool programming.

"We're going to keep working with many of the same partners that they already had existing," Pezzullo said.

For Port Chester Middle School, last year's program organized by SER was overseen by Ilse Velez, and she is continuing her program this year under the oversight of and with funding from **Carver**. Many aspects of her arrangement will continue but with some additions courtesy of **Carver** like the chance to go swimming at the community **center** or go to a soccer clinic.

Because of the high costs associated with transportation, **Carver** is still figuring out if there is a way to get the elementary kids to the **center** to make use of the facilities as well.

Overall, **Carver** aims to take the best of the existing programs and shake them up a little by adding **Carver** aspects. "We've just basically merged and tried to have our model that we had at the **Carver Center** at the school sites," Pezzullo said.

"What we have here at the **Carver Center** is a good balance of academic support, health and nutrition needs by providing a healthy snack and also having a balance of recreation activities," she went on to explain.

There will be 45 minutes of recreation every day to ensure the program is not merely a continuation of school, even though academics are an important part.

A long-term commitment

The Dalio Foundation has committed to its involvement for a number of years and plans to help **Carver** work to diversify its funding to further prevent a similar situation where all the funding disappears at once.

Education Resources) of Westchester coordinator, is continuing her program this year under the leadership of **Carver**. The next sign-up day at the middle school will be on Monday, Aug. 25. The program is expected to start on Sept. 8 before the elementary ones and will also run Monday-Friday until around 5:45 p. m.

Registration for Park Avenue, King Street and the Early Learning **Center** has not been set yet but will likely be the first week of school and held at each of the sites. Denise Colangelo, the Port Chester Council for the Arts executive director, is also still looking for additional arts instructors from the community to work at all the schools. Anyone interested in teaching children can contact her at dicolange@aol.com.

"With 21st Century, all the eggs were in one basket. Once that funding went away, the program was devastated," Kwasniewski said. Creating long-term sustainability of the after school program is essential as a fee-based setup means many families cannot afford to participate.

"What we want for the program is to level the playing field for all children in Port Chester, the affluent and the at risk," Kwasniewski said. Socioeconomic backgrounds should not have to hinder the students, he added.

"The Dalio family has committed to a long-term relationship," Fanelli said. "It's significant because this is a private sector, public sector partnership so the district doesn't have to go begging to find grant money."

Grant money had become notoriously difficult to secure in the current economic climate and always stands the risk of being taken away, as happened with the 21st Century funding.

Park, King and the ELC

For the coming year, however, PCCFA and One World will continue their work at Park, King and the ELC, but possibly at a cheaper cost to the parents than last year. Previously, the elementary program cost families \$175 per month for the first child and \$150 for all other children, which breaks down to less than \$4 an hour. Unfortunately, even at only a couple dollars an hour for each student, many parents still did not sign up. Last year only about 270 participated in the program compared to the 800 two years ago. Back when the high school students also had a program two years ago, there were more than a thousand children participating across the district.

Park and King had some of the higher numbers of enrolled students and Denise Colangelo, the PCCFA's executive director, hopes they will get even more this year if the cost is lower.

"What we're hoping to do on a number of levels is to reduce the amount they would have to pay substantially," Fanelli said. Because the Dalio Foundation will be funding half the schools, Fanelli plans to rearrange the grant money he does have to focus on the schools not participating in **Carver's** program this year. The funds, which were never part of the 21st Century grant, can be focused on only the ELC, King and Park rather than spread across the whole school district.

Colangelo is still trying to determine the cost for families and hopes to have it nailed down by the start of school. "We're working on it," she said. "I'm just waiting for the district and the other program to solidify who's funding what."

That number may not be known right away and the cost could drop again in a month or two, Fanelli said, once **Carver's** program really gets underway. "The pieces all have to fit together," he said.

Since **Carver** will be taking over the programs at King, Park and the ELC--and many **Carver** kids go to those schools, Pezzullo said they have every intention of working with PCCFA and One World to ensure a smooth transition.

"They did a great job being able to step up after the district lost their 21st Century grant," she added. "Any way that we can help, we will be doing it. These are our partners and we're all in it for the benefit of the children of Port Chester."