



Some afterschool programs thrive while others struggle to provide

Port Chester elementary school students do not have equal access to care and educational enrichment after class

By Sarah Wolpoff

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Instead of going home to watch TV, Edison Elementary School second-graders Samuel Galindo (front), Gerson Herrera and Aaron Morales are captivated by their Chromebooks as they play educational video games at Edison's afterschool program facilitated by the Carver Center on Friday, Jan. 24. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News

If Dolly Parton boisterously sings about living life working '9 to 5,' Matt Casey said hundreds of students and teachers at Edison and John F. Kennedy elementary schools have her beat by two and a half hours.

Coming to school at 7:30 a.m. and staying through 6 p.m. for the afterschool program, they put in the hours above and beyond a full-time job.

But if he's doing his job right, their lyrics don't embody a folksy complaint about the only way to achieve a viable wage and success. Ideally, he's creating a nurturing atmosphere where students, particularly those in need, realize they enjoy learning and being in school. It's a place where meaningful relationships are made and academic prospects are endless.

However, not all Port Chester students can take advantage of those benefits. Especially those in need.

"We run a high functioning, operational afterschool program where we just try to keep the kids interested and engaged as much as possible," Casey said. "There's a myriad of benefits, but most importantly is the quality of care we're providing to ensure kids aren't leaving to go home and sit in front of the television. The real meat and gravy of our work is engagement and the ability to connect with peers and do activities you might not have the opportunity to do during the day."

As the **Carver Center** senior director of school aged children programs, Casey oversees the afterschool initiatives at John F. Kennedy School and Edison School, where he is also the onsite director managing daily operations. The **Carver Center** programs characterize the vital nature of community partnerships the Port Chester School District embraces and administrators often speak so highly of. The same goes for the district's bond with the Port Chester Council for the Arts—the non-profit facilitating the afterschool program at Park Avenue and King Street elementary schools.

It's no longer standard, as it was decades ago, for children to go straight home as soon as that last bell rings and play ball with their neighborhood friends until dinner time. In the world of education, it's now recognized that children greatly benefit from the extra social and academic support afterschool programs provide—especially in the Port Chester District with its large composure of working-class immigrant families.

After years of providing free afterschool programs at all the schools, the district lost a \$1.4 million grant that allowed them to do so in 2013. At that point, administrators tirelessly worked with community partners to provide reasonably priced tuition-based programs, which has more-or-less been the model ever since.

Now, all four elementary schools have a comprehensive program where enrolled students receive an array of benefits: a free meal, homework help, social-emotional exercises and enrichment programs. The **Carver Center** initiative sets a prime example, where children have a safe place to be for \$2 a day.

However, it's a different story for students at Park Avenue and King Street schools. With the program price indicating a drastically higher burden on families, not all children have equal access to the same opportunities.

When programs thrive

Casey vividly remembers the details of his own afterschool program as a child. Students would assemble in the auditorium for about 90 minutes every day and snack on saltines and seltzer as they played and watched a movie.

It was fun. He's pretty sure it was free.

"Excellent programming 20 years ago," Casey laughed. "Excellent now looks like an engagement element where kids aren't just stuck in a room until Mom and Dad arrive but have opportunities to continue developing."

The **Carver Center** afterschool program operates on the schools' campuses every weekday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. It starts communally with a group "snupper," a cute amalgamation of "snack" and "supper," which promises every student a hot meal and vegetables.

With a recreational period included to release all the snupper energy and tensions from the school day, the rest of the program revolves around social academics in the classrooms they're already familiar with—making them feel comfortable in an environment they understand, Casey said.

As a former teacher at Edison School himself, Casey said nearly 60 percent of the afterschool program staff are teachers paid to spend a few extra hours at the building. It's good for the children to not only see familiar faces but have an opportunity to personally connect with the established adults in their lives.

Having schoolteachers around also has advantages during the hour of designated homework help, where students have time to work on their assignments and receive additional support that may not be available at home.

"We're an engagement program. The hyper-focus is making sure the kids are engaged while they're here," Casey said. "It's really important to us that while they're in our care, they're able to experiment and experience anything that they're interested in."

That means large portions of the program are devoted to giving students the chance to guide their own learning and explore topics they otherwise wouldn't go over in a classroom directed by mandated tests. On a weekly basis, community organizations such as the Boy Scouts, the Rye Nature Center and the Clay Art Center come in to teach specific age-appropriate classes.

Throughout the year, classes work on a project-based learning venture that they fabricated together as a class, Casey said. Whether it be about space, dinosaurs or if they want to take a swing at playwriting, it's driven by their collective interests. Twice a year, the schools host an exhibition to showcase those projects.

"During those exhibitions, our hyper-focus is to say to the kids, 'we want you to do the explaining,'" Casey described. "We don't want the teachers at the forefront. We want them to be the teachers to their families and the community."

From 2014 to 2017, the **Carver Center** afterschool program was free at Edison School and John F. Kennedy School due to significant funding from Dalio Philanthropies—a Connecticut-based foundation that supports a vast array of schools, organizations and corporations.

Though they stopped fully funding the program at the Port Chester Schools, they did provide supplemental funds while the **Carver Center** secured other monies to transition to an affordable tuition-based system.

According to Casey, at both schools families currently pay \$300 to register for the program for the entire school year. The fee is up \$50 from the year before, but still amounts to \$2 a day.

Both programs are nearly at full capacity, which encompasses 180 students at Edison School and 200 children at John F. Kennedy. Because they need a minimum of 20 students per classroom to keep the program operational, they don't hit the exact capacity number.

As Casey explained, if 30 third-graders registered for afterschool, 10 would need to go on the waitlist until 10 more third-graders signed up.

They are required to hire one teacher for every 10 students, Casey said. Therefore, there are at least two teachers assigned to every room—a practice that benefits all involved.

"The staff doesn't feel they're monitoring every child all the time," Casey said. "They have this small, familial group, they have their connections and ability to grow with the kids."

Small class sizes let students develop meaningful bonds with their peers, the director continued, making it easy to facilitate exercises where they can talk about their feelings as they decompress for the day.

Beyond that, he stressed, it gives children the chance to form personal relationships with adults—who can identify problems or situations that other **Carver Center** programs are geared toward.

"Depending on the family dynamic going on outside the building, when a child comes to school it can be difficult to engage in work. If their family can't afford a new pair of shoes when they need it, that's all they're focusing on," Casey empathetically remarked. "When they come to afterschool, there's an opportunity for us to connect with them as a community partner and say: 'how can we help you?' If you don't have a backpack because something is going on at home, we'll get you that backpack."

Price barriers and unequal access

At Park Avenue Elementary School, Principal Rosa Taylor said they make do with what they have.

"Is the afterschool program what it should be? No. It should be double the amount of children than we have now," Taylor said. "We offer it for those who can afford it, but that's the whole thing. There's so many that need it that can't afford it."

The Port Chester Council for the Arts runs the afterschool programs at Park Avenue School and King Street School. For a while, the cost was manageable because the Council was able

to secure grants and donations, which in turn lowered the expense for families. In the 2018-19 academic year, 130 Park Avenue students enrolled for \$125 a month.

This year, Taylor said, the Council lost funding—a heartbreak to both the organization and the schools. As a result, the afterschool program price skyrocketed to a prohibitive point where one month costs nearly the same as a whole year does at Edison and John F. Kennedy schools.

Parents are now charged \$280 a month to enlist a child in afterschool programming and \$250 for each additional sibling.

“When you have two children, that’s more than \$500 a month. That’s like a rent for some,” Taylor said with vocal frustration. “It’s a challenge for us.”

Consequently, enrollment dropped. Of the 453 students comprising the Park Avenue student body, only 80 are signed up for the program. According to King Street Principal Samuel Ortiz, currently 44 of his 412 students are registered in theirs.

“With a lot of parents, there was a big uproar about why it’s so much more expensive here,” Taylor said. “There’s a lot of resentment.”

Confirming the notion, Casey said families from Park Avenue and King Street have tried to join the **Carver Center** program—offering to drive their children to wherever spots are available themselves—but to no avail. Because the program is essentially at capacity, those families are on the waitlist.

For many years, Taylor and other school district administrators have advocated for more philanthropic funds—as respectfully as possible. It’s a weird situation to ask a donor, such as the Dalio Philanthropies, for even more money.

The problem is, Taylor explained, Park Avenue doesn’t look as needy in the books as she believes the school actually is. But if it’s not on paper, it doesn’t matter. In the eyes of charitable organizations, Park Avenue doesn’t need the money as much as others because the free and reduced lunch qualifying and minority populations seem lower.

This year, 77 percent of the Park Avenue student body is Latino and 60 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Taylor believes the number is truly much higher, but parents are hesitant to fill out the proper paperwork. And she completely understands why.

“Part of it is they don’t want to be perceived as needy, but they’re also concerned about their immigration status,” she explained. “We tell them it has no effect. They don’t need to use a social security number, we have people here who will help with translation, but nothing. They’re reluctant, they’re afraid, and who can blame them. I have students with parents incarcerated right now for immigration. The fear is real.”

Students are suffering, Taylor said, because the Port Chester Council for the Arts program provides all the same advantages the **Carver Center** initiative does.

The Park Avenue and King Street students who attend afterschool get a meal, homework assistance and enrichment through music and art projects. The younger students need it as

a safe place to be after class and older students benefit from the social-emotional wellness it provides. Especially because risk factors become more pronounced as children get older.

Moving forward as it becomes time to prepare the 2020-21 school year budget, she said one of her top priorities will be advocating for an afterschool program budget line. Though, estimating it would cost around \$400,000 for the teachers alone at both schools, she recognizes it's a big ask.

Still, to her it's a critical measure if the district can't get the funding.

"Good, quality childcare is expensive. But the kids need it," Taylor said. "It's not even progressive. It's something that's really necessary in this day and age."

The Port Chester Council for the Arts provides a quality program. However, it's gotten to the point where the students who need it the most can't afford it. Many Park Avenue parents work until 8 p.m. and don't have the ability to assist their children with academics.

"Equal doesn't always mean equitable and equitable doesn't always mean equal," Taylor sighed. "It's the type of thing where we really need to think long and hard about what our priorities are, what's important to us."