

Afterschool will be offered at P.C. Schools, but families should expect to see a cost

Interest survey is being distributed so program details can be finalized

In a world where the average workday extends hours past the final bell at school, to many Port Chester School District families afterschool programming is more of a necessity than a luxury.

Post-class childcare availability has risen once again as a hot topic amongst district families after word got out a few months ago that plans for the 2023-24 school year were unclear. While some parents were concerned about a future program's price tag, others were worried about whether it would even be offered. And in expressing their griefs, they made one thing clear: either way, they needed to know what the district was planning so families could strategize accordingly.

The Port Chester School District confirmed at the Board of Education's June 21 meeting that there will be an afterschool opportunity when students get back to the classroom this Fall. Administrators recognized the need as crucial, especially at the elementary schools, as "that's the grade level of parents who are currently clamoring for an immediate solution, and we hear them," said Deputy Superintendent Dr. Colleen Carroll during an interview on July 21.

Earlier this month, parts of those plans were hashed out and announced—the Carver Center, a community partner with a longstanding relationship with Port Chester Schools, will be facilitating the 2023-24 school year program. However, some key details, such as cost, are still up in the air.

"We're really excited about our partnership with Carver," said Superintendent Dr. Aurelia Henriquez. "We're committed to providing an opportunity for every student to be successful that is academic, fair, challenging and enriching."

The logistics of afterschool programming has a fluctuating history in the Port Chester School District.

Until a \$1.4 million grant was lost in 2013, the district was able to provide a free afterschool program for years—at that point, they connected with various community partners to establish a tuition-based structure, which served as the model moving forward.

With the program established then, there were concerns about inequity and a lack of consistency for all students and families. The Carver Center, supported through restrictive grant funding, was able to provide an experience for only students at John F. Kennedy and Edison elementary schools for \$300 a year. Meanwhile, students at King Street and Park Avenue elementary schools could attend a Port Chester Council for the Arts program for \$280 a month.

Concerns were temporarily addressed when the structure completely changed in the 2020-21 school year through the district's launching of ASPIRES (After School Programming Initiative for Recovery,

Enrichment and Support). The free program was available to all families and was facilitated by the joined forces of several community partners in Port Chester—an over \$2 million initiative feasible in the aftermath of COVID-19 due to American Rescue Plan funding.

The popularity of the new program was seen through the numbers.

During the 2019-20 school year, 85-100 students were attending afterschool at both the King Street School and Park Avenue School campuses; 123 Edison School pupils and 191 John F. Kennedy School children were enrolled.

With ASPIRES, during the 2022-23 school year, approximately 300 John F. Kennedy, 240 Park Avenue, 200 King Street and 160 Edison School students partook.

“The free afterschool program, it was only meant to last for a few years,” Henriquez said. “That grew out of monies that were specifically allocated to address learning loss.”

The money that made ASPIRES thrive has run dry.

The Port Chester School District is not able to facilitate a free afterschool program in the 2023-24 school year. The Carver Center’s K-5 After School Child Care Program, which will continue the district’s priority to offer the same experience in every school building, is expected to cost families between \$250 and \$400 a month per student.

The range is vast because the Carver Center will not be able to solidify costs until they know how many families are participating.

“If not enough students sign up to make the program affordable, then it’ll have to fall on the families that did sign up to cover the costs of all that it takes to run the program,” Carroll said. “The goal is to keep it as low as possible. We have a feeling that there will be great interest, but we had to give a range to cover all possible scenarios.”

The Carver Center has distributed an interest survey that can be found at www.surveymonkey.com/r/CAP2324. While the afterschool program will take place at Port Chester School campuses, the results will also determine if all buildings will host it or if some students will need to be transported to attend.

“It’s heartbreaking that we have to charge,” said Carver Center Chief Program Officer Daniel Bonnet. “It’s unfortunate because we know the Port Chester community is struggling with the cost of living going up, but we know that families also need a program...we’re a non-profit, we’re not here to make money. So, we want to make it something as affordable as possible while still covering our staffing.”

The 12-question survey also asks families to disclose income information because the Carver Center is dedicated to helping eligible parents and guardians attain subsidies and scholarships that may be available—a dedicated staff member will be there to help them through the paperwork and process.

Bonnet said there are two sources of income-based financial assistance available. The Westchester Department of Social Services (DSS) has a subsidy with a more restricted income limit, which Bonnet said is measured on different scales depending on the family situation.

If a family's application to the DSS subsidy gets denied, he said they'll be able to apply for a Childcare Council of Westchester grant, which he thinks on a sliding scale could help families making under \$90,000 a year with some of the expenses.

"Our goal is to keep costs down in a year that we don't have grant funding," Carroll said. "We're doing our best."

"We wanted our partner organization to be able to work together with parents who are interested in applying for subsidies and any kind of assistance available depending on their income level," she said. "We want to make this doable for families, comfortably, as much as possible. And then also to make it the best program we can."

Some parents, such as Jordan Allen, are worried about the expense—especially if the program ends up running on the costly end of the predictions. As a mother of middle class means with of two King Street Elementary School students, an \$800 monthly bill would put her in a position where she'd have to make tough decisions.

"I love the Carver Center, and I have nothing against having them do an afterschool program, but we're talking about a lot of money," she said. Her frustrations are with the school district, who she believes should have been planning for these circumstances.

"Why isn't the school board recognizing this need community wide and budgeting for it?" Allen questioned. Over the last two years, she noted, the district's budget has failed to utilize the entire allowable tax levy increase—decisions that each year sparked heated debate—and she thinks subsidizing an afterschool program is one of many ways additional monies could have been used.

"It's a shortsighted and selfish approach to not expect this to be a need district-wide," she said.

Lou Russo, president of the Board of Education, recalled that intense conversations regarding the tax levy were had during budget season, and at this point, it does no good to speculate on what could have changed.

"We are where we are now and I think we have a good program that we're putting together with the Carver Center and that's the most important part," he said. "I appreciate the administration being able to work something out with the Carver Center and get a program in place that will be fair and equitable for a lot of people."

The Carver Center's After School Child Care program will provide students with a meal, homework time and structured activities, Bonnet said.

"We partner with other organizations, such as the Clay Art Center, and do STEAM related workshops, enrichment, and recreational activities," he described. "We focus a lot on social-emotional opportunities

and building engagement, like talking about basic life skills—respect, enthusiasm, taking initiative and looking at career pathways.”

This year, the district is in the unfortunate position of seeing a lapse in grant opportunities, Carroll said.

“We can only apply for grants when they become available to us,” she said, “and when something becomes available, we do our best to get in the mix.”

The Port Chester School District, she said, is currently looking and applying for grants that would help with afterschool program funding. While at this point she said it’s unknown if the structure can or will change this year, there is hope for a more affordable future.

“We’d like for this parent pay (structure) to keep it as short as possible,” she said. “We don’t want to ask our families to pay money. And usually, when we get grants, they’re not just a year. So, if we win something, our goal will be looking long term, to get a couple years’ worth of funds.”

“We’re hoping this won’t be the case in a year or two,” Bonnet agreed. “We’ll hopefully get grant funding that will bring back that 21st century, free program.”