

## Amid price hike, afterschool attendance drops over 80% at Port Chester Schools

October 5, 2023 at 4:39 a.m.



Students attending the Edison Elementary School afterschool program operated by the Carver Center listen attentively to a lesson about nature in 2020. That year, 124 students from the school were enrolled in the program. This year, that number has dropped to 34. [\(File Photo/Westmore News\)](#)

The Port Chester School District's afterschool program has felt the effects of its most recent fluctuations.

When the immensely popular ASPIRES (After School Programming Initiative for Recovery, Enrichment and Support) program ceased operation at the end of the last school year, many were unsure what the future would hold for their children.

ASPIRES largely was popular because the program was completely free, having the benefit of being funded through American Rescue Plan Act monies. However, that funding ran out at the end of the last school year—which wasn't a surprise, it was only meant to last a few years.

It wasn't until late July that the district announced the Carver Center, one of the school district's oldest community partners, would be hosting the

program for the 2023-2024 school year. At the time, it was unclear what that program would cost families.

Lily Weinstein, a mother of two, stated that parents were not given much advance notice on what they would be charged.

“We were only given a couple of weeks’ notice that it was \$300 a kid per month,” she said. The program now costs \$3,000 a year for every child. A working nurse, she stated that it wasn’t feasible to enroll both of her children into the program. But as she and her husband work full-time, they found the need to sign up at least one.

## **Afterschool enrollment history**

	Current year	During COVID (2022-23)	Pre-COVID (2019-20)
Edison School	52	143	124
John F. Kennedy School	31	257	192
King Street School	53	140	85-100
Park Avenue School	34	148	85-100

The Haines Boulevard resident had to make the difficult choice to not send her 10-year-old daughter to afterschool, instead electing to enroll her 4-year-old son into a pre-k program.

“We had to show her how to walk home,” Weinstein explained, since both she and her husband work full-time and would be unable to pick her up every day. “Then my husband can help her with her homework if she needs it when he gets home.”

Afterschool programs are widely lauded as necessary parts of a child’s educational development. The program offers students additional academic assistance, enrichment activities through the arts, and even a meal. It’s considered a safe space for younger, at-risk students, and provides a place that promotes social-emotional learning. In today’s understanding of education, most parents consider afterschool programs essential.

Weinstein is not alone—many other families were unable to send any of their children to this year’s afterschool program. Manuel Ramirez, an engineer who lives on Adams Avenue, has twin daughters who had previously participated in the ASPIRES program.

“It was good because we could work without stress,” he said of what the experience had been like. “It was easier to fit around our schedule.”

But it would cost \$6,000 a year to enroll his 8-year-old twins who attend King Street Elementary School, Theresa and Isabelle, into the program—a fee that he said would have been impossible to afford.

According to numbers provided by Anne Bradner, CEO of the Carver Center, there has been a steep decline in enrollment.

As of Sept. 30, only 34 Edison, 31 John F. Kennedy, 52 Park Avenue, and 53 King Street School students had signed up. These figures total significantly less than the approximately 700 or so people who had expressed interest in a survey that was released in late July.

The current 170 students enrolled represents a more than 80% decrease compared to last year’s approximately 900 students who took part in the final year of ASPIRES.

Of course, ASPIRES had the benefit of being free, as its \$2 million price tag was funded by the American Rescue Plan Act that had been granted to the Port Chester School District. But even when families had to pay tuition in the past, there were more students enrolled than today.

Before ASPIRES was instituted, there was an, albeit inequitable, afterschool structure in place that provided programming to families at various costs. The Carver Center, due to grant funding, was offering a program to Edison School and John F. Kennedy School students for \$250 a year in the 2018-19 school year, which served 406 pupils.

In 2019-2020, at the annual price of \$300, there were 316 students enrolled between the two schools attending.

And those are numbers from just two of the four Port Chester elementary schools. The Port Chester Council for the Arts ran the afterschool program at King Street School and Park Avenue School. When that program was running in 2019-2020, King Street and Park Avenue elementary schools saw enrollment between 85-100 students, according to previously collected data from the Port Chester School District.

It’s evident that Port Chester families take advantage of the program if they can afford it. But when the price reaches a threshold families found unaffordable, they simply didn’t enroll.

The situation begs the question as to why the sudden increase in price.

According to Bradner, the answer is the obvious one: funding. In previous years, both the school district and the Carver Center were able to procure funding from different types of grants and charitable organizations, such as the Dalio Philanthropies. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case for the 2023-2024 school year. But Bradner said the center is looking into alternatives for future years, as are others in the school district.

At the Sept. 14 Port Chester Board of Education meeting, Board Vice President Sharon Burke expressed concerns about the decline in enrollment after a member of the public notified the board of the low enrollment rates.

In response, Superintendent Dr. Aurelia Henriquez stated that while a grant may not have been secured for this year, both the district and the Carver Center are actively searching for funding opportunities, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, to ease the financial burden on families in the future.

If prices were to drop, Ramirez said the program would see his children return.

"Of course we'll send our daughters back," he noted.

Weinstein said afterschool was an essential part of a child's education, and "people love to send their kids to after care because it really helps out in so many situations."

In the meantime, the Carver Center has someone on staff who will help families try to apply for a subsidized price through state government aid. That financial assistance is granted through the Westchester Department of Social Services (DSS), albeit with a somewhat restricted income limit.

If a family is unable to qualify through DSS, there are other grants Carver Center staff can help families apply for.

Though Bradner has stated that the acceptance rate for subsidies has been mixed, she and her staff are doing what they can to help as many children as they can.