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Sustainability of Out-Of-School Time Programs

In February 2003, the Governor eliminated funding for Minnesota's After School Enrichment Grant program, along with other state programs, as he addressed that year's budget shortfall. Subsequently, the entire program budget allocation was removed for the 2004-2005 biennium, resulting in a loss of \$11 million for After School Enrichment Grant—funded programs across Minnesota. Because the unallotment took place in February 2003, 44 grant recipients across the state and over 200 after school programs had only a few weeks to prepare for the sudden loss in resources. This study examined the effects of the funding loss on a sample of these programs.

The Governor's After School enrichment Grants (ASE)

In 1996, Minnesota began funding an After School Enrichment Grant program. The goal of the grants was to provide programming to 9-13 year olds during nonschool hours. The intent of the legislation was that organizations would serve youth struggling academically or at risk for being involved with the juvenile justice system, or youth who were alone and unsupervised. The original legislation required that community-based organizations, city, county, and school district representatives collaborate to receive grant funds for providing out-of-school time programming. Partnerships were to build upon existing resources in the community.^{1,2}

In 1999, the legislation was amended to provide programming to *all* school aged youth, expanding the age range for After School Enrichment Grantees. In addition, the legislature removed language requiring formation of community collaboratives, because many potential grant applicants in rural locations did not have access to community partners with whom they could collaborate.

The Sustainability Study

The Sustainability Study examined the effects of sudden ASE funding losses for:

- Programs providing Out-of-School Time supports and opportunities
- Collaboration and Partnerships
- Youth, families, and communities served by ASE programs.

Out of 44 ASE grant recipients in 2001, a stratified sample of 14 programs was drawn for interviews. The sample included programs from six rural, five urban, and three suburban areas in Minnesota.

Of the fourteen agencies selected for the random sample, four were unable to participate either because the program had ended or the coordinator was no longer employed by the agency.

Interviews were conducted with ten programs: four rural, three urban, and three suburban.

¹ After School Enrichment Programs Third Year Report: 1998-1999 MN Session Laws 1996

² Children Families and Learning After School Enrichment Grants Activity Description Citation: M.S. 124D.221

Summary of Findings

All 14 programs felt the negative impacts of the cuts: 22% no longer existed; 64% existed in significantly reduced format and fewer staff, with serious doubts about long-term sustainability; 14% reported slight reductions—continuing core programming but cutting in other areas. These findings suggest that the ASE grant was an important part of the funding stream for all recipients, regardless of strengths in other areas.

All those interviewed reported uncertainty about the future. 50% face immediate financial crisis and may need to close their doors in the next semester, while the other 50% believe they will be able to sustain reduced programming for at least a year, but are unsure about their program's future in the longer term.

When asked about how serious their financial trouble was, the rural areas reported being hit the hardest. All programs in rural areas found themselves in serious financial jeopardy.

Impact on Programs

Reductions in Service

The programs that continued operating with reduced services faced difficult choices when the ASE grant was unallotted. The most common adjustments made to accommodate the funding reductions affected programs dramatically:

- Programs operated on reduced schedules during the school year and summer programs were offered for fewer weeks.
- Staff were eliminated. Enrichment programs like art, photography, and creative writing were discontinued, and guest teachers and field trips were eliminated.
- Transportation for youth was eliminated, and youth requiring transportation were unable to participate.
- Fewer youth were served and programs narrowed the age range served.
- Fewer volunteers were available because of reduced hours or difficulty recruiting.

Concerns About Sustainability

It is difficult to raise fees when 98% of our youth are already receiving free or reduced lunches, so we couldn't charge fees to these kids and families³

All voiced anxiety about the future. Even those programs with minor program reductions expressed doubts about their ability to continue in the long term.

- Small, short-term funds came largely from the communities served by the ASE Program. Most coordinators doubted their communities could sustain current funding levels in the long term.
- Loss of ASE grants was compounded by the general economic downturn. Donations were down and foundation grants were scaled back, putting more agencies in competition for reduced resources.
- Some ASE grant recipients were awarded one-time emergency funding to continue programming through the current year, but these programs were told that emergency funds would not be available again.

Impact on Col Iaboration and Partnerships

We had just gotten ourselves together and were really starting to work well- that takes time, you know. And then "poof" - the funding was gone and we had no way to sustain the partnership work.

The ASE grant incentive for collaboration was jeopardized when funding was cut. Programs struggling to keep their doors open lacked the time and energy to maintain relationships even when they were an obvious benefit to youth participants and the organizations providing the Out-of-School Time programs. Three coordinators who stated they had a high degree of collaboration (prior to receipt of the ASE grant) were able to maintain those relationships. The collaborations and partnerships that resulted from the grant were all characterized as positive, and the perceived community need for better youth programming was the primary incentive for those interviewed.

³ The Free and Reduced Lunch Program is a federal grant that offers nutritional lunch options for children whose family income is less than 175% of the poverty level.

Impact on Youth, Families and the Community

Timing was horrible. It happened at the same time the city decided to close all the rec centers and a child was murdered in the neighborhood.

It all sends a message to kids and community members that they are not worth the investment.

Without exception, staff interviewed reported negative effects on the youth and community. Even programs maintaining services expressed anxiety about their ability to continue quality programs. They used words like panic, frustration, disbelief, anger, discouraging, traumatic and damaging to morale in describing the reaction of program participants and community members.

Programs affected by loss of ASE funding made difficult decisions about how to accommodate youth with fewer resources. Possibilities for community collaboration were altered. Programs that have been significantly scaled back reported a "tremendous increase in unsupervised time for youth". Abruptness of funding losses left youth, families, and program providers with little time to re-think options or re-configure resources.

Kids were crying. Single parents were in chaos because they had nowhere to take their kids.

There was too much shock and no time to respond- and no way to maintain dignity in the process.

Youth connection to meaningful relationships with adults and peer groups outside of school were interrupted and sometimes terminated as a result of program loss, service reductions, and collaboration limitations among community youth serving organizations. Program coordinators felt this disruption in relationships with supportive people, places and opportunities was the most critical for youth with the most limited capacity to replace them.

All coordinators interviewed reported high levels of community support for the youth services provided by their organizations. However, community support could not keep program doors open in the face of shrinking resources.

Lessons Learned

Collaboration was particularly beneficial for programs that were able to form community partnerships with ASE funding. These relationships often enabled organizations to share essential resources such as facilities and transportation. In turn, they positively affected youth access to programming; the number and variety of activities available to youth; and the number of staff and volunteers with whom youth had contact. Collaboration often extended the reach of individual programs allowing the creation of community youth-serving networks.

Organizational Capacity Building is an area where a one-time investment related to staff training, curriculum improvement, and organizational development can dramatically affect a youth-serving organization long term. Some organizations reported that improvements made during the time of ASE funding enabled them to maintain their programs with fewer resources, simply because they built a solid organizational foundation through better training and improved program curricula.

Program Sustainability

Four factors (summarized in the chart on page 4) appear to be significant in determining whether programs that faced reductions will be sustainable in the short term.

- **Community Vitality and Community Resources** - Low resourced communities suffer disproportionately because sustainability depends on having access to wider community resources during tough times. A vital community has related programs and services to fall back on including community foundations, private contributors, and community members willing to volunteer time.
- **Geographic Isolation** - Geographic isolation creates vulnerability. Higher levels of geographic isolation were associated with more serious sustainability challenges.
- **Ability to Diversify Funding** - 30% of programs relied solely on the ASE grant for their funding needs. 70% sought money in addition to the ASE grant prior to

unallotment, although many did not receive other grants. All programs required additional funding after the unallotment and sought dollars from community foundations, national grants, and local fundraisers.

- **Capacity to Form Collaborative Partnerships** - When programs have funds to facilitate coordination with each other, their collective capacity is increased.

This brief was prepared by Ann Lochner from *Sustainability of Out-of-School Time Programs: A Study of the Effects of Cuts in the After School Enrichment Program*. Principle authors Kathleen O'Connor, Nadja Hogg and Ann Lochner.

Factors in ASE Program Sustainability

Programs Eliminated (22%)	Programs Significantly Reduced (64%)	Programs Slightly Reduced (14%)
Few or no community resources	Some limited community resources	High degree of community resources
High geographic isolation	Moderate geographic isolation	Little geographic isolation
Unable to diversify funding due to size of program or location	Some funding diversity, but ASE grant was largest pot of money	More funding diversity due to high levels of community resources
No partnership, due to geographic location or partnerships strong, but not maintained because all partners forced to close doors	Partnerships strong; some maintained if they were self-sustaining, others eliminated because partners needed to focus on own programs	Partnerships strong—most maintained

It appears that Program Sustainability is directly related to organizational vitality and community capacity to create effective youth serving networks through collaboration.

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