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Federal After-School Funding Bill Divides Community

Federal Measure Would Allow Use of Money to Expand In-School Time

By Mary-Ellen Phelps Daily

Language in the federal education spending bill for fiscal 2011 would raise funding for a key after-school program, but also open the door to using that money to expand the school day and year—a move that has some after-school advocates worried.

The spending bill that cleared the Senate Appropriations Committee in late July would increase the allotment for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program to nearly \$1.3 billion, up \$100 million from its current level.

The program today supports after-school, before-school, and summer learning programs. But new provisions in the fiscal 2011 bill reflect a tone set by the Obama administration, which has embraced the concept of experimenting with extending the school day and year.

The appropriations bill, which is pending in Congress, has exposed a division among some members of the expanded-learning community, which includes groups that provide enrichment activities outside school as well as those that work within schools with nontraditional school days.

The learning-centers program serves schools with high percentages of low-income students—a group seen as an important focus for extended-learning time and after-school activities aimed at boosting achievement.

Jodi Grant, the executive director of the Afterschool Alliance, a Washington-based advocacy group, said she fears that opening the program to extended-learning-time initiatives could come at the expense of high-quality after-school efforts. She said she is concerned the bill would be “changing the very nature of the [CCLC] program.”

Research bears out that high-quality after-school enrichment programs benefit children, she added, while the jury is still out on whether longer school days improve achievement.

“The data’s just not there on a longer school day,” Ms. Grant said.

Greater Flexibility?

But Eric Schwarz, the chief executive officer and co-founder of Boston-based Citizen Schools, said the proposed shift in funding is not cause for alarm. His nonprofit organization works with schools on both after-school and extended-learning programs.

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Mr. Schwarz said he sees it as a positive move for schools to have the flexibility to choose between using federal dollars for after-school or expanded-learning time. He would also like to see the appropriation for the program increased by \$500 million in the coming year, not the proposed \$100 million.

"I think the expansion will create opportunities for communities and will help kids," he said. "In a lot of ways, [extended learning time] has emerged from the strongest after-school programs out there."

Bringing extended learning under the community-learning-centers umbrella does not mean afterschool initiatives would have to suffer, Jennifer Davis, the president and CEO of the National Center on Time & Learning in Boston, agreed. "It isn't either or. ... There are opportunities to bring resources together."

Jennifer Peck, the executive director of the Partnership for Children and Youth, in Oakland, Calif., supports expanding the federal program, but she is [adamant that language be added](#) to ensure that community organizations participate fully in the CCLC, and that added learning time means added "engaged" time, not simply more time in class. Other groups, including the After-School Corp., based in New York City, make the same point.

Ron Ottinger, the executive director of the Noyce Foundation, said the role of the community-center funding in high-quality after-school programming is critical. The Palo Alto, Calif.,-based foundation supports out-of-school science initiatives. (It also is underwriting an upcoming special report in Education Week about such initiatives.)

'Backfill' Worries

Mr. Ottinger said his concern is that schools could use dollars under the federal program to "backfill" holes in their budgets, rather than to continue partnering with out-of-school groups.

"It's vital that that funding continues to flow to community partners," Mr. Ottinger said. If not, the impact would "be devastating to the after-school infrastructure and programming for low-income kids."

Ms. Peck agreed that the community-partnerships aspect of the program is crucial. And, she said, the CCLC funding cannot simply support a lengthening of traditional school days.

"It should absolutely not be more of the same," she said. "It should build off of the best of what afterschool" has to offer.