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# Afterschool Alert

## ISSUE BRIEF

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### **Afterschool Programs: Helping Kids Succeed in Rural America**

*Children, families and communities benefit in measurable ways from the afterschool program. Instead of our students spending time alone or in unsupervised activities, the program provides planned, staffed programs and a safe haven where children can learn and build strong, positive relationships.*

**-- Byron Jeffries, Superintendent of Metcalfe County Public Schools**

Investing in afterschool programs helps children of rural communities break out of the cycle of poverty and creates opportunities for at-risk youth. In areas where prospects and resources are limited, afterschool programs are often the only source of supplemental enrichment in literacy, nutrition education, technology, and preparation for college entrance exams. Afterschool programs offer an effective and affordable way of overcoming obstacles confronting rural communities and helping children realize their full potential.

Twenty-one percent of the nation's children attend public schools in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Children attending rural schools have the lowest median per-student funding for afterschool programs under the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers federal grants program, as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, rural schools have fewer financial resources – largely as a result of diminished local property tax bases and inequitable distributions of state funds.<sup>3</sup> This disparity underscores the fact that children living in persistently poor rural America need greater attention.

#### **Remote rural areas persistently have the highest poverty rates.**

- Rural America is home to 2.5 million children living in deep and persistent poverty.<sup>4</sup> Over the past several decades, child poverty rates have been higher in rural than in non-rural areas.
- Among children living in rural areas, 19 percent live in poverty, compared to 15 percent among non-rural children.<sup>5</sup>
- Thirty-one percent of rural grade-school students are eligible for reduced-price or free lunches, as compared to 25 percent of urban grade-schoolers who qualify.<sup>6</sup>

*Many poor rural communities lack the resources to ensure children can lead healthy, successful lives. When schools are under-funded, libraries are outdated and nutritious foods and recreational opportunities are lacking, children will struggle to develop to their full potential.*

**--Save the Children**

Partly due to structural conditions -- such as geographic isolation, fewer services, fewer jobs, and fewer opportunities -- rural communities are ill-equipped to break out of the poverty cycle. Consequently, children who grow up in rural poverty face obstacles early in life that make it difficult for them to escape poverty as adults.<sup>7</sup>

### **Poverty has a direct negative effect on children's academic achievement.**

Low literacy rates among parents in poor rural communities affect children's early language development and educational aspirations. In addition, children living in poverty experience less cognitive stimulation and enrichment than their middle-income peers.<sup>8</sup> As a result, poverty is the key factor that prevents teens from advancing through high school from freshman to senior status. According to Save the Children, a commonly cited reason why teens drop out of high school is that they lack the necessary literacy skills to keep up with the curriculum. These teens are less likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and attain jobs that will make them financially self-sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rural poverty presents additional challenges for children and families.**

- **Transportation is either inaccessible or costly, discouraging children from participating in extracurricular activities.** Poor rural households – the very families that need supplemental enrichment for their children – are three times more likely than non-poor rural households to be without a vehicle.<sup>10</sup> Where families do have vehicles, they are even more affected than non-rural residents by rises in gasoline prices because they must travel longer distances and rely on local vendors that charge more for gasoline.
- **Access to quality physical activity opportunities and nutrition education is limited.** In rural areas, the low income of families limits their ability to purchase nutritional foods that promote healthy eating habits. Instead, they must often choose from affordable high-caloric processed foods. Additionally, the absence of major grocery chains, nutrition awareness, and recreational facilities are factors that contribute to unhealthy diets, causing rural areas to have the leading childhood obesity rate. While the national average is 15 percent, 20 percent of children in rural school districts are considered obese.<sup>11</sup>
- **At-risk behaviors, evidenced by high rates of drug use and suicide, are not adequately addressed due to the lack of support structures and limited resources.** Rural counties have the highest rate of drug abuse among teens.<sup>12</sup> A study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that eighth graders living in rural America are more likely than their urban counterparts to smoke marijuana, use crack cocaine, smoke cigarettes or use smokeless tobacco.<sup>13</sup> Limited professional resources, such as the availability of and access to treatment options and providers, compound at-risk behaviors.<sup>14</sup>
- **Underdeveloped human capital discourages children from investing in their futures and in the community.** Building human capital in rural areas is a challenge. Workers who have specialized skills and knowledge and young adults with a college education migrate out of their rural communities and into larger cities for better opportunities and higher paying jobs. In effect, this out-migration creates a lower return on investments in human capital, and therefore discourages employers from providing job training. The result is the cyclical effect of underdeveloped human capital.

### **Afterschool Programs Successfully Address Rural Community Needs.**

Notwithstanding the obstacles and challenges, rural communities possess strengths that enable them, if given adequate financial resources, to overcome the obstacles and challenges presented to children. A strong work ethic, a spirit of teamwork, and broad-based community support coupled with existing public facilities and the ease of partnering with local community organizations are assets found in many rural communities.<sup>15</sup> With these

assets, implementing afterschool programs that tailor to the needs of children and build on community strengths is likely to result in marked success.<sup>16</sup>

*We've found that it's very important that rural areas recognize that they actually have a wealth of potential partners and that they very intentionally develop those partners to establish both a community-wide appreciation of the afterschool program and well-documented in-kind services and goods.*

-- Bricca Prestridge Sweet, Director  
Educational Leadership Beyond Excellence, NC

### **Promoting Literacy and Healthy Lifestyles in Manning, SC**

Save the Children's model literacy and nutrition afterschool program, housed at Manning Primary School in Manning, South Carolina provides supplemental literacy education for its second and third graders, 83 percent of whom receive free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>17</sup> The children receive daily literacy activities that include independent, guided reading practice, fluency-building support, and read-alouds.<sup>18</sup> In addition to literacy education, the children also learn basic principles of healthy living by eating a healthy snack and partaking in guided physical activity. For many of the second and third graders, the afterschool program is what allows them to read at grade level and provides them with nutrition awareness.

### **Reaching Academic Potential in Sunflower County, MS**

In Sunflower County, Mississippi, the average ACT score is 15 out of 36, and 85 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Sunflower County Freedom Project, an afterschool program for middle and high school students now in its sixth year, offers intensive academic enrichment, mentoring, educational travel, martial arts training, drama performances, and media production classes.<sup>19</sup> Participants develop skills that motivate them to apply for and get accepted into college. Youth gain confidence and leadership skills from the rigorous curriculum that demands achievement and performance. During 2006–2007, the Freedom Project saw a 32 percent average increase in student grade point averages and an average increase in reading scores of 1.2 grade levels.

*College. I have to exhale when I say that. That's how unbelievable it is. I am here! Because of the Sunflower County Freedom Project.*

--Chris Perkins, Former Sunflower Fellow, Berea College

### **Removing Transportation Barriers in Edmonton, KY**

Recognizing that lack of transportation is often a barrier to participation, the After School On Track afterschool program in Edmonton, Kentucky made transportation a priority. By allotting a significant portion of its 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers funding to transportation costs, students are able to participate. The program provides daily transportation for nearly 75 percent of the students, many of whose families either do not drive or have access to a car.<sup>20</sup> Access to the program has made a real difference in the lives of the participants. Test scores and school attendance have improved, and discipline problems have decreased.<sup>21</sup>

### **Reducing At-Risk Behaviors Among Youth in Tyonek, AK**

In the Tyonek village of South Central Alaska, the Tyonek Boys & Girls Club plays a critical role in the lives of the participants. In addition to grinding poverty, Tyonek has high rates of alcoholism and prior to 1995, more than one teen suicide per year. The community relies on

the leadership of the Tyonek afterschool staff to provide suicide prevention, intervention and referral. Since the Tyonek Boys & Girls Club launched the afterschool program for youth in 1995, not one child has taken his or her own life.<sup>22</sup>

### **Rural Afterschool – Helping Kids Catch Up, Keep Up and Stay on Track for Success**

Children in rural communities often face social isolation, a lack of positive role models and scarce opportunities, but in many communities afterschool programs are helping change that and more. Working on the strengths of the communities, afterschool programs can give children in rural areas access to safe, inspiring activities that allow them to flourish. Afterschool programs can offer children supplemental help in order to meet basic grade-level expectations, and help children develop the necessary skills to compete in an increasingly specialized and global workforce. By collaborating with local partners and businesses, and motivating families and residents to participate in establishing new afterschool programs or improving the quality of existing ones, improving the quality of life for children living in rural communities is both possible and affordable.

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2007). *Status of Education in Rural America*.

<sup>2</sup> Learning Point Associates (2006). *21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Analytic Support for Evaluation and Program Monitoring: An Overview of the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Program: 2004-05*.

<sup>3</sup> The Rural School and Community Trust (2005). *Why Rural Matters 2005*.

<sup>4</sup> Fairchild, Ron and Gil Noam. (2007). *New Directions for Youth Development: Summertime, Confronting Risks, Exploring Solutions*. Wiley, No. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Afterschool Alliance (2004). *Afterschool Programs Meet the Needs of Youth in Rural America*.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Kristen & Savage, Sarah. (2007). *Fact Sheet on Food Stamp and School Lunch Programs Alleviate Food Insecurity in Rural America*. Carsey Institute of the University of New Hampshire.

<sup>7</sup> Save the Children. *Examining Child Poverty in Rural America*.

<sup>8</sup> Save the Children. *Strengthening Education and Literacy*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Dennis & Stommes, Eileen. *Rural Governments Face Public Transportation Challenges and Opportunities*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. Retrieved on August 30, 2007 from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/amberwaves/February04/Findings/RuralGovernments.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Sheehan, C. (March 2005). *Tide of Child Obesity is Rising in Rural U.S.*, The Associated Press.

<sup>12</sup> Afterschool Alliance (2004). *Afterschool Programs Meet the Needs of Youth in Rural America*.

<sup>13</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2000). *No Place to Hide: Substance Abuse in Mid-Size Cities and Rural America*.

<sup>14</sup> Branas, CC, Nance ML, Elliott MR, Richmond TS, Schwab CW. (2004). *Urban-rural Shifts in Intentional Firearm Death: Different Causes, Same Results*. American Journal of Public Health; 94(10): 1750-1755.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, Elizabeth. (2003). *Finding Resources to Support Rural Out-of-School Time Initiatives*. Strategy Brief, Vol. 4:1. The Finance Project.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> S. White (personal communication, August 14, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Save the Children. *Abbreviated Description of Literacy Programs*.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.sunflowerfreedom.org/about\\_us/about.html](http://www.sunflowerfreedom.org/about_us/about.html). Retrieved on August 2, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> J. Tucker (personal communication, August 14, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Kentucky School Boards Association. *Metcalfe County Program Kills Two Birds With One Stone*. Retrieved on August 2, 2007 from <http://www.ksba.org/KSA0903metcalfe%20county.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.bgcalaska.org/003/003\\_core.php#life](http://www.bgcalaska.org/003/003_core.php#life). Retrieved on August 2, 2007.