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Back to the drawing board to save afterschool programs: Allen Smith

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It's critical for our kids to save afterschool programs, writes guest columnist Allen Smith. Photo Courtesy of Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio



By Guest columnist, cleveland.com

Guest columnist Allen Smith is the CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio, which provides afterschool programming for kids ages 6-18 in six Northeast Ohio counties. His Boys & Girls Club career spans more than 30 years.

When I was growing up in Toledo, afterschool programs played a major role in my development as a young person.

I played a different sport in each season and attended the Boys & Girls Club when I could. The first sports team I ever played on was at the club. My first job was at the club.

I enjoyed hanging out there -- swimming, playing bumper pool and basketball.

You'll hear folks say these activities keep you from getting into trouble. I know that's true. They also help shape lives.

Today, the loss of pandemic relief funding is prompting school systems and nonprofits across Northeast Ohio to drop afterschool programs. Since our organization, Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio (BGCNEO), stands to be hurt by this, the temptation is to be critical of the cuts and rally others to do the same.

But we feel our efforts are better spent working to find new ways to help our kids.

The pandemic relief money is largely gone. It is not coming back. That reality is most evident in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, which will save \$34 million by cutting afterschool programs.

Clearly, those of us in the afterschool space are dealing with a new reality.

Let's consider ways to move forward, including:

- Putting kids first by working with school districts and other organizations to identify afterschool opportunities. Let's think creatively and maximize the resources we have.

In our case, we have standalone sites -- clubs not located in schools -- that will continue to serve kids during the 3 to 7 p.m. weekday hours, the period in which children are most at risk of being victims of crime or getting into trouble.

- Finding new -- and, hopefully, sustaining -- sources of government revenue at the local, state and federal levels. Let your elected officials know how important afterschool programs are to families.
- Supporting fundraising campaigns that urge companies and individuals to step in and fill the funding gap created by the loss of pandemic relief funds and other sources of government revenue.

Here at BGCNEO, we have been working on such an effort ever since we became aware that the pandemic relief funding was going away.

The loss of pandemic relief dollars is not the only challenge facing nonprofits. Also drying up are federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, which help at-risk youth and families. We are asking state legislators to set aside a portion of Ohio's capital budget to make up for the loss of TANF funds.

Afterschool providers have already had success obtaining funds through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODE), as well as the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OHMAS).

BGCNEO has used ODE funding to bolster academic success programs and open new clubs in Huron and Ashtabula counties; OHMAS dollars have enabled us to forge partnerships with behavioral health providers and create clinical pathways for youth.

It will take big-picture thinking to overcome the current funding challenge.

We believe in the power of afterschool programs -- and in the resolve of our larger community to find new ways to help those programs thrive.

Readers are invited to submit Opinion page essays on topics of regional or general interest. Send your 500-word essay for consideration to Ann Norman at anorman@cleveland.com. Essays must include a brief bio and headshot of the writer. Essays rebutting today's topics are also welcome.

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