

Elizabeth Chambers- NCSU- 2/7/24
Testimony
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Joint Committee on Education and Human Services

Encore, North Country Supervisory Union's 21CCLC supported afterschool and summer program, is in its 20th year. Last year 1,048 youth, K-8, attended the program, which is 65% of the students in our nine elementary schools. 25% of Encore attendees were on an IEP or 504 plan, and 61% qualified for free and reduced lunch. 56% of attendees donated to the program, and 44% attended for free without impact on enrollment.

Encore programs focus on high quality opportunities, like Martial Arts, dance, theater, sports, junior chef, arts, STEM, literacy, newspaper, youth councils, and much more. The program manages three bike trailers with 40 bikes and safety gear each, including adaptive equipment, used nearly every possible nice day across all NCSU schools. Last summer was the pilot for the NCSU mobile woodworking lab that has developmentally appropriate lessons for K-8 and all of the tools, supplies and workbenches for 16 youth to be working at a time. This is booked out through 2025. Encore partners with local nonprofits and agencies like Umbrella, Siskin Ecological Adventures, NorthWoods Stewardship Center, North Country Career Center, Green Mountain Farm-to-School, NEK Outfitters and Guide Service, Teach America to Swim and the Old Stone House to lead effective and engaging programming for youth.

Besides those providers there are over 150 Encore staff per year, with 11 site coordinators overseeing them. 67% of that staff also works during the school day, and of those that don't, 25 were high school students working in Encore through the work-based learning and NCUHS Flexible Pathways program. In many sites, high school students are what keeps the program from having to shut down because of low staffing.

Encore enrollment did not take a hit during the pandemic and made adjustments to include robust tutoring as part of the NCSU recovery plan, with a fully in-person program starting in the summer of 2020. In some schools, enrollment increased as local childcares closed. Encore advertises itself as an enrichment program meant to bring opportunities to youth that they may not otherwise get. That is not untrue, but if you ask the families that we serve, many will tell you that Encore, a great option, is their only option. That has prompted us to change focus in the last couple of years, remove set fees, buy vans to bring youth home for whom transportation is a barrier, add to the registrations for families to indicate if programming on a day is a need or a want, and still, when a waiting list is necessary, there are families who are struggling to get by. Partnering with the NCSU Community Schools Department, led by Sam, as a thought partner for Encore decision making, in addition to the programs she mentioned collaboration on, ensures a continuous lens on access and equity. Four out of nine Encore sites currently have waiting lists at least one day a week, and in many sites, more youth are allowed into programs than would be most effective for high quality enrichment.

Staffing continues to be a challenge, as it is across education, but afterschool programming is by nature flexible and fun, and we have tried to keep up with wage increases that have taken place across sectors. This type of budget increase will be a challenge post-ESSER in conjunction with local school budgets and both Title I and Title IV at risk for decreases, which along with 21CCLC are the largest percentage of the Encore budget. The number of needed 1:1's for youth, nursing supports required, and preventative behavior supportive leaders worked into budgets has increased, and hiring in those specialized areas is a real challenge. One of the most challenging afterschool hires is bus drivers, or acquiring transportation in general. In one site that had afterschool bussing for 5+ years, we lost a driver and have not been able to fill the position for over a year. Enrollment initially dropped over 25% without that option. In sites where we purchased vans, Encore staff take turns driving kids home when we can't find someone available to be the official driver, and that is only providing for those who indicate that they could not attend otherwise.

All leaders across North Country Supervisory Union are cohesively engaged in making sure that the afterschool and summer programs are successful. As a member of the 21CCLC director cohort, as well as having served a term last year as a National Afterschool Ambassador, I can tell you that programs that are successful take a community to support, and I feel lucky and proud to be part of a community that does just that, and I see and hear about plenty that do not have the necessary embedded systems of support, which causes director turnover and programs to fall apart.

On that note, I'd like to share some thoughts about the Act 78 funds that are being allocated to expand extended day learning opportunities. In my opinion, the first priority should be schools in communities that do not have programming, as they have embedded policies and procedures that will ensure that access and equity is a priority for youth. I also see the merits of other organizations having access to a funding source that increases opportunities for kids through partnerships with schools who may not have the capacity to take the lead on grant writing and program development, but who have identified student needs that would otherwise go unmet.

An example from the Northeast Kingdom is the group working together to create a teen center, The Hive. An action group, made of local educators, human services, NEKCA, youth, community members and police was created at the end of last summer to engage in the creation of a teen center, which is badly needed for youth in the Newport area. This group worked together to create a name, choose an area for the center to run, create an advisory structure, and vote on the lead organization, which was decided to be Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA), a group with experience building teen centers, serving rural communities, and writing grants. Although the high school principal, and many of us from the education field, were fully in favor of a teen center, we did not feel it was within our capacity and scope to take a lead on it. NEKCA is a non-profit organization encouraging many stakeholders to be part of decision making, and I would fully support them applying for these funds without oversight from the North Country Supervisory Union, but with robust, equity-focused oversight from a grants manager at the state level, much like I receive from Emanuel at the Agency of

Education, who has been a steady leader over my 8 years and I know to hold programs accountable to the intent of the grant.

Similarly, our local libraries and education centers like Siskin and NorthWoods would be groups that could make their programming more affordable and have systems in place to ensure that safety, equity and access are at the forefront of their applications.

I want to see out-of-school opportunities for kids increase, and I don't think schools have the capacity to manage and oversee the funds for other organizations, I know that if we, at NCSU, need to apply for and manage the funds for the teen center, it will be difficult to find a person to do that for NEKCA. I believe the legislation should be as clear as possible that the funds will go to programs that can prove safety, access and equity, that they are in an area where other programming is at capacity or doesn't exist, and that they are applying with the support of community leaders. Those elements are addressed in the RFP, but should be addressed by the legislation as well to ensure the long-term intention of the funding source as a community, equity and access driven source.