

Maureen Gillard - School Age Childcare Director at Essex Junction Recreation & Parks

Essex Junction Recreation & Parks is a municipal department within the City of Essex Junction which provides all of the licensed afterschool and full-day summer camp programming for the Essex Westford School District (EWSD), which serves approximately 4,500 preschool through 12th grade students across three communities: Essex Town, Essex Junction, and Westford.

Our afterschool programming, known as Rec Kids, serves K-5 students, and there are 411 individual participants currently enrolled in our programs across eight sites. We provide full-day programming during most school vacation days for students in grades K-6 with up to 150 available spots for care, and we operate five full-day summer camps (7:30am-5:30pm, Mon-Fri) that support 425 campers each day for incoming 1st-9th graders.

We have a long-standing and close working partnership with the EWSD, which is a critical component of our success, particularly concerning our eight shared staff members who work within their school communities during the day and shift gears to afterschool sites in the afternoon. This unique model provides consistent relationships, continuity in expectations from school to afterschool and into summer, and allows us to hire highly qualified staff as full-time, year-round employees to fill these important roles. We are also able to provide connection and communication with school and family teams around additional support for students, including behavior plans and Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions.

Our model works effectively because the district is able to focus on all the needs associated with school day learning, while entrusting us with the great responsibility of providing the invaluable resource of afterschool care, a space for enrichment and extended learning, social growth and development, relationship building, and, most importantly, fun. We have the sole management of funds, staffing, design, and programming, with a strong layer of support as needed.

While we are a municipal department, our entire budget falls within the enterprise fund, so it is essentially self-supported programming funded by the participants of the programs. We access grant funding to keep up with growing demand, meet our desire to focus on growth and development and intentional programming, and ensure that we can keep costs for families low, and the value of the programs and the care we provide high.

We currently have 70 students on the waitlist for afterschool care, and are diligently working to find ways to affordably expand programming to meet the growing needs in our community. As the sole provider of programming like this for our entire district, not having access to funding that could create additional spots and invest in staff and future development would have a significant negative impact on families in the City, Town, and Westford (higher fees for licensed childcare, longer waitlists, less staff support, and fewer programming resources).

From our experience, it is critical that the funds offered to provide afterschool programming throughout the state have more flexible access in order to have the best outcome for the children and families - which should always be our ultimate goal. Already established municipal departments, licensed providers, nonprofits, etc., need to be able to work collaboratively with their LEAs to best provide systems and programs to support needs within their communities, and being financially tied as subcontractors can limit this collaboration and can add barriers in a variety of ways, from the process of applying for and accessing funds, documentation, and communication, to maintaining the integrity of our ability, as the experts in our field, to independently deliver high quality programming.

We also believe it is critical for other entities to have access to funding to provide a variety of options for programming for children and youth, because, like so many things in Vermont, programming and service delivery in afterschool looks different from one community to the next in order to best meet the needs of children and families. It is critical that state supported resources come with flexibility for the varying service models that exist and allow local solutions and systems to continue to grow and flourish.

The creation of a Special Fund to administer the Act 78 Grant - which is inline with the intent listed in Act 78 where eligible recipients can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations - would allow community partners like us to continue to invest in increased access to well-funded, intentionally designed, high-quality programs with staff who are well-trained, well-compensated, and exemplary role models for the youth - the future - of the State of Vermont.