

Testimony of

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On behalf of
The Afterschool Alliance



Good morning Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Tiahrt and subcommittee members. I'm Chris Francis, and I'm the CEO of the YMCA of the Northwoods in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. As Chairman Obey knows well, Rhinelander is a small, rural community of about 15,000 residents, about 60 miles north of Wausau, Wisconsin.

The YMCA of the Northwoods provides the community's sole afterschool program, and it is almost entirely reliant on its 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants. There are two multi-year grants at work, one for programming for children in grades 6 – 8, and one for students in grades 4 and 5. They expire in three and four years, respectively. The school district also applied for a 21st CCLC grant for K - 3 afterschool programming, but was not awarded a grant. The state only has so many 21st CCLC dollars. The grant recipient for the two grants we operate under is the School District of Rhinelander, which contracts with the YMCA of the Northwoods to provide services. Our YMCA is one of 2,676 YMCAs across the country serving children, youth and families; and the YMCA movement is the largest provider of child care and afterschool across our country.

I should mention, also, that I've worked in the afterschool field for several years now, running successful YMCA afterschool programs in Kentucky, Ohio, and Iowa, as well as in Wisconsin.

Our program in Rhinelander is young, but we're very proud of it because it's meeting such a critical community need. The program serves students at two school sites – the middle school (for grades 6 – 8) and the elementary school (for grades 4 – 5), as well as at the YMCA itself. I should mention, by the way, that the middle school has the second largest middle school population in the state.

The first point I want to stress about our program is that we work very hard to make sure our programming is coordinated with what's going on in the regular school day. We have regular school-day teachers who serve as tutors for our afterschool program. They have very specific knowledge of what's being taught when, and what kind of extra help children might need to keep up or get ahead. In addition to tutoring, a number of the teachers lead various enrichment classes in our program – everything from technology education, to cooking, to fishing lure-making, and more. The teachers are an integral part of what we're doing, and they help us keep connected to the regular school day in all kinds of ways.

In addition, at one of our two sites, our program director is also the school's Guidance Counselor, and she's vigilant about making sure we know which students need help with a given issue, which ones need extra skill-building, which ones are struggling in which subjects, and so on. As a result, we're able to target individual students with low reading or math skills, for example. And then our tutors provide the help they need, one on one, or in small groups.

We accomplish the same integration of afterschool and regular day at our other site, as well. Staff members there meet with teachers at the end of the day, every day, to find out about their assignments for the evening, identify problem areas, and so on.

In short, communication between our afterschool team and the regular school day teachers is absolutely vital to what we're doing, and we view our program as an extension of the regular day.

Our daily program begins with what we call a Power Hour, during which students do their school assignments for the evening, with supervision and help from our tutors and staff. That's also when they get individual or group tutoring. That includes a regular skill-building session led by one of our teachers. That hour is followed by a snack, and then the kids break into a variety of groups for enrichment classes, or take a bus to our YMCA facility to play games and sports. Next year we're going to beef up our STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) component. Two of our teachers took some additional training on the subject recently, and they're now developing a curriculum for next year that will include robotics, architectural drafting, and more.

All that effort has made a difference for our students' academic performance. Over the course of the last year, children in our program have gradually improved their grades. The average grade point average of regular attendees has increased steadily: from 2.5 in the first quarter of last year to 2.9 in the fourth quarter, and to 3.2 in the first quarter of this year. That's more than half a letter grade.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, we're a rural community with a fairly high poverty rate. About 45 percent of our kids are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. About a fifth of the kids who attend regularly are at risk academically, and another 16 percent are special education children. Historically, we've had one of the highest drop-out rates in the state, and one of the lowest graduation rates. So we have a very high population of kids who need extra support afterschool.

Before our program was in place, a lot of those children – and others like them – went home to an empty house after the school day ended. Perhaps related to that, our high school has one of the highest pregnancy rates in the state. And there is no shortage of other inappropriate activities for kids to get involved in when left to their own devices, as I'm sure we all know. So getting our children into a safe, adult-supervised setting is a huge plus for them, as well as for their families, and the whole community.

If the principals of our schools were here, I know they would tell you that our program has also helped the larger school community. One of our ground rules is that parents need to come into the building at the end of the session to pick up their kids. They literally have to come in and sign them out. There's something about parents physically entering the school building that helps break down barriers. We also do family night events for children and parents, and recently had 106 people come to share some family time with us – in the building, seeing what the school's doing, hearing about our program, getting engaged. In short, the afterschool programming is helping connect parents who have in the past been disconnected from school.

One other aspect I want to note is that we have a truancy task force in place in the school district, and some of the students who've been skipping school are required by the court to come to our afterschool program as part of getting back on the path to regular attendance during the day. The reason for that is pretty simple: Afterschool is fun. Kids want to come, even the ones who've been truants. So it's pretty

common for the students who've been "assigned" to us by the Oneida County judges because they've been skipping school to stay with us long after their "assignment" has ended.

We have a similarly positive effect on student behavior across the broader population of afterschool students – that is to say, not just those assigned to us because of past truancy. Since we launched the program, suspension rates for the students in our program have decreased faster than for the rest of student population in general. So we have ample evidence that our program is having a very real impact.

One of our afterschool students, a young man whose name I'll keep to myself, came to us as a 7th grader last year. His family had just moved to the area, and he had a very rough transition. He didn't have any friends, struggled with his grades, and eventually got in trouble for stealing something. That's the point at which a lot of kids can slip right through the cracks – labeled as troublemakers, or low-achievers. But we worked very hard with him to get his grades up and to get him back on track, and this year he's on the honor roll, and continues with our program because he enjoys it. His attitude about school has turned around 180 degrees, and he's pretty close to a model student at this point. He's one of a number of success stories I could tell you about, the kind of story that makes my job so rewarding.

I know the committee is particularly interested in the opportunity that afterschool programs offer for delivery of health care services and health literacy instruction. And I can tell you that afterschool provides an ideal platform. First, we've got a student and parent population that would absolutely benefit from primary care services – we're rural, we have a lot of low-income families, and a lot who rely on seasonal employment and are therefore less likely to have insurance. Second, and I think most programs could say this, our program is very well suited to it. The second half of each day's program lends itself to modules of all sorts, so we could very easily accommodate health literacy education classes, and basic health screening or primary care services. We already incorporate some education around alcohol and drug abuse, and this would be a natural addition.

Moreover, it'd help strengthen the program, I expect, because it would provide yet another incentive for parents to enroll their kids, and because it would tighten parents' connection to the program, and our connection to the broader community.

In that respect, I think we're very similar to other afterschool programs around the state, so I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a program that couldn't provide a strong platform for health care and health literacy, provided that funding and the services were available to them.

I should note that one of Wisconsin's major health care providers has identified afterschool programs as an outstanding vehicle for providing preventive care and health literacy instruction. They've announced their intention to work with communities to bring prevention services to afterschool programs. That's a welcome development, and I'm confident programs would want to participate.

Now, turning for a second to the proposals for 21st CCLC going forward, I have some concerns. First, as I said, we are a small, rural community, and we don't have a professional grant writer on staff. So, I'm very concerned about what it would mean for us if the competition for 21st CCLC were nationalized. I think that would give large school systems a huge leg-up on the rest of us, especially small community based organizations.

And I'm also concerned about the idea of requiring that 21st CCLC grants go only to school districts. Ours does, and they contract entirely to us to provide services. But I think we're fairly unique in that regard. A lot of outstanding 21st CCLC afterschool programs are run by community-based groups, from YMCAs to faith-based organizations, to Boys & Girls Clubs, to extension services, to home-grown community organizations. They coordinate what they do with the schools, but they are the grant recipients and they provide very successful programs.

And the truth is that a lot of school districts are so strapped for dollars that they're cutting back on afterschool programs. Even when programs generate grant funding, the districts find that they cannot afford them. I can tell you that the YMCA takes a different view, and always has. Engaging kids in out-of-school time is what we were created to do, and it is and will always remain a core mission for us. I know other community groups share that commitment.

As many of you probably know, the YMCA focuses on character values – honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring. We incorporate those values into everything we do. We exist to serve the community, and that's why we run afterschool programs. Our three focuses are youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility – a perfect fit for afterschool.

Mr. Chairman, afterschool programs are in short supply in Wisconsin, despite the best efforts of many of us. According to the Afterschool Alliance's *America After 3PM* report, we've got more than 317,000 kids taking care of themselves in the afternoon hours – one third of the schoolchildren in the state. By contrast, just 11 percent of kids are in afterschool programs. If afterschool programs were more widely available, we'd have a lot of takers. The parents of 31 percent of the children not already in afterschool, representing more than 265,000 children, say they'd sign their kids up if one were available. And Wisconsin's story is similar to those of the other states, too. Afterschool programs are in too short supply. Too many children are left on their own.

As a representative of a community that has directly benefited from 21st CCLC, I encourage the committee to ensure that 21st CCLC funding remains dedicated to afterschool, before school and summer programs. Especially in this difficult economy, it is critical that funds for afterschool not be diverted to other purposes, which would result in even more kids left without afterschool programs.

Finally, I want to note that I came to the YMCA as a beneficiary of afterschool myself. I grew up in the foster care system, and lived in more than ten different homes when I was a kid. Afterschool programs were a source of great stability for me as a youth, and I hope in my work to provide that same stability

for today's children. And by the way, that includes my own kids, three of whom are enrolled in our program.

So I'm grateful for the opportunity to be with you today to tell you about the wonderful work that afterschool programs are doing for our children, and to ask that you do all you can to make sure that funding for afterschool programs continues and grows.

Thank you very much.