Afterschool Programming is the Key to Educational Success in the Implementation of ESSA
Testimony before the Illinois State Board of Education
Submitted by Susan Stanton on behalf of the ACT Now Coalition, September 13, 2016

The ACT Now Coalition is a state-wide organization that works to ensure that young people in Illinois have access to quality and affordable afterschool and youth development programs. We believe that an increased commitment to young people beyond the traditional school day is a crucial part of their growth into healthy and productive individuals. ACT Now is a diverse coalition supported by Illinois families, educators, business leaders, community advocates, youth organizations, and policymakers. On behalf of our over 160 member organizations, we ask that the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) take advantage of the opportunities available to increase and improve afterschool programming in the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

I would like to begin by thanking ISBE for the opportunity to provide comments on ISBE’s draft ESSA implementation plan. We encourage ISBE to accept feedback from the diverse afterschool community because they are important partners for school day learning. Many states have created entire committees filled with stakeholders that are collaborating on writing the plan, including members of the afterschool community. We encourage the state to work as closely with possible with afterschool providers in constructing its plan.

ACT Now is excited about all the opportunities to create better connections between school-day and afterschool professionals present in ESSA. I would like to acknowledge ISBE’s inclusion of afterschool programming and our Network in its plan. I see many ways that the role of afterschool providers could be expanded in this plan to the benefit of Illinois’ youth and schools, particularly in regards to improving academic outcomes, collecting meaningful data, promoting family engagement, expanding funding opportunities for afterschool programs, using afterschool programs as partners, and improving the quality of afterschool programs.

Improving Academic Outcomes

Afterschool programs can improve academic outcomes and should be used as a crucial strategy for improving schools and academic achievement. In 2014, one-third of all 21st CCLC participants in Illinois improved their grades from fall to spring, an increase from 2013. 93% percent of Teen REACH students improved their grades within a year. A longitudinal study also showed significant gains in math test scores for elementary and middle-school students who participated in high-quality afterschool programs, and a meta-analysis of 35 studies of at-risk youth found that out-of-school time programs had a positive effect on reading and math achievement.

In regards to the school improvement indicators suggested by the Accountability Workgroup [Section 3.1], afterschool programs address many of the indicators listed in non-academic indicators and should be added as a separate indicator because of afterschool’s ability to improve youth outcomes. Afterschool programs can also work as a strategy to create a well-rounded and supportive education for students because of its proven ability to improve educational outcomes [Section 5.1(B)].

Data

In response to ISBE’s question in the plan regarding what other data the state should include in the reporting system, we suggest that ISBE collect data that reflects the impact afterschool programs can have on schools and communities, such as improved safety, improved health outcomes, and improved social/emotional skills [Section 3.1]. ISBE could collect this data through 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st Century CCLCs) reporting systems or through partnerships with other afterschool programs. Incorporating data such as this into the educator dashboard/Ed360 and sharing that information with community partners that run afterschool programs could help to track outcomes and improve instruction [Section 3.1; Section 4.2(B)].

Family Engagement

Afterschool programs provide a crucial bridge between communities and schools and can help foster the family engagement called for under ESSA. We applaud ISBE’s decision to include the use of Title IV, Part B funds to build the capacity of subgrantees as they implement high-quality afterschool and family programs [Section 5.1(E)]. We also want to note that ESSA’s provisions on Parent and Family Engagement in Title I Part B calls on education agencies to collaborate with community-based organizations, such as afterschool programs, to carry out parent engagement plans and in using its parent engagement funds. We encourage ISBE to include this in their plan.

Out-of-school time programs can also assist in students’ transitions throughout their schooling, as discussed in the plan, because these programs often have strong, consistent parent and community ties and because youth may continue on in their schooling but they or their siblings may stay with the same afterschool programs [Section 5.1(A)]. ISBE’s plan to address the needs of migratory youth and low-income rural students can also be assisted by afterschool programs. Afterschool programs can help connect families and youth to the vital services that they need in order to have youth be successful in school. The extra instructional and enrichment time offered in afterschool programs can also help these student populations to succeed [Section 5.2].

Funding

Because afterschool is such an integral part of educational improvement, we encourage ISBE to use the opportunities present in ESSA to make investments in afterschool. In allocating funds set aside for school improvement, we remind ISBE of the positive effects of afterschool programs and how they

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lead to overall school improvement [Section 3.3 (A)]. We encourage ISBE to allow funds to be allocated to afterschool when planning for school improvement.

In regards to ISBE’s request for additional ways it can use Title IV, Part A funds, we suggest ISBE consider opportunities for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) learning and college and career readiness, which there is an emphasis on throughout ESSA [Section 5.1(G)(iv)]. Afterschool programs provide limitless opportunities for students to advance in these areas. We're experiencing a rapid growth in the need for STEM professionals. Between 2008 and 2018, the nation's need for STEM professionals will grow by 17 percent—which is more than the projected growth for administrative work, sales, and transportation combined.4 If we want the next generation of students to be fluent in STEM, we have to take an immersion approach. School age children spend only 20 percent of their waking hours in school—the other 80 percent is spent outside of school.5 Children discover their passions and pick up new skills as they explore their world in afterschool hours. To allow for the level of exposure and experiences needed to develop fluency in STEM, we must ensure that all communities offer ways for students to engage with these subjects in multiple and varied ways, including afterschool programming. We ask that you take into consideration the positive impact afterschool programming can have on STEM fluency in your ESSA implementation plan.

Afterschool programs also provide a link to higher education and career readiness. Afterschool and summer learning programs have a proven track record of helping children avoid the pitfalls of poor academic achievement, poverty, truancy, and behavior issues, which can derail their futures before they begin.6 Afterschool programs offer a key opportunity to expose students to higher education options and career paths and to teach them skills that can unlock doors to future career prospects. The afterschool hours offer time for apprenticeships, guest speakers, and project-based activities that are not always available during a school day focused on a core curriculum. Afterschool is an essential support to help students move ahead to success in higher education and careers. ISBE should take the opportunities available for college and career readiness in afterschool programs into consideration when implementing ESSA plans for college and career readiness.

Although it was not mentioned in ISBE’s plan, Title II Part B provides grants to “develop or enhance comprehensive literacy instruction” to entities serving “children from low-income families.” ESSA specifically states that these literacy initiatives can be “augmented by after-school and out-of-school time instruction.” ISBE should take advantage of this opportunity to improve the literacy of high-need populations by coordinating literacy initiatives between in-school and out-of-school time partners.

**Afterschool Providers as Partners**

We also recommend including afterschool partners in school review teams and in creating instruments that evaluate the quality of an improvement plan, in order to more fully incorporate comprehensive stakeholder input. [Section 3.3 (A)]. Our coalition of providers from around the state could be of assistance in gathering diverse stakeholder input for these purposes.

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5 Ibid.
Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards

ACT Now released Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards this past spring, as noted in the draft plan. These Standards were developed in partnership with ISBE and are evidence-based practices that lead to positive youth outcomes. Using these Standards will promote overall school improvement and academic achievement.

The plan emphasizes the various standards and evidence-based practices schools can use to develop consistent practices to support students [Section 3.2(A)(i); Section 3.3(B); Section 5.1(A)]. We encourage ISBE to incorporate the Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards into its MTSS because of afterschool’s strong ties to the school day and to further promote consistent, high-quality instruction.

As ISBE considers training opportunities for school staff, we encourage ISBE to consider training specific to afterschool [Section 4.2(A); Section 5.1(C)]. Many afterschool instructors are school day teachers as well. Providing training for teachers and school staff on what quality afterschool programs look like through ACT Now’s Quality Standards training, which ACT Now offers free of charge, can improve school day academic achievement as well.

In conclusion, the implementation of ESSA provides Illinois with the opportunity to create a comprehensive vision for student success. In implementing ESSA, we hope that ISBE works to coordinate services for young people so that they have everything they need for success, not only academic supports but coordination with community partners that provide services to promote health, safety, and mentoring. These things can be accomplished by greater partnerships between school and out-of-school time programs. Afterschool programming is critical to success for students, and we hope ISBE capitalizes on the benefits offered by afterschool programming to the maximum extent possible in its implementation of ESSA.