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Public Witness Testimony of Jodi Grant

Executive Director
Afterschool Alliance
Washington, DC

Submitted to:

U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Afterschool Alliance, the entire afterschool field, and especially the 1.6 million students in Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers, I extend our sincere gratitude for the remarkable funding and support received in fiscal year (FY) 2022. Those critical resources helped keep many young people and their families supported and connected in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In FY 2023, we ask Congress to build on past success and tackle the challenges of tomorrow by providing the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program within the U.S. Department of Education with \$1.789 billion, a \$500 million increase over FY 2022.

I'm Jodi Grant, the Executive Director of the Afterschool Alliance, a national non-profit organization that works to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities. We support a network of more than 23,000 afterschool partners that are expanding learning opportunities for students nationwide and tapping community partners to keep children safe and well-nourished and provide engaging, hands-on activities that raise school attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates.

During the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic presented afterschool programs—and the staff, organizations, students, and families that rely on them—with challenges they never could have anticipated. Programs endured unexpected costs, serious staff and student health considerations, limited access to school facilities during closures, staffing shortages, and much more. The afterschool field rose to the challenge. With local partners, afterschool programs across the country adjusted their operations to address the urgent needs of the children and families in their communities: providing meals, offering care for children of essential workers, finding ways to keep students engaged and connected while learning remotely, providing in-person programs and safe spaces for online learning, and remaining a source of support to students and families as they confronted numerous challenges. Working with communities that often face particularly intense hardships caused by the pandemic, afterschool programs remain critical partners that are ensuring young people emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, and hopeful. Of course, none of this is possible without federal support.

For more than 20 years, 21st Century Community Learning Centers have played a vital role in communities across the nation by providing a range of services to students with academic challenges, especially those in low-income communities. These programs are unique collaborations between schools and local communities that provide a balance of academic, social, and emotional supports to students in need. Programs operate before school, during summer months, and in peak after-school hours when students can most benefit from a safe learning environment, enrichment activities, and caring adults and mentors. 21st CCLC programs provide:

- opportunities for new, hands-on, academically enriching learning experiences to meet challenging state academic standards;
- a broad array of additional services, programs, and activities, focusing on subjects like science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), physical fitness and wellness, drug and violence prevention, nutrition and health education, service learning, youth development, and arts and music;
- activities that connect to in-demand industry sectors or occupations that are designed to reinforce and complement the academic program of participating students, including, but not limited to, financial and environmental literacy, career readiness, internships, and apprenticeships; and
- opportunities for families of students to actively and meaningfully engage in their children's education, including opportunities for literacy and related educational development.

Based on the most recently available data, 21st CCLC funding currently supports afterschool and summer programs in 10,496 school-based and community centers; 41 percent are in cities, 38 percent in suburban areas, and 21 percent in rural communities. 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide essential support to 1.564 million students, many of whom are from underserved communities, and offer creative, engaging learning opportunities to kids of all ages and backgrounds. Programs stay open on average 13.8 hours per week, 5 days per week, for 32 weeks per year. More than 127,000 individuals make up the staff of 21st CCLCs; 35 percent are certified teachers, 32 percent are community partner staff and youth workers, and 9 percent are college students.

What makes 21st Century Community Learning Centers work? They are individualized to each state and community, and providers examine the needs of the population and design programs to offer holistic supports to students of all ages that prepare them to become college- and career-ready. Community-based organizations, schools, nationally affiliated non-profits, colleges and universities, public libraries, park and recreation centers, faith-based organizations, charter schools, museums, and more are all eligible for 21st CCLC funding, but the "secret sauce" is that these entities come together as partners to provide a quality learning experience for pre-K-12th grade students. For students who attend programs, the opportunities provided through 21st CCLCs are a lifeline that helps them reconnect, re-engage, and develop the skills they need to be successful in school and in life. 21st Century Community Learning

Centers orchestrate opportunities that anchor students to peers and caring adults in their schools and communities, and often help them discover their passions, be it robotics, culinary arts, gardening, writing, flying drones, coding, music, creative dance, or calligraphy. Academic supports are paired with personal connections, community partnerships, and structured opportunities that allow students to explore and develop talents and interests that are often not addressed during the regular school day.

The greatest weakness of 21st CCLCs is that there is not enough funding to offer programs to students in many schools and communities. In fact, only 1 out of 3 requests for 21st CCLC funding is awarded nationally. Across a span of 10 years, \$4 billion in local grant requests were denied because of the lack of adequate federal funding and intense competition. And while the program serves nearly 1.6 million children, demand for quality afterschool and summer programs, like those offered through 21st CCLC, continues to grow. Before the pandemic, 24.6 million students nationwide were on the afterschool waitlist. For every child in afterschool, three were waiting for an available program. In 2020, 7.7 million school-age children were unsupervised and alone after school between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. An October 2020 survey of parents found that 79 percent agreed that all children deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs.

What are the students who are unable to attend programs missing out on? The research is clear that participation in afterschool programs, including 21st CCLC programs, yields a wide array of positive outcomes:

- Statewide evaluations of 21st CCLC programs have found a positive impact on student engagement and motivation in school, with gains seen across grade levels, from elementary to high school.
- Students who regularly participate in 21st CCLC programs improved their school attendance, school engagement, health-related behaviors, and math and reading achievement.
- Regular participation in afterschool programs helped narrow the achievement gap between high- and low-income students in math, improved academic and behavioral outcomes, and reduced school-day absences.
- Businesses want to hire problem solvers and team players. Students learn by doing in afterschool programs and develop the skills they need for the jobs of tomorrow.
- Students regularly participating in 21st CCLC programs see gains in skills and competencies valued by employers, such as the ability to communicate well, collaborate with others, and think critically.
- Jobs in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are driving global economic growth. Nearly six million students are getting opportunities to develop an interest in and explore STEM in afterschool.
- More than 8 in 10 parents say afterschool helps give working parents peace of mind and helps parents keep their job.

During the pandemic, 21st CCLCs faced challenges but were able to rise to the moment and provide critical supports for students and families. Although many states reported disruptions

in data collection during the pandemic, promising findings illustrate positive academic and behavioral gains among participants during the past two years. For example, Arkansas' 2019-2021st CCLC statewide evaluation reported that most youth expected to do well in English (90 percent) and math (87 percent). And Idaho's statewide evaluation found that a strong majority of teachers reported homework completion (95 percent) and student behavior improvements (93 percent) among regularly attending students. Additionally, surveys of program providers found that throughout the pandemic, 21st CCLC programs, compared to afterschool programs overall, were more likely to adapt to address the needs of the children and families they served, from connecting with youth remotely during school closures and stay-at-home orders to helping families connect with vital community resources during a challenging time.

The afterschool field is grateful for the funds made available by Congress through the CARES Act, CRRSA, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. A number of states, including Connecticut and Oklahoma, are using the American Rescue Plan Act ESSER set-aside funds to broaden access to evidence-based, comprehensive afterschool and summer enrichment programs. Some states have leveraged their 21st CCLC infrastructure at the state and local level to efficiently invest their COVID-19 relief funds to provide supports to students during the summer and afterschool. Some states have used these funds to reach populations that have not been served by other funding streams, including intentionally reaching out to smaller providers. States are also collaborating with partners and building out opportunities for technical assistance and professional development to support providers and students.

We are also grateful that Congress recognized that our children and youth lost much more than just academics during this pandemic. A recent CDC survey found alarming self-reported rates of depression, sadness, and even suicidal thoughts amongst our youth. Healthy interactions with their peers and caring adults are more essential than ever. Quality afterschool programs provide a safe place where our students feel a sense of purpose and belonging. It's a place where teamwork, collaboration, and getting out of one's comfort zone are applauded and encouraged.

The demand for COVID relief funding is great, with states experiencing many more funding requests from eligible applicants than they can support. And, at the local level, many school districts are just getting started with investments in afterschool and summer. With 24.6 million students waiting for comprehensive afterschool programs, there is an urgent, compelling need to use the ARP resources effectively and build on successes. The COVID-19 relief funds for comprehensive afterschool and summer enrichment and learning are helping students get caught up and accelerate their learning, while also providing whole-child supports and social and emotional learning. But, sadly, too many school districts are using their federal dollars for programs that only focus on academics and offering tutoring or summer school, which only address some of the losses our kids are facing. Without increased funding for 21st CCLC, students and families across the nation will miss out on the holistic afterschool and summer opportunities that can help them more effectively navigate the challenges created and/or exacerbated by this pandemic.

Our children spend 80 percent of their time outside of school, yet they are learning all the time. Working parents know this very well. When the school day ends, or summer and vacation breaks take place, the responsibilities of working parents do not pause. Afterschool programs create opportunities for our children to thrive, and they also provide a lifeline for working parents who know their children are safe and engaged during the hours after school and throughout the summer.

Our goal is simple: to ensure that a quality, accessible program is available to every youth and family that wants one. In addition to expanding access to programs, increased funding for 21st CCLC can help existing programs offer more professional development opportunities and other quality supports. This includes courses for staff in positive youth development, youth choice and voice, making connections with schools, and especially now, courses in trauma-informed care and mental health first aid.

Additional funding will also help ensure that programs have the resources needed to recruit qualified staff and retain experienced staff. Staffing, which was challenging prior to the pandemic, is a rising concern for programs. Data collected throughout the pandemic finds that staffing challenges have increased over time and that now, more than ever, staffing is impacting the ability of providers to meet the needs of the children and families they serve. In a spring 2022 survey, among program providers that report that they are physically open but operating at reduced capacity, 71 percent say that it is due to staffing issues.

Finally, I want to quote Kyla Anderson, a high school student attending a 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool program, because at the end of the day these programs are all about the young people:

“During the pandemic, it was challenging because I was social distancing and not doing certain activities. But, my 21st Century [Community Learning Center] program has been a place where I’ve been able to meet new friends, communicate, and be social with others. I wasn’t a talker, but now I am! The mentors in my program also helped me stay on top of my work and encouraged me. Without my program, I wouldn’t have the grades I do now, and I wouldn’t be as social as I am. I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of things without my program.”

When considering funding for FY 2023, I urge you to consider just how important it is to sustain and expand afterschool and summer learning programs for our children, families, communities, and our workforce. I urge you to increase funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers by \$500 million to give more young people like Kyla opportunities to grow and learn.

Thank you for your consideration.