

Oral Testimony of Felicia Simpson

Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance (AELA), Director

House Appropriations Committee

Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

Good morning Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Felicia Simpson, Director of the Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance (AELA). On behalf of the [Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance](#) (AELA), the [Afterschool Alliance](#), and afterschool and summer learning programs and the families they serve in Alabama and across the nation, I would like to thank you for increasing funding for the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers in Fiscal Year 2023. Today, I ask you to build on that investment in our communities and address the vast unmet need for afterschool and summer learning programs by providing \$2.09 billion for the program in Fiscal Year 2024.

The Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance works to ensure Alabama youth, families, and communities have access to high quality out-of-school-time programming that promotes positive development and life-long learning. Our goals include supporting the development and growth of statewide policies that secure the resources needed to sustain new and existing school-based afterschool programs. With the 21st CCLC funding, Alabama serves approximately 18,643 students in 202 communities. Across the nation, we serve approximately 1.5 million students. Through the 21st CCLC initiative, partnerships between local school, community and faith-based organizations provide students in pre-k through 12th grade with a safe and supportive environment where they participate in academic enrichment opportunities, explore

a diverse set of opportunities in STEM and Literacy, participate in internships and fellowships, and earn high school credits through pathways such as Alabama Act 2021-428 mandating that *“the Alabama State Board of Education, each local board of education, and public charter schools shall routinely inform students and their parents of the ability to earn elective credits.”* ELOs are defined as approved out-of-classroom learning experiences which provide a student with enrichment opportunities; career readiness or employability skills opportunities, including internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeship, or any other approved education opportunities. It has become an integral part of Alabama’s workforce.

21st CCLC programs serve students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these programs were a vital source of support for underserved communities. With students back at school, 21st CCLC afterschool and summer learning programs are more essential than ever. Programs can leverage community partnerships to keep children safe, fed and offer engaging, hands-on learning experiences which improves school attendance, academic achievement, and increased graduation rates.

According to [“America After 3PM,”](#) a national household survey of more than 30,000 families released by the Afterschool Alliance in 2020, in Alabama and across the nation, for every one child in an afterschool program, there are 4 more waiting to get into a program. Cost and access to programs, including transportation and overall availability, were deemed the largest barriers.

For those Alabama families participating in programs, 91 percent of parents are satisfied with their child’s afterschool program and 81 percent agree afterschool programs provide

young people opportunities to learn important life skills, like the ability to communicate and work collaboratively with other students. More must be done to ensure that all children in Alabama, and nationwide, are able to take part in an afterschool program that keeps them safe, inspires learning, and gives parents peace of mind. I would like to note that partnership at the state level is critical, and we are fortunate to have an exceptional Governor in Kay Ivey, who has committed funding and support in Alabama which leverages our federal investment. Large industries, such as Mazda Toyota in Huntsville AL, are implementing afterschool and summer programming for their employee's children. Research finds productivity decreases in industry after 3PM as parents seem to be more concerned about their children arriving home safely, transitioning to a childcare facility after the school day ends, or attending a local YMCA or Boys and Girls Club program.

Of course, every state has its challenges and successes. A recent survey of more than 1,000 afterschool program providers found that nationally, more than half of providers (53 percent) had a waitlist for their program and 1 in 4 (23%) are operating at reduced capacity. While American Rescue Plan Act funds for out of school time programs are focused on the specific challenges related to the pandemic and are primarily directed to local school districts; community-based providers including nonprofit, faith-based, park and recreation, library, and other non-school providers serving a wide range of vulnerable students continue to struggle to access the funding resources they need, with only 19 percent of providers surveyed reporting the ability to access federal Covid-19 relief funds.

21st Century Community Learning Centers are a lifeline, helping students reconnect, re-engage, and develop the skills they need to be successful in school and in life. They anchor

students to peers and caring adults, and help many discover their passions, be it robotics, gardening, coding or music. Programs are innovative and respond to students' needs. Junior ROTC (JROTC) programs are available through many programs. Further, programs sometimes emphasize physical education and activity to ensure that young people who want to serve in the military can do so. And, as stated earlier, other programs offer students academic credit for learning that happens in afterschool programs. At this moment when so many youth are struggling, afterschool programs provide the trauma-informed care so many need. In Alabama, we are partnering with the Department of Mental Health to ensure staff are trained and understand how to care for children with these challenges and the students are provided with support.

Students and communities absolutely benefit from afterschool programs. Students who regularly participate improved their school attendance, health-related behaviors, and math and reading achievement. Regular participation helped narrow the achievement gap between high- and low-income students in math, improved academic and behavioral outcomes, and reduced school-day absences. With jobs in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) driving economic growth, afterschool gives nearly six million students opportunities to explore STEM.

However, funding remains a barrier for these rich experiences. States can provide grants for only 1 in 3 requests for 21st CCLC funding. Across 10 years, \$4 billion in local grant requests were denied due to insufficient funding. Before the pandemic, 24.6 million students nationwide were on the afterschool waitlist. As of last fall, data shows that for every child in an afterschool program, four were waiting to get in. Additional funding will also help programs address staffing challenges, which is a major and growing concern. Costs associated with staffing,

transportation, and supplies continue to increase. Thus, level funding or a decrease in 21st CCLC funding will mean fewer programs and fewer students served.

Afterschool and summer learning programs help parents work with less worry knowing that their children are safe and happy while benefitting socially and academically. More afterschool programs are needed to help keep youth in school, help them graduate and prepare for the workforce.

Finally, I want to share a story about a gentleman named Phil. As a child, he grew up with a single mom and was considered a “latchkey kid.” In middle school, he found himself at a pivotal point as to his future. His mom enrolled him in a local afterschool program which brought stability and a safe place during a turbulent time in his life. Phil graduated high school, entered into the United States Army Reserves, graduated from Birmingham School of Law and eventually served our state in the Alabama Senate from 2010-2018 representing the 10th district. Currently, he is the policy director for the Alabama Policy Institute, and hosts a conservative radio program, Rightside Radio. Phil was blessed to have a high-quality afterschool program near his school and a single mom who knew about the resources within her community. Not all children are so fortunate.

This is why I urge you to increase funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers by \$750 million in fiscal year 2024 to give more young people, like Phil, opportunities to learn and thrive. Out of School Time programming was once a privilege afforded to few. Now, it has become a non-negotiable for supporting children and families. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to advocate on behalf of children and families in Alabama and across the nation.