

City makes after-school investment

Mayor, Assembly look at expanding commitment to kids

By MEGAN HOLLAND

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Some of the kids who show up after school at Central Lutheran Church in Fairview are among the poorest in the city. In the church's annex rooms, they paint, read and do homework under the watchful eyes of trained adults.

If the children weren't there, parents, teachers and even city lawmakers worry about where they would be and what they would be doing.

The after-school program was new and experimental last year and has continued into this school year. If the mayor's budget passes, the kids will be able to keep coming back. So will other kids around the city who receive after-school care paid for by city taxpayers. About \$430,000 has been proposed for after-school programs in next year's city budget.

The money, pulled from the \$430 million pot of next year's overall spending, would expand Anchorage's commitment to after-school programs after several years of increased tension over how to keep kids busy and away from trouble, including the city's gangs.

The funding has the support of Mayor Mark Begich and seems to have the support of Anchorage Assembly members. All must sign off on the budget by mid-December.

Some Assembly members, though, are calling on the city to look at doing even more in the future. East Anchorage Assemblywoman Sheila Selkregg, who proposed the \$430,000 for the programs, sees this money as a start but wants the city to explore the idea of funding after-school programs at all of its elementary schools in poorer neighborhoods.

"I'm interested in defining that need," she said. "This isn't something we can do overnight."

According to the Anchorage School District, 37 percent of the city's 50,000 students are from low-income families, up from 26 percent two years ago. And, while the district doesn't have statistics on how many of them are in households where both parents work, 29,000 kids statewide are responsible for taking care of themselves when school lets out each day.

The city's lack of options for teenagers and children after school has been raised for several years. It was a key recommendation of a city task force on combating youth violence. The proposed \$430,000 would go to help fund the Central Lutheran program, as well as the Mountain View Boys and Girls Club, the Muldoon Boys and Girls Club, the Russian Jack youth program at St. Anthony's Catholic Church, and it would help employ youths with the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

LONG WAIT-LIST

The programs at Central Lutheran are paid for by the city, nondenominational, and run by the nonprofit Camp Fire USA. The one at St. Anthony's is summer only, paid for and run by the city.

Both are free. And they meet the basic needs of kids from Russian Jack Elementary, which is considered a needy school by state standards, and Denali Elementary, which is not. About 70 percent of students at Russian Jack come from economically disadvantaged families, compared to about 32 percent of students at Denali. Selkregg wants the city to explore the need at all of the city's 21 elementary schools classified as Title I schools, which means they have at least half of their students coming from poor families.

Some of the schools in the Title I category have federal funding for an after-school academic program called 21st Century, which pays teachers to tutor kids after the school lets out. The program serves 1,200 kids

citywide.

But for every child enrolled, there is another one on the wait-list to get into the program, says Susan Williams, who manages the learning centers for the School District.

The program used to serve many more kids but the federal funding has been cut from \$2.25 million eight years ago to \$1.6 million this year, she said.

"Every Title 1 school should have access to extended school-day learning," she said. "Which means we would have to double or triple the amount of funding coming into the city."

Williams said she knows of at least one parent who buses her kids an hour across town every morning and evening so they can attend a school with the 21st Century program.

"We are doing great things with kids. There are just a lot more kids that need great things," Williams said.

Other parents who have money can pay about \$380 per month for their child to attend one of the Camp Fire USA before- and after-school programs, which provide licensed child care, not specifically tutoring like 21st Century. Some of the programs are available at the needy schools, where parents can receive assistance in paying. At the 26 licensed child-care sites, 35 percent of the kids receive subsidies through the city, state or Camp Fire, said Barbara Dubovich, chief executive of Camp Fire.

Dubovich said they have had double the number of families ask for fee help from last year to this year. She isn't sure why.

Find Megan Holland online at adn.com/contact/mholland or call 257-4343.

Participating schools

Schools in Anchorage where at least half of the students are from economically disadvantaged families:

Airport Heights: 67 percent

Chinook: 56

Creekside Park School: 68

Fairview: 100

Government Hill: 50

Lake Otis: 59

Mountain View: 100

Muldoon: 100

North Star: 100

Northwood: 60

Nunaka Valley: 66

Ptarmigan: 73

Russian Jack: 70

Taku: 59

Tudor: 59

William Tyson: 100

Ursa Major: 55

Ursa Minor: 55

Williwaw: 100

Willow Crest: 100

Wonder Park: 85

Source: Anchorage School District