

spotlight on
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Accounting error hurts Mississippi kids
Stell Simonton

David Dallas had just walked out of a Boys & Girls Club meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, in mid-August when a radio reporter approached him.

Would an accounting error at the Mississippi Department of Education affect his youth organization?

It was the first Dallas had heard of the error in which state employees had issued new grants with money that was already earmarked to support existing programs. The error left a hole of \$9 million for existing out-of-school programs.

Dallas, chief executive officer of the [Boys & Girls Clubs of the Mississippi Delta](#), went into emergency mode. School was about to start in a few days. He was responsible for eight after-school clubs serving 2,000 kids in towns stretching from Tunica to Yazoo City.

He immediately laid off several staff members and made the decision not to open the Boys & Girls Clubs at the start of the school year.

Dallas was lucky, however. Within two weeks, he secured some funding from donors to make up part of the \$250,000 the organization had lost, and the clubs opened two weeks late. But the real crunch will come in 2017 when the new fiscal year starts.

"Next year is problematic," he said.

The grant money in question is funding that comes to each state from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative in the U.S. Department of Education. It's the one federal funding stream dedicated to after-school and summer learning programs, and it serves children in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Mississippi received \$14.6 million in 21st Century funding for this school year, but only had \$5.6 million left to support existing programs, according to the state Department of Education.

As a result, only 7,000 of the expected 29,000 schoolchildren reached by Mississippi 21st Century programs would be served this school year, the state Department of Education said.

Why after-school programs?

How much does it matter if after-school programs serving low-income children in Mississippi get cut back? According to some advocates, the impact could be substantial in a state in which child poverty has been a pressing issue for decades. The most recent [Kids Count](#) by the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported 212,000 children living in poverty in the state. Kids Count [ranked Mississippi last in the nation](#) for overall child well-being.

After-school programs [are increasingly seen by some as an important solution](#) to the enormous inequities in the United States education system and society.

"We feel after-school is a solution to the educational crisis in Mississippi," said Amber May, programs director of the Jackson after-school program Operation Shoestring, in an interview with the Jackson Free Press. May has been working to help set up a statewide network of after school organizations in Mississippi, one of the minority of states without such a network.

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Proponents like May say after-school programs provide opportunities that help close the gap in school achievement between low-income and more affluent kids. They say the programs keep kids safe after the school day. Free and low-cost programs allow parents without a lot of income to hold on to their jobs.

A look at the research

Recent research seems to support the claims of May and others. American Institutes for Research evaluations across five states found that regular participation in the 21st Century program led to higher [reading and math scores on state tests](#). The students' grade point averages grew and they had more credits toward graduation as well.

Deborah Lowe Vandell, founding dean of the School of Education at the University of California-Irvine, testified before Congress in 2014 [about the impact of after-school programs](#). Low-income kids who consistently attend after-school programs improved their academic achievement, she said. Her research showed that after-school programs can narrow the gap in math between low-income kids and their more affluent peers.

In Mississippi, Tamu Green founded the after-school program [Scientific Research](#), known as SR1. "We're one of the [programs] that show that students who come from low-income backgrounds can succeed," Green said. "We were doing STEM before it became a buzzword."

He said kids in the program [made significant gains academically and socially](#). SR1 has been serving 350 in grades K-12 kids at eight locations. Now, SR1 will have to cut programming for three-fourths of the kids, he explained.

What hurts, Green continued, is that his program has excelled in its work, but programs are being cut without regard to quality. And the funding cut will interfere with the ongoing long-term evaluation of the program.

Parents are going to have to figure out what to do with their kids after school. It took time to gain the trust of kids and families, he said.

Dorlisa Hutton, operations officer of SR1, said lots of the students SR1 serves are used to adults being in and out of their lives. She said she is afraid SR1 is going to fail them as others have failed them.

Affluent kids have many more activities

Across the nation, a big gap exists between the opportunities for low-income kids and their more affluent classmates. Middle-income kids have spent 4,000 more hours in after-school and summer activities than poor kids by sixth grade, [according to the Afterschool Alliance](#), an advocacy group for after-school programs.

After-school programs can help reduce that inequity—but only if the programs exist.

According to the Afterschool Alliance, 10.2 million children across the nation are in after-school programs, of which 4.5 million of are from low-income families.

Twice as many children would take part in after-school programs if such programs were available to them, according to the Afterschool Alliance's report [America After 3 PM](#), based on a nationwide survey of parents.

The work of foundations

After-school programs have long been supported by some major foundations concerned with poverty, particularly the Wallace and Charles Stewart Mott foundations.

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A major focus of the [Wallace Foundation](#) is to bring education and enrichment to kids through after-school, summer learning, and expanded school-day programs. Since 2003 the foundation has funded the establishment of 14 citywide after-school systems and worked to share knowledge and best practices so others can replicate.

The [Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#) has made out-of-school activities for young people a high priority since it began funding community-based program for kids in the 1930s in Flint, Michigan.

In fact, 21st Century Community Learning Centers was pioneered in a partnership between Mott and the U.S. Department of Education in 1996. The foundation provided \$2 million initially and made a yearly commitment of \$55 million for expansion of the program. It has also funded the establishment of statewide after-school networks.

The time spent before school, after school and in the summer is a critical foundation for kids' learning, according to the foundation.

Addressing poverty

Twenty-one percent of children in the United States live in poverty, according to the Kids Count data. The Mississippi Delta, in particular, is a high-poverty area.

"It's tough for our kids," said Dallas, of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Mississippi Delta. "We're trying to keep our kids ahead of the game." A lot are raised by grandparents, he said. Some are in foster care.

"Our real focus is get kids to graduate on time and to expose them to the opportunities they don't get in school," he said.

The clubs focus on character development and good decision-making, he said.

Dallas has been approached by parents and county leaders from small communities in the region asking about the possibility of a club in their area.

They tell him that kids in their area don't have anything to do after school.

"You're talking about thousands of children we could reach," Dallas said.

But with the loss of 21st Century funds this year, survival rather than expansion is the issue for many after-school programs in Mississippi.

Stell Simonton is an independent journalist in Atlanta who frequently writes about youth issues for Youth Today. She has contributed to publications including the Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post and Al Jazeera America, and she was formerly a digital editor at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Editor's Note: This article is part of a new effort at Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity to feature reported journalism as part of its efforts illuminate news and trends in the field to promote a bipartisan dialogue. To submit pieces, please contact Bill Nichols at Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com.

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