

TO THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Funding Set To Expire For After-School Program

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HARRISONBURG — More than an hour after school has ended for the day at Thomas Harrison Middle School, Brent Holsinger stands in the hallway with a walkie-talkie as kids rush by, laughing and talking, and funnel into classrooms for their Beyond enrichment projects.

It's not quite like the rest of the school day, but for kids in the Beyond the Bell program, the learning doesn't stop when the rest of their classmates go home.

Holsinger has directed the program since it started in 2011.

On Wednesday, after working on their homework with teachers or tutors who could answer their questions, students moved on to more hands-on activities that still have educational value. This semester, some are taking a cake-decorating class and others have been working on making papier-mâché masks from old books to enter the Altered Books Competition at Massanutten Regional Library.

Other groups are playing soccer, investigating the outdoors in their school's own backyard, or learning a form of dance called step.

Beyond the Bell isn't the only after-school program at Thomas Harrison, but it is the most expensive program in the district. It comes with a price tag of \$150,000 per year and has been fully funded by a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant. It costs about the same to run similar programs at other schools.

But that grant money runs out this year.



Thomas Harrison Middle School fifth-graders (left to right) Jeremias Domingo, Steven Alfaro, Michael Samboy and Irvyn Gonzalez, all age 10, discuss a book with team leader Jen Biser at Beyond the Bell on Wednesday. Grant funding for the after-school program runs out this year. (Photos by Nikki Fox / DN-R)



Thomas Harrison Middle School fifth-grader Brooklyn Nguyen, 10, works on her homework while at Beyond the Bell on Wednesday afternoon. The grant funding for the program is set to run out this year, causing concern among the program's supporters.

The grant program was established to support kids who attend low-performing schools in high-poverty areas, but the school division doesn't quite fit that bill the same way it did when it received its most recent grant in 2011.

"I think it impacts the school culture, when you have 100 kids staying after school, doing positive things, being a part of a community," Holsinger said Wednesday. "That's an extension of the school day, I think that's really powerful.

"Kids will just miss out on lots of opportunities and experiences that they wouldn't have otherwise. Some kids would just go home. For our working families, that makes things really difficult."

More than a dozen parents, teachers, students and other community members spoke at Tuesday night's Harrisonburg City School Board meeting.

Some parents said the program has worked miracles for their families. Many work during the day and don't get home until later at night, when it's time to start making dinner.

That, combined with many years distancing them from their own middle school homework, makes it hard for those parents to help their kids academically, which is where Beyond the Bell has come in.

Paloma Saucedo said her daughter is in sixth grade at Skyline Middle School, where funding for Beyond the Bell ran out last year. Now, instead of getting help with her homework at school, Saucedo's daughter has to wait until her mother gets home if she has any questions with homework.

Often, Saucedo can't help her.

"I went to middle school a very long time ago ... in a different country, in a different language, so when I come home and she has a question about something that I cannot relate to at all, it makes it a lot harder on her and on me," she told the board. "Programs like this make it easier for parents who are immigrants to help our children. ... I hope you don't see this as an expense, but as an investment in our youth and in our community."

This year, Beyond the Bell serves about 120 fifth- and sixth-graders at Thomas Harrison and eighth-graders at THMS and Skyline Middle School. Funding for younger students at Skyline to participate in Beyond the Bell ran out last year.

The grants have been secured through a partnership with the College of Education at James Madison University. Seven grants have been secured since 2005 to support after-school programs within the division.

Some aspects of those programs have remained in place, but most dissolved when the funding did, according to Diane Foucar-Szocki, a former School Board member who coordinates grants, contracts and special projects in the College of Education and has written the 21st Century grants for HCPS.

"Some programming has continued," she said. "We have not yet been able to sustain the kind of quality, in-depth, rigorous programming that Beyond the Bell represents."

She and Holsinger said the grants were designed for local support to continue the programs after federal funding expired. The assumption is there, Foucar-Szocki said, that the programs are considered valuable enough to the local community that it cares enough to invest in the projects itself rather than relying on outside entities to make that investment.

"There's been over \$4 million that have come through these grants that we've led since 2005, and they're really designed for local support to help sustain them," Holsinger said. "I think we're at that place. You know, we've been able to build programs up, show they work, the community obviously cares about it ... so [the School Board] is kind of our main focus."

In spite of the praise the program has received, it would come at a high cost for a school division that's already planning to ask Harrisonburg City Council to add about \$1.4 million more to its new operating budget than it did for the current spending plan.

The division's proposed budget totals about \$62.7 million, assuming the city allocates about \$28.7 million.

Superintendent Scott Kizner said he's supportive of after-school programs, and they won't go away — they just may look different.

HCPS allocates more than \$300,000 of its budget for its own after-school programs, serving hundreds of children. Some of those programs cost as little as \$26,000 per year, Kizner said.

"We have a lot of needs, we're a growing school system," he said. "In my judgment, we can't be absorbing all the grants that get discontinued. I think we need to look at cost-effective ways of meeting the needs of children."

Don Vale, principal of THMS, shared similar thoughts. Beyond the Bell has shown to help kids in his school, he said, but there will be other ways to provide the programs without a \$150,000 price tag.

"Offering after-school activities for students is very important and we will find a way to do that," Vale said.

Holsinger said most of the money goes toward personnel who work with the kids and transportation to get them home after the program ends. It costs about \$7 per child per hour of programming, which is generally Mondays through Thursdays and includes some trips on weekends, such as one trip today for some eighth-grade students to visit Eastern Mennonite University.

Nothing is off the table as far as finding some kind of funding to keep the programs alive next year, Holsinger said. The current goal is to get the division to fund it, but it's possible that he or others involved could look into other kinds of grants, donations or private money.

Foucar-Szocki said it's not as easy as just writing another grant application for more 21st

Century money.

Part of the reason the schools qualified for the 21st Century grants in the first place was because of the poverty rate among students and lower academic achievement in the city's schools. Since the grant was received in 2011, the poverty rate has declined and academic achievement has increased, meaning that the schools are no longer as eligible for receiving the grants, which are becoming increasingly competitive.

She said it hasn't been decided yet whether JMU will work on applying for another round of grants for the school system. If not, next year would be the first time in nine years that the school system isn't receiving 21st Century grant money for after-school programs.

"It would be a disappointment if, after \$4.2 million were invested in building a strong, quality out of school infrastructure, that it weren't continued," she said. "That would be a disappointment."

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