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Time for Congress to Stand up for Expanded Learning

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This post is co-authored by [Lucy N. Friedman](#), President, [The After-School Corporation](#) and [Jennifer Peck](#), Executive Director, [Partnership for Children and Youth](#).

Last week, Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Richard Burr (R-NC) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) introduced five bills to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that included the "Empowering Local Educational Decision Making Act." The bill eliminates the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program that provides dedicated funding for critical after-school and summer learning programs.

Although my co-author, [Lucy N. Friedman](#) of [The After-School Corporation](#), and I believe there is a pressing need to reauthorize ESEA, this bill takes us in the wrong direction. While states are raising standards and asking more of students in order to help them graduate high school and college career-ready, this bill would decrease the support students need to meet that goal, and it should be soundly rejected.

Even at current funding levels, 21st CCLC falls short of meeting the need. [Over 18 million parents](#) say they would enroll their child in an after school program if one were available to them. In addition, approximately [1.3 million students](#) drop out of our nation's high schools every year, leaving three of every ten freshmen without a high school degree four years later. We need to engage and sustain more young people through high school and post-secondary success by giving them more time and more ways to learn -- not pull the rug out from under them.

Our education system strives to help students succeed academically and develop to their fullest potential, but schools can't do it alone. High-quality expanded learning opportunities -- including after-school, before school, summer and expanded-day and -year programs -- done in partnership with community-based organizations can bolster young people's engagement in school and improve their chances to graduate and achieve lifelong success.

Research has shown that after-school, before-school and summer programs are effective in improving student outcomes. For example, students in [programs supported by The After-School Corporation](#) (TASC) passed more Regents exams (New York State's high school exams) and earned more high school credits than nonparticipants, and had significantly higher school attendance after a year of participation.

This proposed bill takes away dedicated federal funding for expanded learning opportunities -- those very experiences that we know help kids thrive. It consolidates the 21st CCLC program into a diffuse block grant with 24 other programs that does not ensure any expanded learning opportunities. Yet over 75%, or \$1.1 billion, of the \$1.453 billion dollars allocated for this new block grant comes from the elimination of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program that provides dedicated funds for summer and after-school programs. Taking away this funding jeopardizes more than [1.6 million kids](#) who will have the potential to reach new heights in their academic and social development through the 21st CCLC program.

In a time when budgets are tight, investments in education make economic sense. [Research](#) shows that students who drop out of school severely diminish not only their own income, but also the economic state of the nation. This country as a whole will suffer

devastating economic consequences in loss of tax revenue and purchasing power. Considering only the students who dropped out of the class of 2009, [nearly \\$335 billion](#) will be lost to the nation's economy over their lifetimes.

This block grant proposal comes at a time when organizations, including our coalition, the [Collaborative for Building After-School Systems](#), are proposing to build on a decade's worth of research to strengthen and expand 21st CCLC to ensure that programs can do even more to improve student outcomes. Undermining that work turns back progress on reform.

Now more than ever, students need more help to graduate -- more engagement, more learning time to succeed and more dedicated federal resources. Congress should do its part.

