State Budget Cuts Reduce After-School Options

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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Olympia, WA - As another school year starts, Washington parents also must scramble to figure out how to keep their children safe and active in the hours after school. In some communities, that will be tougher this year.

The group *School's Out Washington* keeps tabs on after-school programs. Its Network Director Janet Frieling says fewer will be available - and lack of funding is the problem, with state budget cuts affecting both child care and education.

"Many of the state funds that were available to communities to do after-school programs have been cut, and eliminated from the local school budgets. So, schools are just barely able to fulfill their basic education needs, requirements, between the hours of 8 and 3."

School districts are saying they don't have the money to keep buildings open or staff on duty for after-school activities.

Proponents of the cuts predicted that churches and other nonprofit groups would step in, but Frieling says that hasn't happened, and those that do have after-school programs are also struggling financially.

Fewer families are part of *Working Connections*, the state-funded program which shares the cost of child care with working parents so they can keep working. Funding cuts have changed the eligibility requirements, meaning families have to be poorer to qualify. Even so, Frieling notes, the demand for affordable care is high.

"What we're hearing in some communities is, because so many cuts have already had to be made to this program, there's been a wait list established; and that some families may have siblings care for younger children, or leaving kids home alone unattended, during the hours that they're not in school."

Almost 40 percent of children whose families receive child-care subsidies are ages 5 through 12, she says. According to the *Washington State Budget and Policy Center*, lack of access to affordable child care is the biggest barrier for families trying to pull themselves out of poverty.