

## Kids' after-school programs feel pinch

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In the years since she discovered the East Atlanta Kids Club after-school program, the world has opened up to Renay Allen's children.

One of her sons competed in a triathlon. One of her daughters took dance classes and is enrolled in an Emory University program for aspiring doctors. All of them have gone on field trips to local museums and other cultural fare — opportunities Allen says she and her husband would never have been able to afford on their own, especially this year when they have both been laid off for long stretches.

"I can't put into words how much they've helped my family grow and develop," the mother of seven said of the East Atlanta Kids Club.

Now, thanks to recent budget cuts, Allen is afraid her family's good fortune might end.

At a time when more families are struggling to make ends meet, many after-school programs are finding it difficult to keep their doors open and in many cases are doing it with considerably less.

According to a recent survey by the Afterschool Alliance, about seven in 10 Georgia programs reported a loss in funding because of the recession and almost 92 percent expect the economy to hurt this year's budget.

To cope, they are being forced to add or increase fees or cut staff, making it even harder to participate.

"After-school programs provide a safe place for kids and opportunities for academic support, enrichment and physical activity," said Jill Riemer, executive director of the Georgia Afterschool Investment Council, a statewide policy and advocacy group. "When programs must charge or raise fees or reduce hours, more children will be unsupervised once the school day ends."

Not all after-school programs are suffering, however.

Kristen Obaranec, communications director for metro Atlanta YMCA, said the organization likely will increase locations this year.

"Three to 6 p.m. is a dangerous time for kids, and that's why they need to be in supervised care," she said. "We see it as something that is not an option."

Obaranec said the Y had 115 after-school sites last year serving some 6,000 children. The organization hopes to add eight more sites this year, she said.

Still, the number of struggling programs far outnumber those that are not.

Jill Sieder, executive director of the East Atlanta Kids Club, said funding cuts have forced her to dramatically reduce or cancel some activities, cut staff and limit the number of children she can take.

“We’re telling people no for the moment,” Sieder said.

For the past 11 years, Sieder ran the free after-school program out of the Brownwood Park Recreation Center.

Then last summer the program was asked to move to make way for renovations. Sieder expected work to be completed in three months but was later told the center was closing because of budget cuts.

In the months since, Sieder has run the program at a nearby church but has been hampered by a lack of space.

Sieder is hopeful the program can return to its old home by the time school resumes.

“Recreation centers are the net that catches a lot of low-income children, whether they are city run or by a nonprofit like ours,” Sieder said. “They provide after-school programs ... that kids need. And on a baseline level, just a place to be.”

The only silver lining, perhaps, is that school will soon start, Sieder and others said.

“Instead of children having eight hours unsupervised, they’ll have four,” Sieder said.

Jacquetta Watkins, executive director of the Study Hall near Turner Field, sacrificed her summer program so she could be open when school starts Aug. 10.

It was either help 60 families this summer or 90 in the fall. “I decided to help the 90,” she said.

Watkins said: “This has been a very challenging year. Donors have either cut back on funding or they didn’t give at all.”

Ditto, said Gwendolyn Sands, who has watched enrollment at Visions Unlimited’s Excel Academy drop from a high of 250 kids in 2005 to 127. Sands, founder of the northwest Atlanta program, has reduced staff accordingly.

The gap between supply and demand and the economy is hurting after-school programs, Riemer said.

“In Georgia, 51 percent of public k-12 students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In metro Atlanta, it’s 76 percent,” she said. “That simply translates that there really are too many kids at risk and in poverty and points to the need for an even greater need for these after-school programs.”

Still, Riemer said she is “very optimistic.”

Renay Allen says she has no other choice but to be hopeful the Kids Club will be restored to its former self.

“They provide opportunities my children wouldn’t have,” she said. “Never.”