

# Amid state budget crunch, Norwalk Housing Authority celebrates after-school programs

By R.A. Schuetz



Photo: Alex Von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Trishelle and Tristine Jones have their photos taken in an Instagram frame during the Norwalk Housing Authority Learning Centers Lights On Afterschool celebration at Stepping Stones Museum for Children on ... more

**NORWALK** — Photographs from poetry slams, photography trips, urban birding treks and robotics sessions lined the walls of the Stepping Stones Museum for Children Thursday night — pictures of what students have been doing in Norwalk Housing Authority after-school programs.

“It’s more pressing now than any other year because of the budget or the lack

thereof,” said Wendy Gerbier, the director of the programs, which are funded by the NHA, the state and grants. A state budget was passed on that afternoon, but ramifications had not yet become clear. “I’ve heard of other after-school programs that have not started yet this year because of the budget.”

On Thursday, thousands of organizations celebrated their after-school programs in a nationwide event called Lights on Afterschool. A decade-long Harvard study has shown that after-school activities can improve children’s academics, health and self-esteem, and industry research company IBISWorld has concluded that demand for such programs will only increase as unemployment rates drop and parents go back to work.

The NHA programs, which are located in what are called Learning Centers at Roodner Court, Colonial Village, Washington Village, Meadows Gardens and 20 West, provide activities for children until 6:30 p.m. during the school year and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the summer. “A lot of families won’t know what to do if we closed down because of lack of funding,” Gerbier said.

Betsy Sanchez, a mother of a 9-year-old girl who loves the STEM offerings at the Washington Village learning center, said she appreciated the extracurricular activities. “I feel like they learn more than they would sitting in front of the TV,” she said.

As students and families waited for Lights on Afterschool to begin, some students colored in pictures of energy-efficient lightbulbs, a reference to the event’s name. At least two took advantage of the crafting opportunity to promote their respective YouTube channels.

“I want to become a famous YouTuber and an actor,” said Leyin Grant, a 11-year-old student who vlogs (video blogs) about his life and posts reaction videos. He said the after-school programs at 20 West have helped him with his channel. “They have a program where we learn how to edit and take really nice pictures.”

Tiana Brown, the assistant director, kicked off the event by asking the crowd, “Who has the most love for their learning center?”

Hands shot into the air. “Me!” a girl squeaked.

Some of the directors brought a taste of their programs into the museum. Three chefs from 20 West, including Grant, showed the crowd how to prepare vegan mango and black bean tacos, and Sheiree Powell, the NHA Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) director, demonstrated the chemical reaction that can occur between a base and an acid.

“What happens to the pressure? It has to go somewhere,” she asked before a girl wearing goggles dropped a Mentos into a bottle of Coca Cola and a geyser of foamy soda spewed into the air.

Children looked around, open mouthed, to see whether adults were reacting to the mess. “Mom, did you see the explosion?” asked a little boy in the back. “All of the bubbles!”

Mayor Harry Rilling spoke to the children, urging them to “read, read, read,” and state Sen. Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, who had just returned from passing the state’s budget in the wee hours of the morning, whipped up the students into cheers for their various schools. State Rep. Bruce Morris, D-Norwalk, who also helped pass the state budget and is currently running for mayor, emphasized the importance of school.

This year, new programs offered by the learning centers included Girls Who Code and Google CS First, and Cypherkids said Powell. One of the scenarios Cypherkids students wrestled with was how they’d encrypt messages if they wanted to plan a party without their snoopy landlord finding out.

“We try to spark the youthful curiosity that we believe are in all our young scientists,” said Powell.

But, as Wendy cautioned, such programs take funding. “Thank you, we’ve

sent a very clear message that we need continued funding for after school,” she said as the evening concluded. “Can we all say, all together, ‘Lights on after school?’”

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