



October 11, 2011

Re: No Child Left Behind – Optional Waiver
Honorable Gerard Robinson
Commissioner, Florida Department of Education
325 W. Gaines Street, Suite 1514
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Commissioner Robinson:

On behalf of parents, students, afterschool providers and supporters from across Florida, I would like to share with you my concerns regarding the Optional Flexibility waiver provision included as part of the President's No Child Left Behind waiver announcement. This provision could fundamentally alter the purpose of the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program by allowing these funds (Title IV, Part B of NCLB) to be used to add time to the regular school day without providing guidance on how such time would be used.

For more than 10 years, Florida afterschool providers have been working together with the Florida Department of Education to build first-rate 21st Century Community Learning Centers across Florida. We have created quality standards, trained staff and leaders, and linked to national research and stakeholders. We have explored the best ways to learn in the afterschool hours, built strong partnerships with schools and a wide variety of community partners, and found ways to serve and engage families.

Through these efforts, Florida has developed an exemplary 21st CCLC program which is focused on continuous improvement, as well as fun, hands-on engaged learning for our students. Students who participate in 21st CCLC programs throughout the state are offered opportunities to conduct science experiments, solve hands-on and real-world math problems, develop reading skills, engage in meaningful service learning, work with mentors, learn musical instruments, play sports, learn to paint, sculpt and dance, and have other experiences that change and shape their lives forever.

We recognize that though this voluntary waiver will provide educators and State and local leaders with flexibility regarding specific requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), unlike the other waiver provisions, the expanded learning time provision could significantly and negatively impact federal afterschool program funding. Successful afterschool programs are effective not only because of the scope of academic and personal development services provided, but because these services are provided at a time when the children who need this programming the most would be otherwise unsupervised, unsupported, and disengaged from meaningful enrichment. Allowing these funds to be used during the course of the regular school day would prevent these effective programs from providing either a full scope of valuable services or a safe place to learn and grow.

We are all dedicated to insuring our nation's children are provided every opportunity to achieve at the highest academic levels. And while we have the same end in mind, it is imperative that we chart the best path to reach this goal. As Winston Churchill famously said, "Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing, after they have exhausted all other possibilities." We hope that rather than exhaust precious time and funds, Florida will do the proverbial "right thing" and not "check the box" on the optional waiver, thereby allowing the 21st CCLC program to continue to operate in its current, successful form. Please support our effort to secure Florida's 21st CCLC programs and ensure quality afterschool programming for the children of Florida who need it most.

Sincerely,

Larry Pintacuda
Executive Director
Florida Afterschool Network