
After-school and Summer Latchkey Programs in Corpus Christi, Texas¹

Presenter:

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Background

Between 1980 and 1990 the sociodemographic profile of Corpus Christi residents underwent a major change. In 1980 over 50% of the population was Caucasian. By 1990 the ethnic composition of the 257,000 residents was 50% Hispanics, 44% Caucasians, and 5% African Americans. In 1980 the local economy was driven by the oil and gas industries and military bases. By the early 1990s both of these economic bases had substantially declined, reducing the number of high-paying jobs in the area. As the tax base dropped, school budgets were reduced, and extracurricular activities were terminated. At the same time, the lack of high-paying jobs required that there were more instances where both parents in two-parent families needed to be employed in order to make a livable income.

These conditions meant that a substantially increased number of employed parents faced the difficult decision of whether or not to let their children go home after school to an empty house. The Task Force for Latchkey Children was formed in 1985 as a result of a series of articles, "Who is Minding the Children," published in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*. One local principal had estimated that as many as 65% of the children from her school were involved in self-care after school. "We have so many children in this situation that we require multiple telephone numbers, because we cannot reach parents at home."

When at home, many latchkey children have admitted to being frightened, hiding in closets, and carrying baseball bats because they fear burglars, or watching hours of television because it provides a kind of companionship. (Quote from "Who is Minding the Children?")

Task Force members included representatives from the YWCA, YMCA, *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, Chamber of Commerce, United Way, Corpus Christi Independent School District, Area PTA Council, Memorial Hospital, Parkdale Bank, and the Corpus Christi Park and Recreation Department. The Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce provided \$5,000 for a contract with the Social Science Research Center at Corpus Christi State University to do a community needs assessment survey. Approximately 500 parents from across the community were surveyed. The study showed that a substantial number of Corpus Christi children went home to an unsupervised environment. Approximately 75% of the children were left alone for at least 15 minutes after school. The survey also showed that the problem cut across ethnic lines and was most prevalent in middle-income families, generally because of dual-income parents. The respondents indicated that the preferred solution was for supervised day care, not an extension of the school day, and that families would be willing to pay for the additional enrichment services.

Taking into consideration these findings, the Task Force concentrated its efforts on: (a) actual care of the child after school; and (b) education in self-

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reliance skills. The Park and Recreation Department joined forces with the Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) to address the problem through the development of the Latchkey Program.

Program Descriptions

Pilot Program

The objective of the pilot program was to develop an organized, supervised after-school program for elementary-school-age children who would otherwise go home alone to wait for a parent to come home from work. That simple objective has not changed, but the means of meeting that objective have changed dramatically through offering expanded programs. CCISD gave complete support by making two elementary schools available for the pilot program. The pilot program was so successful, and demand for additional sites so high that the program was expanded into 12 schools during the next school year.

Current After-school Latchkey Program

The current program has expanded in the number of youth and families, school districts, and neighborhood elementary schools served. The after-school program currently is offered in CCISD and Flour Bluff Independent School District at more than 30 school sites, serving approximately 2,800 elementary-school-age children. The program has experienced a steady growth in enrollment. However, there have been occasional growth spurts. For example, during the 1994-95 school year, there was a 30% enrollment expansion which did not appear to result from any dramatic circumstance other than the growing needs of employed parents (see Exhibit 23A).

Development of the Summer Latchkey Program

For decades, the city park and recreation department offered a typical Summer Recreation Program at city recreation centers and school sites across the community. However, the traditional approach to staffing, events, fees, and procedures associated with this program over the years resulted in declining participant and political support plus an overall lack of excitement about the program. This led the Recreation Division staff to ask themselves "What type of program would you send *your* child to?" The responses resulted in a new program which better meets the needs of today's youth.

In 1992 a Summer Latchkey Program was piloted at one elementary school. The commitment of the principal at the school to make the program

Exhibit 23A

Parents' Comments

When school started, my 78-year-old great-grandmother was taking care of my boys. She became ill and was hospitalized for three weeks. My children would walk home and wait, for 30 minutes to an hour, unsupervised outside my great-grandmother's home. The program was a real lifesaver for me. Knowing they don't have to walk home in the cold and rain . . . is such a relief to me. When I arrive at Latchkey, my boys are always doing educational things and they look forward to participating. Before this, they only watched TV and were not allowed to go outside until I got there. The program is providing quality after-school care which would otherwise not be affordable; and they would be unsupervised.

work, made it a positive experience for all involved. The program is now in its fourth year and includes four schools. Elementary-school-age children are placed in groups of their own age and are offered the opportunity to participate in a variety of "classes" during the day. A "lesson plan" which utilizes a variety of activities, resources, and equipment at the particular school is developed prior to each Summer session. Resources and equipment include computers, cafeteria, classrooms, library, and playground. Lunch is provided daily and field trips are regularly scheduled. The park and recreation department hires and trains the staff (many of whom are teachers from the schools involved), develops and operates the program, and collects all fees which are designed to cover expenditures, similar to the after-school latchkey program. Further expansion to eight sites is anticipated.

Vacation Station

As another spin-off program, the Park and Recreation Department began offering a school holiday break program during the Christmas/New Year's break. Due to the level of demand, the Vacation Station Program is offered only at two city recreation centers. Its mission is to continue childcare programming for those families who need it, with only a limited break in service.

The After-school Latchkey Program, Summer Latchkey Program, and Vacation Station have objectives which are directed at all their beneficiaries:

For the Participant:

- (1) Provide a safe, professionally supervised environment for children after school;
- (2) Provide quality recreational experiences and enhance the child's leisure skills;
- (3) Develop basic survival skills necessary in today's society;
- (4) Develop physical skills and coordination; and
- (5) Develop the ability to express thoughts and feelings through activities such as art, computers, drama, and games.

For the Parent:

- (1) Provide a safe haven for their children;
- (2) Keep the monthly fee affordable;
- (3) Provide a scholarship program for those unable to pay for the service; and
- (4) Provide education in areas that concern the well-being of their children (e.g., drug education, child abuse).

For the School Districts:

- (1) Reduce vandalism and loitering around the schools;
- (2) Keep the cost of their cosponsorship to a minimum (only provide the facilities); and
- (3) Involve programming for taxpayers after-school hours (maximize capital investment).

For the Park and Recreation Department and City:

- (1) Promote consolidation with other agencies to save tax dollars;
- (2) Run the program on a self-supporting basis;
- (3) Develop attitudes in future adults which support educational, quality of life and social issues;
- (4) Provide recreational opportunities through city-sponsored programming; and
- (5) Reduce crime.

Each of these programs has reduced registration fees for low-income families and for families with more than one child in the program, and offers snacks and lunches funded with grant assistance from the Texas Department of Human Services. Private grants and donations are also solicited. Each school site must be licensed with the Texas Department of Regulatory and Protective Services as a childcare facility. Licensing requires certain staff-to-participant ratios, adequate room space, and toileting facilities.

The needs of employed parents do not end after the school year. In fact, childcare is an even greater need during the summer and other holiday breaks

from school. Offering these programs to the community year-round has resulted in strong support for the development of other youth and family-oriented city-sponsored programs.

Since their inception, these latchkey programs have received awards from the Texas Recreation and Parks Society, Public Technology Inc., the Texas Municipal League, the Corporate Fund for Children, as well as recognition from the Texas Attorney General's Office.