

**South County Journal**  
February 24, 2001

## **Tukwila's After-school Program Closes Gap**

*By Wendy Giroux*

TUKWILA -- The bell rang. Students poured out of Tukwila Elementary into cars and buses lined up at the curb.

But about 60 students stayed after school this week to attend extra classes -- and they were happy to do it.

Tukwila schools were in session Tuesday through Friday this week, unlike most South County districts that were on mid-winter break.

In the gym, fourth- and fifth-graders alternately smiled and grimaced as they concentrated on learning the steps of a dance routine.

The kids are participating in the district's new extended day program, which kicked off Feb. 13.

About 250 elementary and middle school students are enrolled in the classes, which are funded in part by \$330,000 in grants from Casey Family Programs. A program at Foster High School will start soon.

The total program budget for the 2001 calendar year is about \$669,000, most of which pays for staffing. Other funding sources are the Stuart Foundation and the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation.

Offering more learning opportunities is the best way to improve student achievement, Superintendent Michael Silver said.

"We know that we need to close the gap in student achievement between those students who are succeeding and those students who are struggling learners," he said.

But the program isn't focused just on struggling students. It's open to any child nominated by staff, said Margaret Hunt, program coordinator for the Tukwila Community Schools Collaboration.

The idea is to build a "full-service" community school over about the next five years.

"The community school comes back to what it used to be about 40 years ago, which was sort of the hub of the community," Hunt said.

That means the school would work with community partners to bring in outside resources and services. For example, officials might coordinate a health fair to offer free screenings or counseling sessions, she said.

During the after-school sessions, elementary students concentrate on four areas: homework and tutoring, computer lab work, recreation and the arts.

The middle school program is arranged differently, with all the students spending time on homework or tutoring, then breaking up to work in one of four "academies" depending on their interests: independent living skills, business technology, the arts or recreation and health.

Parent Mardine Aske says she's ecstatic about this opportunity. She has 7-year-old twin first-graders and an 8-year-old second-grader in the program at Tukwila Elementary.

"To extend their day there is just a stroke of such luck," Aske said.

The Federal Way resident says the after-school program is a better use of her children's time than the community center program they were using.

"This is not just running around but actually ed-based," she said.

"It's not just being a baby sitter. They're helping them improve not only socially but mentally, and as a parent you just can't ask for better care," Aske said.

She said her sons seem happy, interested and excited to be involved.

That's exactly the sort of response school officials will be looking for as they evaluate the program, Silver said.

“The job ahead is to provide an enriched after-school program that students are going to want to attend day after day,” Silver said.

“It has to be highly motivating. It has to be exciting,” he said.

Fourth-grader Pamela Schwartz, 10, said she's glad for the chance to hang out and learn more.

“This program makes me care a lot about stuff about school `cause I want to get a good education,” Pamela said.

Parent and Tukwila resident Kim Karns says she's happy that her 8-year-old son, Derek, has come home from the Tukwila Elementary program excited about his reading and math homework.

“Derek is not quite an average student, so we're trying to get him some extra help. He sometimes has low confidence levels,” Karns said.

“He is enjoying this, totally, and that's the number one positive to me. If he wasn't liking it, then I would know they weren't getting through to him,” she said.

Tukwila Community Schools Collaboration partners:

- \* Tukwila School District.
- \* City of Tukwila.
- \* Puget Sound Educational Service District.
- \* State Department of Social and Health Services.
- \* Casey Family Programs.

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