

Stanly schools, YMCA form partnership

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Stanly County Schools and the Stanly County Family YMCA have formed a partnership to help high-risk students and their families make a positive change in their health, academics and life skills.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant approved in September will fund a program called Students and Parents in Academics, Relationships and Knowledge (SPARK).

The grant-funded partnership is designed to assist 250 elementary school students in grades 2-5 during 34 weeks after-school and six weeks in the summer.

“Selected based on their low-income status and displayed high academic need among students, we will target Badin, Central, East Albemarle, Norwood and Stanfield elementary schools,” according to the program overview included in the grant proposal.

SPARK will take place both in schools and at the YMCA, according to the proposal.

“During the school year and summer, the YMCA Pavilion Albemarle will serve as a program center for 100 Spark students (50 from Central, 50 from East Albemarle),” according to the overview.

Badin, Norwood and Stanfield students will take part in the program at their own schools, with the exception of 50 Stanfield students who will go to Locust Elementary during the summer, it says.

Jeff James, superintendent for Stanly County Schools, said the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant is open both to schools and nonprofits, adding that he was encouraged to partner with a non-profit organization when applying.

“SPARK ties right into our vision and mission statement here in Stanly County,” James said. “Our goal was, when we wrote the grant, to try to serve as many kids as possible, and, of course, that’s the goal of any grant.”

The grant is for about \$400,000 per year for four years, coming to a total of about \$1.2 million “by the time you take the in-kind contributions of everyone involved,” he added.

The grant proposal outlines the need for the program in Stanly.

“Parents in our district face barriers to helping their children succeed in school and life,” it says. “These barriers include but are not limited to: a lack of education (almost 84 percent of adults in Stanly do not have a bachelor’s degree), limited financial resources (the cumulative poverty rate among the feeder schools is 73.62 percent), predominant use of a non-native English language (our feeder schools saw a 13.5 percent increase in Limited English Proficient enrollment over last school year), a lack of affordable afterschool programs (Stanly County has no free afterschool programs that provide transportation), and limited time to engage with their child (over 30 percent of our youth are living in single parent homes.)”

The proposal notes that the feeder schools also have their challenges, adding that a large percentage of students in feeder schools failed to meet North Carolina College and Career Readiness standards in reading and math. Students also face a heightened crime rate.

“Stanly’s indexed crime rate increased almost 9 percent, property crimes rose 7.4 percent, and the violent crime rate rose 22.8 percent from 2015 to 2016,” the proposal says.

School data shows that Stanly students are suspended more than the state average, have a shorter life expectancy than in similar state counties and are exposed to violence and substance abuse within the schools, it adds.

While the proposal says SPARK will have a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) approach, James said it will also include a focus on art, making it truly more of a STEAM program.

SPARK will incorporate the curriculum Engineering is Elementary as well as literacy programs Reading A to Z, Raz-Kids, MobyMax and Education Galaxy for academics.

“To address the need for increased wellness, we have chosen to use the evidence-based Botvin Lifeskills Training program, mentoring, certified physical education instructors to provide structured activities, and the YMCA’s Passport to Fitness program that provides a free health screening and access to the YMCA facilities to improve long-term health and wellness outcomes for our students and their families,” the proposal says.

Arts and “cultural experiences” will also be a focus, and the program will work on boosting parent involvement through Family STEM Nights once a month, Financial Literacy Nights, Multi-Cultural Nights and Nutritional Meal Planning each quarter and Family Field Trips each week over the six summer sessions. Interpreters will also be available.

In addition to school and YMCA staff, there will be community partners.

“We’ll bring in multiple people from the community, like financial literacy, we’ll tap into the State Employees’ Credit Union, we’ll use the cooperative extension agency to come in and do some helpful cooking classes, so it’s just a great wraparound to provide opportunity for the multiple businesses and supports of the school system to have a captive audience to make more impact,” James said.

The program will provide families struggling financially with free afterschool care on top of educational, cultural and life skill opportunities.

“We’ve tapped into quite a few community partners,” James said. “We’re excited about the list of people that have stepped up. Of course our retired school personnel, the Rotary Club of Albemarle, the Stanly County Arts Council, Uwharrie Players, Albemarle police, Pfeiffer University, Albemarle Parks and Rec, the extension agency, Food Lion and Atrium Health all are partners to make this work as we move forward.”

The YMCA already has about 115 students in its after-school programs, James said.

“We didn’t want to supplant, we wanted addition,” he said.

James said he’s had about 15 years of experience working with the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant and has always seen it make a good effect on the community when used well.

Stanly faced a good deal of competition for the grant: only 49 proposals out of 113 were recommended by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to be approved. The North Carolina State Board of Education voted on the list of proposals on Aug. 2, according to a release.

Representatives for the program were supposed to attend a statewide meeting in Raleigh on Sept. 14, but the meeting was rescheduled due to Hurricane Florence. Stanly County sent three representatives, according to James.

James said he has applied for several other grants and hopes to see others approved soon.

Imari Scarbrough is a freelance contributor to The Stanly News and Press.

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