



NEW JERSEY'S AFTERSCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME (OST) PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

This audio recording was provided by NJSACC, New Jersey's Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Professional Network. This is NJSACC's founder story as told by Diane Genco, its co-founder, and former Executive Director. For context, you may occasionally hear Diane Genco refer to someone in the room. She is speaking with Sarah Cruz, NJSACC's Director of Special Projects. You may also hear Sarah occasionally ask questions. Throughout this recording, a transcript will be available at njsacc.org.

Today is Tuesday, February 14, 2023. And we're here with please say your name. Diane Genco. Diane is the now retired Executive Director of New Jersey School-Age Child Care Coalition also known as NJSACC. So, Diane, please tell us in your words, why did NJSACC begin?

NJSACC began before I moved to New Jersey because there was a noticeable amount of kids that were hanging around school (after school hours) throughout the state. The cost of living was going up in New Jersey; New Jersey is a very densely populated state, and principals were realizing that these kids were just hanging around and what they kind of figured out was, there were a large amount of single parent families (predominantly women) who had to go back to work – and it's an expensive state to live in. But the majority of them were single parents, kids of single parent families, and there was no place for them to go.

So, [NJSACC] grew out of discussion with the Community Education Director at EIRC, which is the Educational Information and Resource Center, and his name was Dr. John Radek and they pulled together a loose knit group of thought leaders. One was Dr. Tynette Hills, who was at the Department of Education. She was awesome! She was an early childhood specialist and she really believed there needed to be a continuum of care and support for kids from early childhood on up through the elementary school years; a way that parents and families can be supported because they were on their own. One of the original thought leaders was Selma Gore, who was a community education director at West Windsor Plainsboro. Then, there was Dr. Fran Ornstein, and she was with Consumer Affairs for the state, but she also headed the Women's Bureau at the state. So again, for her, it was also a women's issue. So, that's how it started!

So, with this group of thought leaders... we had someone from the Department of Health; we had Pat Patracco, who's on the New Jersey School Boards Association; we had the PTA (then the state PTA). So, we had kind of high-level people that tried to problem solve and figure out how to provide care and support for these kids after school. So, then Community Education, which at that time in New Jersey was very big. They were looking at redesigning themselves in schools – like South Brunswick, West Windsor Plainsboro, Cherry Hill, Morristown – and they realized that that was a perfect venue, that they could start opening the school up and figuring out a way to provide programming (not academic) but, play and social interaction for these kids. They were never designed to be academic programs; it was to make a new neighborhood because these kids couldn't go home.

So, afterschool, which at that time they called “school-age child care,” well, actually they called it “latchkey,” because kids used to go home with a key around their neck, that was before key fobs and codes. They called it “latchkey child care,” then it became school-age child care. It morphed into school-age child care when the federal government realized that families needed subsidy support and it wasn't just when their kids were in early childhood programs. They looked at school-age child care, which is different then early childhood. So, [it became] child care for school-age kids; they called it SACC, and that was under the federal Dependent Care grant.

Because of the federal Dependent Care grant, the Department of Human Services was approached by this loose knit group of people, this loose coalition, because they realized it needed some type of funding. They needed help in training people because it's different. The academic day was very different than the afterschool time. And it should be. It should look very different. It should look like your kid goes home to the neighborhood, right? So, he or she can play; they can interact with each other; they can select their playmates; they could crawl under a tree and read a book. There should be different opportunities for kids. It could be art enrichment, music, whatever, but it had to be different.

But, they didn't have any way to support that. So, out of the Department of Human Services, the Federal Dependent Care grant money was administered by them, and they gave \$8,000 a year to the coalition. The money was held in a little, they called it a Club account, at EIRC. The group could draw down on that \$8,000 and they started putting on a conference to train and to help people figure out how to start a program.

When I lived in Massachusetts, I ran an afterschool program. I did that for 10 years. It was based on The School-age Child Care Project out of the Center for Research on Women because they also recognized it was a women's issue; that women needed support and care for their kids. So, my program in Brookline, Massachusetts was very involved in the development of an action manual. Their model was a parent-controlled program; that parents needed to have input and control over the program that was housed in a public school.

So, when I moved here, I thought, *oh, this all should be happening here* but, it wasn't. It was just starting to happen. So, when you move to a different state and you're a young mom and I wasn't working, I was desperate to find people that understood where I came from, and I could talk to, and I was introduced to this loose knit coalition. So, I would go once a month to these meetings and try and figure out the whole scope of New Jersey, which was very different.

I mean, when I left Massachusetts, my staff were paid \$25 an hour. When I came here, they were barely making minimum wage. And it was considered a career in Massachusetts; a youth worker. It was not considered a career here. It was really like part-time work that you could pick up. So, it was a whole different way and the control of programs varied. It could be a YMCA. It could be a Boys and Girls Club. It could be a community center. It could be a church or community education; and we didn't have models like that. So, I had a lot of learning to do.

I was involved at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, because Mickey [Michelle] Seligson wrote *The School Age Action Manual*, which we called "The Red Bible." And it was *Afterschool / school-age Child Care 101* – how to start it, how to do an interest finder, how to set up a budget. It was all a very practical manual and when I came to New Jersey, feeling very alone, I left all those people behind me. So, they did an introduction.

Mickey Seligson knew Selma Gore and said, "There's this group that's meeting. Why don't you go?"

So, I went, and they didn't know who I was. I mean, I just kind of walked in. Denise (Sellers) was there. She had just started at Haddonfield Child Care based on the action manual.

Right. So, the group got money from the Department of Human Services for a conference.

And so, we said we need school-age child care money. And the [the federal government] had in the Dependent Care grant a whole pot of money for school-age child care.

So, I just started working in different counties. And I started doing outreach to several parent groups that contacted me; one program is still in existence. And it's called Primetime in Cranford. And I'm so excited because it was started by a Presbyterian church and parents started the program. It's still my favorite program in the whole state and my grandson goes to that program now. So, I am just so happy. They actually still have the couch we gave them 30 years ago in the library room. It was like this brown couch. But every room there in that program is designed for play... every single room that they have. They have a puzzle room. They have a Lego room with Lego pads on the wall and ceiling. So, kids can do Lego everywhere. They have a K'Nex room. They have a quiet room. They have a board game room. Kids are constantly able to choose what they want to do. They always go outside there. It's just a great program. I think he likes it more than school, but I'm so happy.

And I didn't know anything about community organizing, but it really was more of a community organizer than a technical assistance provider because it was just to set up programs. At that time, school-age child care or SACC programs were not licensed. So, anything goes, there was quite a range of quality, and the coalition was still a very loose knit group, but in '91, we needed a plan; we didn't have a strategic plan.

I had gone to training on the federal level. It was how to move a coalition into an organization and how to take a loose knit group and formalize it, and what you needed to do to keep all the stakeholders, and it's good for building partnerships. It's one of the best books. It was from the National Center on Coalition Building and we realized, I went back to the coalition to this group, and I said, 'you know, we need a strategic plan. We don't have one.' So, we wrote a grant that went through 4C's of Union County, and I think it was for \$20,000. The check is that big check in the office and that is a copy of a check that Governor Florio gave me, and we contracted with IBM. They were still very prominent in New Jersey, and it was very out of the box because we paid for our housing, we had a team of about, oh my gosh, that must have been 40 people. So, we paid for a house, and we did it overnight. We went to IBM headquarters up in North Jersey and by the end of two days, we had an amazing strategic plan with incredible input; no judgments. So, the original name was New Jersey School-Age Child Care Coalition because on the federal level, "school-age child care" was a term and school-age care was the term that we all used. And that's how SACC came about.

It changed later on to, now it's, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition because on the national level, people felt in the field that when you put "child" in it (which I never agreed with), people would think of early childhood. It was school-age kids, so ages five and up: five to 13. The Dependent Care grant funded kids ages zero to 13, but school-age care was determined to be ages five to 13.

So, simultaneously as that happened, I accidentally sat on a plane because I was working for Wellesley for the rest of my part time. And who is this woman? She was from the AT&T Family Fund, and we just hit it off. And that was a huge fund that was part of the American business collaborative where all these big companies put money in a pot. And it was money that could be given out to community programs, but it was tied to an employee. So, if I worked at Johnson & Johnson, I could apply for my child's afterschool program to get a grant. So, we were actually given at that time like \$95,000 and we distributed that to programs, and it can be anything from *'I have bicycles, but I have no place to put them.'* So, some people got containers that they could lock in the playground. Some people got it for training, but it was all targeted, specifically to employees' kids from Fortune 500 companies.

So, with that, it was great, but at the same time, it made the state very unbalanced. It wasn't equitable. Why was it that because [for example] Mary Jones works at Cherry Hill Public School and her kid goes to Cherry Hill Public Schools, why can their program get program improvement money? And so, that's how we pitched it. I pitched it to the state. So, I said, "we have a strategic plan now." We were in the process of becoming Incorporated because we had to be a 501(c)(3) in order to accept grants.

So, we got incorporated in 1993 and we wrote a competitive grant. I remember it was due like January 4, and I remember writing it with Tom Zsiga and Denise Sellers over Christmas break and we got the grant. So, they hired me as a consultant, not an executive director, because I was basically hired to administer the American Business Collaborative money, and then trying to figure out how to establish it as an organization.

I started reading the Business section of the *[New York] Times*. So, one thing people will say about our organization is that I was always five years ahead of everybody else. We were doing STEM from the very beginning. We were doing nature-based programming before anybody even talked about it and then shortly after we got incorporated, we were part of a big national project that was started at Wellesley at the Center for Research on Women and that was the Principals' Institute.

That allowed us to train a core group of people as specialists and we convened a large meeting with the Principals Association. They did a two-day residential conference and school districts came and brought like a local community member, or Boys and Girls Club, or the Y or PTA. They were interested in starting afterschool programs. So, we did this two-day training which was really intense on helping to train the principals; why it was important, how it could complement the work they were doing, we were not competing with the day, we were complementing the day, it could extend the day, in terms of a lot of the learning, but that was another project we were doing then.

So, we hired people on an hourly basis to go out and do technical help and we also started doing training, but people had no training; they didn't know what they were doing.

We petitioned the state that our programs be licensed because we felt that many were unsafe and there was no ability for a parent to make a decision. If there'd been an infraction or an injury or there was no oversight. So, we worked for over a year to petition the state to add school-age child care regulations. So, we set up ratios. We set up qualifications for staff and it was hashing it out. I mean, it was not easy because some agencies that were there didn't want regulation, but that made a big difference. That was a lot of work, but that was passed as regulation, and I think it tells you (in the licensing manual) what year it was.

That was a huge accomplishment because it was safer and if there was infraction, it was reported. And it also helped the state Department of Human Services and the Department of Education recognize that it was more viable. It wasn't just babysitting, and these people were trained, and they were vetted, and had criminal background checks and so, that was a big deal.

And then at the same time, it was the second term of Christy Whitman as governor.

In one of her campaign speeches for her to be reelected, she talked about the importance of having family-friendly programs to support families. And there was an RFP process (request for proposals) for people who wanted money. They got like \$50,000 to improve their program. [Governor Whitman] was a working mom and so, she was very supportive of supporting women.

So, the family friendly grants are still around, and they never raised the amount. Governor Whitman, we called her out, and I called her on it after she was elected. I said, 'Well, on such and such a day, you said you wanted to start this grant application for family-friendly...' and we were petitioned by the Department of Children and Families to review the grants.

When Nita M. Lowey's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) Program started, we had three programs that were accepted. So, you had to apply nationally, and they competed. There was no allocation saying New Jersey would get three or four because you're all part of the national pool. So, Newark received one and because they were public school run, they didn't have to be licensed. Phillipsburg who still amazingly was

part of that first federal program. It's not one of the top 10 neediest districts, but it's a district that needed a lot of help and support and amazingly, they started their program, and they still are using it on the state level. The other one was Princeton.

After several years, it became an allocation (a federal allocation) to each state based on your population. They decided they wouldn't administer on the federal level. They would do it on the state level through the Department of Education. To this day, 21st Century [funding] is state allocation, and programs apply. You could be already running a program. You could be a new program in a school, but they had to meet certain criteria.

Now the [federal government] said on the state level that you have to spread it out. Let's say the need might be greater in Trenton for programs. You can't have an overabundance of programs funded in Trenton. You've got to spread it out. So, those grants are five years, and they need to reapply to them, and they have a special team.

When we developed the RFP, we realized we needed to come up with what our criteria was, and we had freedom to do that. So, at that time, Sue Martz (who was at the Department of Ed in the grants office) was pulled out of the grants office to help develop this RFP and they talked to us about being the only experts in the field in New Jersey.

They talked to me about putting together a committee that would work very hard, roll up their sleeves, and develop that grant opportunity. The only drawback was that because we would participate, we would have to recuse ourselves and we would not be eligible for the funding to provide technical assistance. And that was a big decision that the board had to make, but we felt that it was more important to have impact on the design to make sure it was a quality design because at the same time, on the national level, we were involved in the national accreditation project through the National Afterschool Association, and I haven't even talked about how we helped start the National Afterschool Association.

So, you have all these parallel things. You have the federal level going down to the state money where we have to design the program. So, that was hard work, but we had an incredible team. It was Dennis Groomes (who was still at EIRC), Tom Zsiga (who was on our board), and myself and we had a rep from Boys and Girls Club; we had a rep from the Y; we had [New Jersey Department of] Recreation; we had quite an array of people that were involved in coming up with what the focus should be and, you know, the 21st Century programs were meant to be not just for kids. They were meant to be resources for families. So, there was a strong component of family programming. That's harder to do than provide the program for the kids and that takes longer to kind of get going and gel.

We also decided the program should start the funding with fourth grade. A lot of programs kind of stopped providing care after fourth grade. So, what do these kids do? So, those middle school kids are kind of hung out to dry.

So, when it was all set up, and Nyeema Watson (who's now at Rutgers Camden) was at the department and she was critical in that design and so was Heidi Perez Livingston, and Sue Martz and, when they finally had the final product, they came to us and said: 'we need technical assistance help. We need to build a team on the state level, and we want to fund it, and NJSACC, we'll give you enough for basically one salary. You'll work in tandem to help develop the team and basically teach the team the skill set that they needed.'

So, the state, they didn't even need to do a competition [grant] because they said we were sole-sourced. There was nobody else out there. So, we did that for five years and then the state decided that they needed to make it a competition [grant] and, knock on wood, we've been able to get that grant every year. We've always had a very strong relationship with the Department of Education. And so, I'm really proud of that and we still have that today.