

AFTERSCHOOL ALERT

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Afterschool programs strengthen communities

At their most sophisticated, [afterschool programs] represent a dynamic, authentic school-community partnership that brings both public and private resources to bear in order to strengthen community, improve schools' effectiveness, and develop the potential of the young people they serve.¹

Some say America's attention to community is in decline. As people work longer hours, endure longer commutes, and have less time to socialize and join community organizations, they are not getting to know their neighbors and communities. Schools exist in a vacuum, having little or no association with the surrounding neighborhood, and many neighborhoods lack safe places for youth to gather and socialize without parents being concerned about violence, drug use, abduction, traffic or other dangers. Afterschool programs are uniquely suited to fill this void and become America's new neighborhood -- a safe space for both kids and parents to gather to learn, play and connect. By giving schools, community based organizations and communities a sound investment in one another, afterschool programs have the power to reduce crime, increase safety, bring neighbors together, and foster community pride and ownership.

Youth reap the benefits of safe, stable environments.

A disconnected community is in jeopardy of becoming an unsafe community. Criminologist Robert J. Sampson asserts, "communities characterized by (a) anonymity and sparse acquaintanceship networks among residents, (b) unsupervised teenage peer groups and attenuated control of public space, and (c) a weak organizational base and low social participation in local activities face an increased risk of crime and violence."² Conversely, afterschool programs are proven to lower juvenile crime rates and generally improve neighborhoods, and not just by keeping youth occupied for a few hours every day. Afterschool programs help young people succeed by providing academic support and the chance to form meaningful relationships with adults from their community, and by encouraging them to get involved in their neighborhood through service projects. This support, these relationships and the benefits to the community create a mutually beneficial relationship of immeasurable value.

- After the implementation of the city-wide San Diego 6 to 6 program, the San Diego Police Department's 2001 report indicated that although overall crime increased 8.8 percent since 2000, juvenile arrests during after school hours were down 13.1 percent. The police chief specifically cited the 6 to 6 program as one of the primary factors responsible for this decrease. Additionally, the rates of juveniles as victims of violent crime during after school hours decreased 11.7 percent from the previous year.³
- When young people form early connections with community groups through service activities, the groups themselves are often the beneficiaries. Young people can infuse a charity or civic group with energy and inspiration; become members of the volunteer force, staff, or board; help build awareness of the group's mission throughout the community; and help an organization garner positive press and media attention.⁴
- Evaluations of the first two years of The After-School Corporation (TASC) programming found that students felt that participating in after-school improved their ability to maintain self-control and avoid fights.⁵

Afterschool programs bring communities together.

In communities where at least 50 percent of the kids are participating in after-school programs, that community is five times more likely to be a healthy community because they are putting resources behind their children. —Grenae Dudley, executive director of the Youth Connection in Detroit.⁶

Schools and other organizations that invest in youth are prime facilitators of community connections. In 1935, when C.S. Mott and Frank Manley developed the model of the "lighted schoolhouse," or a school that is a

vibrant community center, open all evening, year-round, they gave birth to the idea of the community school. Community schools have flourished in some areas of the country and afterschool is serving as a stepping stone for community schools in others. Afterschool programs need community involvement to succeed, and asking for community support brings neighbors together for a common purpose--to help their children--and fosters a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the program, the entity that houses it and its results.

- In the report *What We Know Works*, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change compiled current research on the most effective strategies to promote and ensure healthy families and children, thriving neighborhoods, living-wage jobs and viable economies. Afterschool programs are number three on the partnership's Top Ten List For Community Success:

“**Create quality and affordable after-school care.** ... Children who participate in quality after-school programs are much less likely to use drugs and alcohol, to have sex, or to be involved in criminal activity than their peers who go home to empty houses in neighborhoods that are not safe. Participation in after-school programs is linked to improved school attendance and academic performance.”⁷

- An afterschool program helped build a community center in Greensboro, NC. The Eastside Park Community Center grew out of an afterschool tutoring program that grew from a partnership between the predominantly black Eastside Park community in eastern Greensboro and the predominantly white Westminster Presbyterian Church in western Greensboro. The need for more space for the afterschool program prompted the idea for the community center, and residents are optimistic about the effects the center, the partnership and the program will have on the community. Vernon Bailey, president of the community center's board, said the partnership with the church has brought the Eastside Park community closer together. As children learn and play together, he said, their parents get to know each other, and neighbors are no longer politely waving at strangers.⁸
- Project C.H.A.N.C.E. in Wilmington, DE, has an annual Bike Award in which it gives refurbished bicycles to needy students who make significant academic improvement during the school year, and adult bikes are given to parents. The bikes are donated by the police department and refurbished by a bicycle club (Wilmington Velocity). The police department and Christiana Health Care System provide the bike safety training, a local helmet bank provides helmets, and a local bike store provides equipment such as gears, reflectors and mirrors. The program also promotes healthy living and uses the event to encourage families to go cycling together, program director Alina Columbus said.⁹
- In a survey of afterschool programs supported by The After-School Corporation, “forty-five percent of principals said that the after-school programs had increased parents’ attendance at school events.”¹⁰

Flourishing communities, effective schools, productive youth, promising future.

The notion of community investment in youth cannot languish. Support for afterschool programs that bring together kids, parents, teachers, residents and community leaders and organizations is vital in building strong, supportive communities. Successful afterschool programs help young people become productive adults, get parents involved in their children’s education, produce safer streets, address community needs, foster civic responsibility, strengthen community groups and rally residents around a common goal. In short, afterschool programs make communities safer and stronger.

¹ EdSource Online, Community Partnerships and After-School Programs, An Overview, www.edsource.org/edu_part.cfm, February 2002.

² Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, Pg. 307.

³ Ferrin & Amick, 2002.

⁴ Corporation for National and Community Service, *Students in Service to America*, Washington, D.C., 2002.

⁵ Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002.

⁶ Kresnak, Jack, “After school - and all alone; State not doing enough to put kids on right track, study says,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 16, 2002.

⁷ News Release, “Pew Partnership's Top Ten List For Community Success,” [www.pew-partnership.org/newsroom/top_ten\(pr\).html](http://www.pew-partnership.org/newsroom/top_ten(pr).html), accessed November 14, 2003.

⁸ Rutland, Aulica, “Building a dream; community center rises in eastside,” *Greensboro News & Record*, April 19, 2002.

⁹ Alina Columbus, Afterschool Ambassador.

¹⁰ Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002, p. 32.