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Orange Grove: After-school programs bright idea

They give kids a safe place to spend the afternoon productively.



Randy Barth

Founder, CEO of Santa Ana-based THINK Together, a nonprofit education company Today we celebrate "Lights On Afterschool," a nationwide rally to draw attention to the need for, and proliferation of, after-school programs. After-school programs emerged over the past two decades in response to changes in our society – particularly the move of women into the workplace.

Approximately 70 percent of households with kids in school have two parents working or are headed by single parents.

This phenomenon, coupled with the shrinking school day (school often is out at 2:30 p.m. or even earlier with minimum days) created a situation where the number of "latchkey kids" exploded, and crime increased from 3-6 p.m.

In middle-class communities, parents pay for after-school programs, and in low-income communities a mix of tax dollars and private philanthropy often fund programs. Such programs have found bipartisan support from powerful and wealthy benefactors, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sen. Barbara Boxer and Irvine Co. boss Donald Bren.

After-school programs will be more than just a safe place for children to be during these dangerous hours. Increasingly, after-school programs are integrated with regular school-day learning.

Budget cuts and the shrinking school day have eliminated or reduced science and art programs – curriculums that foster imagination and creativity. Physical fitness and sports programs have been cut at a time when childhood obesity is epidemic. The after-school platform can fill these gaps.

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For low-income students, after-school programs are even more vital. There is a persistent "achievement gap" in which the average 18-year-old African American or Latino student performs at the level of an average 13-year-old white or Asian student. If you think that's "their" problem consider this: Latino and African American students comprise 55 percent of all K-12 students in California.

This will plague California's workforce competitiveness. With baby boomers beginning to retire, the Public Policy Institute of California estimates that by 2020 California's workforce will be short 1 million college graduates. California is already a high-cost place to live and do business. Where we have remained competitive it has been through an educated workforce. With more than half the state on the wrong side of the "achievement gap," our economy could be facing further peril.

After-school is not the silver bullet for all that ails California schools. It can, however, be a cost-effective tool that supports higher student achievement. Students attending after-school programs until 6 p.m. increase the hours spent in school by two-thirds. Because these programs are staffed with paraprofessionals and leverage existing school facilities, they cost about 20 cents on the dollar when compared against the regular school day.

Further, California's after-school infrastructure can be leveraged to deliver other learning programs that boost student achievement including early literacy for preschoolers, summer learning, Saturday school and small group tutoring. Many of these programs exist but are not yet coordinated or aligned with school-day learning.

THINK Together has collaborated with Santa Ana Unified to build this next-generation model – an "Ecosystem" of support. It is early but the results are promising. Student achievement is up, and crime during the after-school hours is down. Importantly, this integrated model makes our tax dollars (and philanthropic investments) go farther and produces improved results.

As a society, we can pay on the back end, through incarceration, more cops on the street, special education and through a less-productive workforce. Or we can front-load our investments for pennies on the dollar; making the time children are not in school more productive. In this light, after-school – or, more correctly, out-of-school programs – seem like a bright idea.

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