

## Paul Walters: Staying after school is smart

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With another school year behind us, I applaud the work of our students, parents and school community members in striving for educational excellence in the most challenging fiscal times we've seen in decades. The economy will turn around but, in the meantime, it is critically important that we keep struggling and troubled students engaged in learning and out of trouble.

After-school programs provide important opportunities for these kids. They give students safe places to develop skills and feel more connected to their school community and can dramatically improve students' attendance and academic performance. A recent report from the national anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids

highlights new California research on the many benefits of after-school programs, which provide positive alternatives to gangs, drugs and crime during the prime time for violent juvenile crime.

The report, "California's After-School Commitment," also highlights California's groundbreaking investment in after-school programs. Our state leads the nation in after-school investments, supporting thousands of programs that serve hundreds of thousands of students each day. These programs target the state's lowest-income communities, where the needs are greatest. In fact, four of five low-income elementary and middle schools in the state now operate state-funded after-school programs.

The report features a profile of a Costa Mesa student named Javier, who turned away from involvement in gangs and drugs that had claimed relatives and friends, by turning to an after-school teen center run by THINK Together. There, he found mentors, assumed a leadership role and got to travel beyond his neighborhood on field trips. After graduating from high school and serving in the Marines, he returned to THINK Together, first as a volunteer and then as a site coordinator in the city of Orange. Javier has earned a Masters degree in education and is working on his teaching credential with plans of becoming a high school history teacher.

Despite California's after-school successes, the current budget crisis puts California's after-school investments at risk, threatening public safety, as well as making it harder for families, who often rely on these programs for needed child care, to get by.

In addition, California's investment helps it stand out among other states in the competition for federal Race to the Top funds. The state's recent application for education stimulus dollars from Washington highlights the state's after-school investments as evidence of its commitment to federal priorities of extended learning time and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) learning, and it details how state-funded after-school programs will be an important intervention model for turnaround schools.

Abandoning the state's after-school commitment at this point could jeopardize California's chances at winning these federal funds.

This is no time to back away from California's impressive commitment to after-school programs. By continuing to offer meaningful activities after school, we can keep kids in class, off the streets, and on the path to success in school and in life.