



Education

For once, Rhode Island gets to be a positive role model

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When David Cicilline became Providence's mayor in 2003, the city had nothing remotely like an Office of Youth Development. Besides the School Department, whose charge is kids' education and the school day, no city officials were responsible for kids more generally, like what they were doing during their out-of-school time.

In the modern world, the adult work day ends long after the school day, leaving many kids unsupervised, with time on their hands. Afterschool care is expensive, and many parents are far too trusting of their darlings. Worse, families struggling to survive are the least likely to fuss about their kids' down time, so the kids who most need supervision are out on the streets.

Post-school hours are not just lost opportunities for learning and enrichment, but prime time for trouble sex, drugs, video-game addictions and juvenile crime.

Cicilline wanted to build a better foundation for children and families by helping schools serve the community as a whole. Schools are the perfect point of access for families looking for services and opportunities, including help filling those late-afternoon hours.

The good news in Providence was that no ossified, industrial-strength government system had to be wrestled into modernity.

But the bad news was that many cities had already found that dealing with kids' out-of-school time was tough to do. Nationally, most communities have hodge-podges of programming school-run sports and clubs, alongside community groups offering yoga classes here, art projects there without central organization or oversight. Providence was not alone.

So Gary Bliss, Cicilline's then-Director of Policy, assembled a stakeholders' group to begin the touchy work of knitting together a network of high-quality afterschool programs out of Providence's own hodge-podge. In time they became the Providence Afterschool Alliance (PASA), an independent public-private partnership.

Recently, Bliss told the story of PASA's birth and growth to representatives of nine cities from across the United States, who had convened in Providence for a two-day conference to learn the specifics of what eventually became PASA's elegant organization.

The PASA stakeholders decided their initial target audience would be middle-school students, partly because Providence middle schools offered no sports. Community providers like the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs had various programs. Some schools had clubs like drama and band, or allowed artists, dancers and others to use their space for activities that would at least supervise the kids.

The city agencies included Parks and Recreation and the schools. Bliss says, "We wanted the police, of course — not as crime control, but as positive images of developed youth."

The stakeholder group identified afterschool opportunities for about 500 students. But were the activities appealing? Well supervised? Well attended? Were they aftercare holding tanks, or did they offer enriching experiences?

The answer to all was: Who knew?

Each program was its own entity, presumably with its own standards and internal communication. So, the stakeholders first had to agree on a set of standards and indicators against which they could assess the quality of the programs. They had to collect relevant data, solve logistical problems like transportation, and establish a governance system. In short, without doing the totally unsexy work of creating a centralized management system, attempts to improve out-of-school programming would be like herding cats.

Hilary Salmons, PASA's original director and principal architect, says, "People just don't understand the need for a system. We collect a lot of data for practical reasons and daily decision-making. We're sharing kids (among schools, afterschool providers, and parents), so everyone needs a connection point. It's like the UPS package; we need to manage the package and make sure the glass gets there and doesn't get broken. Parents should know if their kid arrived. We track participation. Daily. And all this information drives practical considerations like the number of apples you need for snack."

Fortunately, Salmons is a data nut. From the get-go, she insisted on creating a robust information system even though frontline workers in all fields, let's face it, don't relish spending time inputting numbers. But PASA built a management system that has been lionized as best practice in three recent reports by Public/Private Ventures, the RAND Corp. and Harvard Family Research Project.

Candy Markman, the planning director for Nashville's afterschool project, says that trying to create these new afterschool systems runs into "smiley-faces" problems with funders who don't get the organizational costs and challenges. "We have to explain the work beyond the on-the-ground scenes of happy kids. No one sees the machinery. If you're not prepared to be a systems thinker, this work is a really tough sell. Unless you build a system, you'll never get the kids you most want. When given a choice, kids vote with their feet. So you have to hand them and their families opportunity on a platter. Those parents are not reading what's in the backpack. But every single day [PASA's children] get project-based learning, baking bread and practicing fractions. They call it expanded learning, but I call it disguised learning." In any case, they're learning.

PASA now annually keeps 1,500 middle-school students off Providence's meaner streets. And they've recently started to build a system for high-school students.

How refreshing to have a Rhode Island initiative held up as a national role model.

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