

Afterschool programs work, and need support

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 16, 2011

By Diane Tabangay

Each year, Hawaii ranks as one of the top states in the nation for afterschool program participation rates, with close to 60,000 children, K-12, receiving afterschool care.

The success behind these numbers is partly based on the 1990 creation of the Department of Education's A + Afterschool Program, pioneered by then-Lt. Gov. Ben Cayetano to address Hawaii's problem of "latch-key children."

Afterschool programs benefit youth, families and our communities. An analysis of 73 afterschool studies concluded that such programs provide multiple benefits, including improvements in children's personal, social and academic skills and their self-esteem. Furthermore, teens not participating in afterschool programs are nearly three times more likely to skip classes than teens who do participate. They are also three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs, and are more likely to drink, smoke and engage in sexual activity. This mirrors the fact that between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m., juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex are at their peak.

Even though Hawaii ranks high in afterschool participation, we need to do more to reach out to the 65,000-plus kids who are on their own after the last school bell rings. These children spend an average of seven hours per week unsupervised after school.

On Wednesday, hundreds of school children and their parents will gather at the Capitol to participate in a rally showing their support for Hawaii's afterschool programs. The next day, Oct. 20, is the 12th Annual Lights On Afterschool Rally, a national event organized by the Afterschool Alliance to highlight the importance of afterschool care; to give our youth a chance to showcase the skills they learn at their afterschool programs; and most important, to send a strong message that there are thousands of kids in need of afterschool care.

Hawaii is lucky. We have a number of well-qualified afterschool care providers. The YMCA, for example, takes care of more than 6,000 kids each year islandwide. Afterschool activities include homework assistance, enrichment and leadership activities, health and fitness guidance, and supervised recreational activities.

However, there's a lot more work to be done. Since 2004, Hawaii's afterschool participation has dipped. For every parent who has a child in an afterschool program, there's another who can't find a program due to cost or transportation issues. Or, the parent don't see the value these programs offer.

Our afterschool programs are reaching only a fraction of Hawaii's children, and cuts in state and federal subsidy funds are increasing the challenge. We need to work together as a community to make sure every family that needs an afterschool program has access to one.

We also need to spread the word these programs do work. After all, they keep our kids safe, provide help to Hawaii's many working families, inspire our kids to become better students and, ultimately, lead to a better future.

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