

Commentary:

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Come learn Thursday what ‘Lights On Afterschool’ is all about

BY MELISSA ROONEY

For at least two years now, Durham public schools have donned posters advertising ‘Lights On Afterschool,’ but I only recently learned what it is.

Lights On Afterschool is a nationwide project of the Afterschool Alliance (afterschoolalliance.org/index.cfm), which is dedicated to ensuring that all children have access to affordable and quality after-school programs.

It’s a great way for families, companies, volunteers, anyone to learn about after-school opportunities available (at no additional cost) to Durham Public School (DPS) students and their families. Durham is celebrating ‘Lights On Afterschool’ this Thursday afternoon, Oct. 18, at various locations showcasing their afterschool programs.

My family has gratefully had the financial ability to involve our kids in organized extracurricular activities since they were toddlers. We know that most families are struggling just to keep roofs over their heads and healthy food on the table, so most kids don’t have access to preschool, much less piano, violin or organized sports.

My daughter transitioned to sixth grade at Lowe’s Grove this year. It’s a difficult time for any kid. Most of her friends from Creekside Elementary were districted for other schools or enrolled at Durham School of the Arts, other magnet schools, or charter schools. She knew only one other person from our neighborhood and surrounding area who was attending Lowe’s Grove (our districted school). As such, it is no surprise that Lowe’s Grove’s student population, consisting of 71 percent African American and only 5.41 percent Caucasian students, is inconsistent with its surrounding population. I thought that being a minority would be a good experience for her, but I worried that, at 10 years old, she may not be ready for it.

So far, my daughter’s experience at Lowe’s Grove has been better than anything we imagined. In addition to the truly dedicated teachers and accessible administration, this blessing is due to her enrollment (at no cost) in Citizen Schools from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday.

Citizen Schools (CS) is a national nonprofit organization that partners with middle schools to expand the learning day for children across the country (citizenschools.org). Through this program, thousands of adult volunteers help improve student achievement by teaching skill-building apprenticeships. It operates in 32 middle schools in eight states nation-wide. Citizen Schools partners with three schools in North Carolina., one in Charlotte and two in Durham (at Lowe’s Grove and Neal Middle schools).

I wouldn’t have known this opportunity existed if not for my daughter’s science teacher, who called me to discuss ways to keep her engaged and enjoying her learning experience through middle school. My daughter was welcomed to fill one of the CS spaces remaining at Lowe’s Grove after school started. It has provided her with close, positive interactions with other students, benefiting her confidence and comfort level at her new school. In addition, she is truly interested and engaged in the apprenticeships (which this semester include Earth Wind and Fire (environmental affairs), Junior Iron Chef, Lego Robotics, Zumba Girls, Electrical Engineering, Sci-Fi Movie Making, Duke Law Mock Trials, and Degrees of Networking).

Bus transportation is provided each day after CS, so no student is prohibited from participating due to lack of transportation. What’s more, my daughter’s homework is usually done before she gets home, because the first hour of CS is spent having a snack and doing homework (with the help of CS teachers). While I worried that 6:50 a.m. (bus pick up) to 6:15 p.m. (bus drop off) is a long day, even for a working adult, my daughter continues to look forward to Citizen School.

I’m sure most parents don’t know about CS, but I hope they will find out via the “Lights On Afterschool” celebration on Thursday.

Across the nation, 15.1 million children take care of themselves after school each day, including 31 percent of K-12 youth in North Carolina. A report on 21st Century Community Learning Centers (afterschool programs receiving federal funds) showed that 45 percent of all participants improved their reading grades, and 41 percent improved their math grades.

Furthermore, teens who don't participate in after-school programs are nearly three times more likely to skip classes than participants and are three times more likely to take drugs, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes and engage in sexual activity. On school days, 3 to 6 p.m. constitutes the peak time for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex. Just as importantly, parents with children in after-school programs are less stressed, have fewer unscheduled absences and are more productive at work. It is clear that involving every child in engaging and meaningful afterschool programs is imperative to their future and that of our entire society.

Last year at Lowe's Grove, the Citizen Schools program helped improve (the testing scores of) 80 percent of students in reading and 47 percent in math.

Lowe's Grove CS director Jin Ellington describes the program's importance to student development as follows: "Not only are we helping our students improve their grades and EOG proficiency scores, but we're also instilling a love of learning that our students will carry with them through middle school and into high school, college, and beyond." She recalls a young man who was "once struggling in all areas of his academics" but who, thanks to the CS program (according to his mother), "is now patiently teaching another student how to write."

Lowe's Grove principal Kathy Kirkpatrick agrees. Kirkpatrick cannot express enough how much she supports CS. She feels strongly that "exposing kids to all the career possibilities out there is invaluable as they are making decisions and setting goals for their lives."

In the latest Lowe's Grove CS newsletter, team leader Christine Vance states: "I served as assistant district attorney in Philadelphia for five years and saw firsthand how failures in our education system can impact our youth. I am excited to be a part of a program that not only supports young teenagers in their academic work, but also supports students in discovering their strengths and career interests through hands-on apprenticeships taught by real-world professionals."

By attending the 'Lights on After School' program at Lowe's Grove or Neal middle schools on Thursday, Oct. 18, you will see the Citizen Schools program in action and learn insights and perspectives from students, parents, teachers, the principals and volunteers. Like many public education programs, CS is threatened annually by budget cuts. Come see for yourself why we need to continue and expand this incredible opportunity for our youth and their families.

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