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Citizen Schools: An After-Hours Adventure

Professionals Mentoring Middle-Grades Students

By **Sean Cavanagh**

Boston

Not long ago, an 8th grader from a hardscrabble neighborhood in this city decided on an ambitious career path: She would become a doctor. Many adults encouraged her, but when she spoke with a knowledgeable source, a Harvard University medical researcher, about how that goal meshed with her academic record, he offered her some blunt advice.

"He told me it's hard. You have to put out a real effort," recalled Andrea Pina, 13. "You have to go through a lot of years of college. ... When I got my report card, he said I could do better."

That discussion occurred as part of Citizen Schools, an apprenticeship program offered outside school hours that seeks to build students' academic and leadership skills by connecting them with professionals from various fields. Launched in Boston in 1994, the program targets what some say is an underserved population in after-school education—middle school students—through a highly structured blend of academic tutoring and mentoring.



University of Texas graduate student Frank Serpa guides middle schoolers from Citizen Schools in Austin through the newspaper-production process. —Courtesy of 6th grader Josephy Garza/Citizen Schools

Citizen Schools has grown steadily over the years. It now serves 2,000 students in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, the vast majority from disadvantaged backgrounds, in 30 schools and five states. Youths spend an average of 400 hours a year, taking part in projects, activities, and academic tutoring led by doctors, lawyers, architects, chefs, artists, and many others,

who try to inspire them to think about college and careers of their own.

According to a recent study, that model seems to be working. An outside evaluation of Citizen Schools conducted in 2005 found that participants at some grade levels saw improvement in their reading and mathematics test scores and their grades. Grade-to-grade promotion and attendance rates also improved, as did performance in high school, it found.

In Boston, most middle schools release students at 1:30 p.m. Citizen

Schools attempts to make productive use of the after-school hours, as well as weekends and summer breaks, through projects and activities overseen by adult volunteers and Citizens Schools' full-time staff.

"They're very thoughtful about building momentum and motivation" among students, said J. Chris Coxon, the deputy superintendent for teaching and learning in the 58,000-student Boston school district. The program succeeds in "developing the whole child," he said, rather than focusing on either academic improvement or broader mentoring.

Find the Time

The holistic approach is evident in Andrea Pina's schedule. Every Tuesday and Thursday last semester, she left McCormack Middle School in Boston's Dorchester section, where she also lives, walked to a nearby train station, and rode to a community center across the sprawling neighborhood to attend an 8th grade academy run by the program.

For 4½ hours on those two days, she received help with her homework and tutoring in specific academics, such as English and math, a subject in which she has struggled. On Tuesdays, Andrea and other students in the academy received writing help from lawyers at 11 law firms and state and local agencies across Boston.

Those lawyers, who regularly host students in their law offices, have students write editorials and essays, which are published in a Citizen Schools magazine. The organization also hosts "Wows," projects and presentations in which students show off their apprenticeship training. The lawyer-volunteers help students arrange mock trials at local courthouses, where "jurors" have included U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer and U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Volunteers also help the youngsters craft admissions essays to Boston's elite public high schools. Citizen Schools encourages students to apply to those more academically demanding high schools as a step toward college.



In Boston, mentor Carol Ball of Lehman Brothers supports 7th grader Solomon Bona during his presentation on financial terms.

—Courtesy of Stephen Peiser/Citizen Schools

After-school programs have a tradition of working with elementary students. Schools and organizations, however, sometimes worry about whether they can maintain order among older students in after-school settings, and keep them motivated to participate, said Betsy Brand, the director of the American Youth Policy Forum, a

Washington-based research and policy organization that focuses on education and career preparation.

Yet services for older students are likely to become more popular, as parents and others search for ways to replace middle school electives and programs cut from the school day because of academic or budgetary pressures, Ms. Brand predicted.

"Things are getting squeezed out," she said. "Programs are being created to bring back some of those opportunities."

Jodi Grant, the president of the Washington-based AfterschoolAlliance, agrees that fewer programs target middle school youths. Apprenticeship training is also relatively rare—despite its potential to cultivate broader, nonacademic skills that would serve them in the workplace, such as written and oral communication skills, she said.

Enterprises run outside school hours can "tie some of the hard skills into the soft skills," said Ms. Grant, whose organization advocates and conducts research for those programs. "All kids should have that kind of exposure."

Not More of the Same

Eric Schwarz, Citizen Schools' president and chief executive officer, believes that districts facing greater pressure to improve academic performance—and tight daily class schedules—are increasingly likely to turn to out-of-school programs.

Boston's early-afternoon release for middle schools helps his organization. But Mr. Schwarz says that as long as a district's schools get out by 3:30 p.m., his program has enough time to operate.

Citizen Schools has been named a supplemental-services provider under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in Massachusetts, and is seeking that designation in other states. It also has participating schools in California, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Texas.

"I see a coming together of school reform and the after-school community," Mr. Schwarz said. School leaders are looking for "creative teaching and learning" options, and after-school programs could offer them, he said: "It can't just be more of the same."

In a public appearance last week, Sen. Kennedy said he expected to introduce legislation soon that would provide more federal support for "enrichment activities," including after-school programs, tied to school curriculum. He specifically cited Citizen Schools as a model for that bill.

A study of more than 70 after-school programs, released Jan. 8, found that they improve students' behavior, self-confidence, and attitude toward

school. Programs that use a well-organized sequence of activities, and specifically seek to improve students' social skills, are most likely to show results, according to the report by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, a research organization based at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Andrea Pina's schedule in Citizen Schools followed a different routine on Saturdays, when she attended an apprenticeship program on medical-science topics. It was led by Marcus Delatte, a drug-abuse researcher at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of the Harvard Medical School, who also used those sessions to talk informally with Andrea about her ambitions and the demands of medical training.

Andrea said she first thought about a career in medicine after watching a physician care for her grandmother, taking her blood pressure and performing a variety of other tests. Mr. Delatte, 31, and other volunteers from Harvard lead her and other students through numerous presentations and activities on medical topics. At the end of the semester, the volunteers helped students make "Wow" presentations, creating posters on HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and the effect of drugs on the brain.

The volunteers also arranged field trips, such as a visit to an embryo laboratory at Harvard, and another to a "brain bank," where youths saw researchers dissect a sheep's brain.

"It blows them away," Mr. Delatte said of those excursions.

Staying Afloat

That enthusiasm was what Mr. Schwarz and Ned Rimer had in mind when they founded the program a dozen years ago. Mr. Schwarz, a former newspaper reporter, led a trial apprenticeship program on journalism at a Boston elementary school; Mr. Rimer oversaw one on first aid, drawing on his work on an emergency squad. Only 20 students were participating then, but the positive results persuaded the men to expand their efforts.

At first, Citizen Schools' small staff met mostly in coffeehouses. They later moved to a basement office, memorable mostly for its propensity to flood. But gradually the program took hold in more Boston schools, with the support of city officials and then-Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant,

Today, Citizen Schools, a nonprofit organization, is located in the Boston Children's Museum. It has a \$15 million budget, and about 270 part- and full-time employees, some of whose positions are supported through AmeriCorps, the federal national-service program. The bulk of its funding comes from private donors and philanthropies, such as the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Goldman Sachs Foundation, and Bank of America.

The program has also broadened its training beyond students. In 2003, Citizen Schools established a master's-degree program in education, with a specialty in out-of-school education, with Lesley University, in Cambridge, Mass.,

Yet the program could not work without volunteers like Mr. Delatte. The Harvard researcher, who is African-American, believes far too many minority youths never consider college or promising careers because they've met few adults with their backgrounds who chose those paths.

Growing up in a tough section of New Orleans' Uptown neighborhood, he witnessed that disconnect firsthand. While Mr. Delatte's parents encouraged him to go to college, which eventually led to graduate school, many of his childhood classmates received no such counsel, he recalled.

"Being a mentor, you can open up all kinds of doors to them," Mr. Delatte said. "They see that people just like them can be scientists. It's more a question of willpower, rather than looking a certain way or talking a certain way."

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