

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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## Happily ever after school

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A CHILD'S calendar has many long hours out of school. Afternoons, weekends, and summers offer some children rich experiences and adventures. But for other children these hours are wastelands of idleness, junk television, and opportunities to get into trouble.

Fortunately, two state legislators want to colonize the empty hours by connecting Massachusetts children with compelling things to do outside of school.

"It's about how we help children develop into positive human beings," said Representative Marie St. Fleur, a Dorchester Democrat, who hosted statewide hearings on after-school time with Senator Thomas McGee, a Democrat from Lynn, who said they heard "kids begging for supervision," for safe places to go, and adult attention.

McGee and St. Fleur are wisely calling for some kind of statewide system to link children up to innovative programs. While school days would stay focused on English, math, science, and history, nonschool time could buzz with moot courts, horse training or gourmet cooking. A first-class system would bring together a wide range of options in a variety of settings that expose students to a larger world. Such programs could be life-shaping.

There's also evidence that these programs promote academic success. Citizen Schools, which runs after-school programs in 18 Massachusetts schools, found that graduates of its eighth grade academy - a high school and college preparation program for after-school participants - outperformed their public school peers on the 10th grade MCAS exam and were more likely to graduate from high school on time and attend college.

This week, McGee and St. Fleur called on the state to set up a council that would raise public awareness and political will, as well as coordinating existing programs and identifying unmet needs.

Other states already have acted. In 2002, California voters approved annual spending on after-school programs of \$550 million, up from \$121 million. The program focuses on literacy, academic enrichment, and safe settings for students.

Massachusetts has many costly initiatives in the pipeline, from universal pre-school to healthcare reform. At this stage, the state doesn't need a California-size investment; matching up needy youngsters with existing programs, and forming more partnerships with nonprofit and business groups, can be relatively low-cost and effective.

Such a community effort should focus on funding high-quality programs and developing what Eric Schwarz, president of the group Citizen Schools, calls a "second shift of talented educators." All of the state's children should have the opportunity to invest their unclaimed time in developing their talents. ■