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Guest Opinion: After-school programs will pay big dividends

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The school day is no longer sufficient to teach our youth the skills they need to be engaged and successful. Arizona still ranks 45th in the nation for the rate of high school dropouts and 47th for teen births. We need to broaden our view of achievement and offer our children and youth the enriching after-school experiences that will help them become successful lifelong learners. Many schools have been forced to narrow their focus due to pressure to measure and achieve higher test scores. Often missing from the 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day are the experiences that inspire, broaden perspectives, encourage collaboration and demand critical thinking — necessary skills for the 21st century. Quality after-school programs can help fill this void.

Recently, the Star published an article about Skrappy's, the Downtown youth center that must find a new home to continue serving the 14,000 youths who participate in its programs and services each year. That's nearly 30 percent of Pima County's youth population taking part in literacy and GED classes, art classes, support groups and other youth-directed activities, all in a safe place supervised by committed adults.

At Skrappy's, teens spend their time out of school working on community projects and learning to work in partnership, solve problems and affect change.

Myriad studies have concluded that, even by conservative estimates, afterschool programs save taxpayer money. Juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and school dropouts occur when youth feel hopeless and unconnected. Studies have shown that:

- Every dollar invested in after-school programs saves taxpayers approximately three dollars.
- Quality after-school programs reduce future welfare, crime and education costs by \$80,000 to \$120,000 per participant.
- Preventing one adolescent from a life of crime saves society between \$1.5 million and \$1.8 million.

High-quality after-school programs address costly high-risk behaviors by keeping youth engaged during the hours they are most likely to get into trouble and providing them the opportunity to be involved in activities that build skills and support academic, social and emotional development.

After-school programs also provide young people access to caring adult mentors who offer crucial support — from homework help, to advice navigating the pressures of school and home, to simply being present for a chat. As a result, children and youths who regularly attend quality after-school programs have better grades and school conduct, are more likely to graduate and have lower incidences of drug-use, violence and pregnancy. Skrappy's is just one program that turns time out of school into an engaging and enriching growth opportunity for youth. Tucson's 162,000 children between the ages of 5 and 17 need more opportunities for productive use of their non-school time. The Arizona Center for After-school Excellence and the United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona's Youth Development Coalition extend an invitation to our civic leaders, community organizations, educators, businesses, parents and youth to join us in conversation that will lead to creating a continuum of education beyond the bell.