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PASA: An alliance that works

By **William Hamilton**
PBN Staff Writer

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The Providence After School Alliance, an innovative citywide program that offers after-school activities for middle school students ranging from martial arts to sailing to cooking, has been attracting lots of national attention lately.

The nonprofit alliance, also known as PASA, has hosted a camera crew from Edutopia, an education foundation founded by Star Wars creator George Lucas, and has recently garnered a three-year, \$500,000 grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, one of only two communities to be selected nationwide.

Hillary Salmons, PASA's executive director, also has been fielding a growing number of calls from cities and towns across the country looking to replicate PASA's success in brokering cooperation among



PBN PHOTO / STEPHANIE EWENS

PASA'S JESSIE KERR-VANDERSLICE – center, wearing red – shows off the after-school program at Delsesto Middle School to Albany, N.Y., city employees.

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often-territorial city and school officials and community organizations. Salmons and other PASA officials have been invited to cities as such as New Orleans and Cleveland to spread the word.

Last week, a contingent from Albany – New York’s capital city of about 94,000 people – visited Providence to tour the program. The group included Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings, the city’s police chief and the superintendent of schools.



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“Not many communities have figured out how to address the needs of the middle school student after school,” Salmons said in explaining the widespread attention. “This is a voluntarily program, and these kids tend to be more independent. They’re hard to pin down.”

So far, PASA has been pretty good at pinning a large number of them down.

Of the approximately 5,200 middle school students in Providence, almost 1,000 signed up for various PASA programs in the fall session at three different “Afterzones,” middle schools in different sections of the city that serve as rallying points for PASA programs. Another 1,200 have joined for the spring session.

And PASA officials are quick to point out that they are not “warehousing” students and giving busy work until they go home.

The list of activity offerings is long and includes guitar lessons, gymnastics and something called “Pets & Vets,” where students visit Roger Williams Park Zoo for tips from a veterinarian or zookeeper on keeping animals healthy.

PASA says the key to its success is the cooperation and coordination among the School Department, various city agencies including the Police Department and community groups that provide many of the activities.

Before, there were many community programs targeting middle school students, but they were “fragmented and like a patchwork quilt,” Salmons said. Under PASA, they’re working more closely together.

The Recreation Department, for example, provides buses and vans to transport students on field trips and other services; school administrators

provide the Afterzones; and groups such as the U.S. Tennis Association and Save The Bay provide programs like tennis lessons and exploration trips on Narragansett Bay.

"You can't impose this model on people," Salmons told the Albany contingent last week. "They have to buy into it."

The next order of business for PASA: Salmons said the nonprofit will soon attempt to align activities so they coordinate with classroom lessons. "That's on the horizon," she said.

Why all the concern about what middle school students are doing after school?

Many educators say having structured activities for teens and preteens after the normal school day is critical in keeping them out of trouble and preventing them from falling through the cracks in the educational system.

Without after-school activities, many students go home where they are supervised by older siblings or by nobody at all.

Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline told the group from Albany that programs such as PASA are here to stay, as fewer families can afford to have a parent home at school dismissal in the afternoon.

Although Cicilline said he sought this type of community-based, after-school program after he took office in 2003, the PASA program got the boost it needed when it won a five-year, \$5 million grant from the Wallace Foundation in 2004.

Since then, PASA – with an annual \$2 million budget – has received donations and grants, including \$1.2 million from Bank of America and \$200,000 annually from the city itself.

Last week, Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings said the group came to Providence looking for solutions to a problem facing many communities nationwide.

"I think we have to be concerned about the kids we are losing in the urban centers," Jennings told Providence Business News, noting poor graduation rates in cities across the country. "Where are we going wrong here? [PASA] was right in looking at the middle school years – those are critical. They need as much engagement as they can possibly get."

Albany Assistant Police Chief Brendon J. Cox said he has already experienced "push-back" when police administrators have asked officers to participate in such community efforts.

"You ask them to give it a chance," responded Patrick Duhon, PASA deputy director. "And be willing to have an ongoing conversation with them."

Salmons acknowledged that her organization faced challenges in getting PASA off the ground, including some resistance from community groups that were being asked to provide programming. Some were concerned that PASA might drain grant money away from them.

"They were fearful that we were going to bureaucratize their high-quality work," she said. "But they realized we weren't trying to change them, we wanted to maximize them."

"We say we're supplementing, not supplanting," she added.

Kimberly Wilkins, a principal at Myers Middle School in Albany and part of the visiting group, said she was impressed with the citywide cooperation and with the number of community groups involved with PASA.

She said her school has an after-school program that is "teacher-driven," but such programs aren't at every school. "It would be really nice to have things brought in by the community," she said. •

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