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OPINION

An outside perspective: PASA a national bright spot

Guest Column:
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In late March, I had the pleasure of spending a day in Providence as a guest of Mayor David N. Cicilline. I came with a specific purpose: to discover more about Providence's successful system of after-school programming, coordinated by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA), an ambitious public-private venture launched by Mayor Cicilline in June 2004 with the task of developing a comprehensive citywide system to deliver high-quality, after-school learning opportunities to Providence's children and youth.

As PASA has developed its capabilities over the past five years, Mayor Cicilline and the city of Providence have gained national reputations as experts and advocates for all-day learning. So, wishing to enhance our already extensive network of after-school offerings for the children and youth of Albany, I thought it would be prudent to visit Providence to validate our efforts, accompanied by City School District of Albany Superintendent Dr. Eva C. Joseph, Police Chief James Tuffey and others from my administration.

Some may ask why providing all-day learning opportunities should be a priority, especially at a time when municipal resources are scarce. As every mayor knows, the hours between the end of the school day and the end of the work day are the peak hours for juvenile crimes and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, gangs and sex. Keeping youth and the community safe have always been primary tenets of my administration, and the offering of well-structured and meaningful after-school programs can significantly contribute to the healthy development of our youth.

In addition to increasing public safety, all mayors, especially urban - city mayors, are concerned with raising the quality of public education, developing the most talented work force possible and giving citizens the best return on their tax investment. On my trip to Providence, I learned that PASA achieves all these objectives through one system by:

- Providing youth relevant hands-on learning.

- Developing career-related skills.
- Enabling parents to focus on work, knowing their children are safe.

Taxpayers should be relieved to know that Providence has leveraged public and private dollars from both national and local sources to operate its model, even in this tough economic climate.

The team from Albany was impressed at the collaborative focus on achieving measurable results for youth that has brought public and nonprofit parties together. Mayor Cicilline has called together the school superintendent, the chief of police, other city officials, after-school providers, youth, parents, business, community and nonprofit leaders, and private funders and asked them to collaborate on a plan to deliver quality, out-of-school learning opportunities to all city youth, beginning with the city's middle school population. Under my "Kid by Kid" initiative, the city of Albany is poised to engage service providers in a similar partnership that will result in a collaboration that meets our local needs.

Mayor Cicilline and I share the core belief that youth who participate in all-day learning activities (after school hours) on a consistent basis benefit socially, emotionally and academically. We believe that if we give young people access to a wide variety of enriching activities and the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with peers and adults, they are more likely to attend school, receive good grades, have a positive self-image and avoid harmful behaviors.

In short, an investment in quality all-day learning is an investment in the citizens of the future. What is occurring in Providence is also happening in Albany. Our array of after-school opportunities is both rich and diverse and our collaborative efforts will continue to grow.

I wish to publicly thank Mayor Cicilline, Executive Director of PASA Hillary Salmons and all the dedicated staff, program providers and representatives from the city of Providence with whom I had the privilege of meeting in your great city that March day. This kind of innovative programming is making a positive difference for our children and our communities. PASA is a model program not only for Providence but also for cities throughout America. •

Gerald D. Jennings is the mayor of Albany, N.Y.