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# Providence After School Alliance going to the high schools

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By **Linda Borg**

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Imagine a place where high school students could converge to find out where to take art classes, get a summer job or go for health screenings. Then imagine a Web site where teenagers could find out about the latest poetry slam, hip-hop concert or art offerings at AS220.

Five years ago, at the urging of Mayor David N. Cicilline, the Providence After School Alliance — known as PASA — created a network of after-school activities for middle school students, half of whom had nowhere to go between the time school let out and the time their parents came home from work.

On Monday, Rep. Patrick Kennedy and Sen. Jack Reed joined Cicilline and dozens of youth groups to announce the launch of a high school version of PASA's nationally recognized middle school program.

Five years ago, Cicilline decided that the city's middle school students needed a coordinated network of activities to engage students during the long and sometimes hazardous hours that follow the end of the school day. The Providence After School Alliance was the result of that effort. Rather than duplicate existing programs, PASA created a network of activities around neighborhood hubs — a middle school or a YMCA — and then provided free transportation within the neighborhoods.

Today, 1,800 middle school students take juggling or learn to sail after school. Initially, the alliance focused on middle school children because that age group had the fewest after-school activities and the greatest need. About 50 percent of middle school students are alone when they get home.

Cicilline always dreamed of extending the program to the city's 7,000 high school students, half of whom have never participated in any after-school activity.

"Our kids spend a lot more time out of school than in school," Cicilline said yesterday. "We need to recognize that."

“We’re graduating 400 middle school kids a year,” said PASA’s executive director, Hillary Salmons. “The question kids ask is, ‘What’s next? How do we go deeper?’ ”

The high school version of the After School Zones is called the Providence Hub and it will exist in real time and in cyberspace in the form of a Web site. Hub.com will bring together all of the resources available to teenagers, from after-school arts programs at New Urban Arts to summer internships to HIV screenings. The site will also be interactive, allowing students to share their interests and even post comments about existing programs.

Because most teenagers have to hoof it to after-school activities, the program will also provide bicycles planted at various locations around the city in addition to a local trolley that would drop teens off at places such as AS220 and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Students will also be able to access information at automated kiosks scattered around Kennedy Plaza.

What is unique about this effort is that high school students helped create it. Last year, PASA tapped teenagers from 10 youth organizations and invited them to brainstorm what an effective after-school program would look like. Those students interviewed 1,300 young people, asking them what they wanted and what services were missing.

“Right now,” Michelle Duso, a consultant who helped design the high school plan, said, “kids need to go to three different places to find out information about summer jobs, internships and financial aid. It’s very fragmented. The Hub will be the central place that collects all of this information.”

Duso gave the following example. AS220 is a place where students can create art and make music, but it is not equipped to help students who are having academic problems or substance-abuse issues. The Hub would be able to answer those questions, taking a burden off nonprofit groups that have a more defined mission.

“This will be a central conduit for a system of extended-day learning programs,” said Paul Sproll, who runs the Department of Teaching and Learning at RISD. “Teens live in several different worlds. Being connected to the Hub gives all of us access to the world of teens.”

The hope, he said, is that the Hub will allow youth and arts organizations to reach many more high school students.

The PASA program hopes to raise \$500,000 in start-up funds. So far, it has received \$150,000 from the City of Providence and Bank of America.

[lborg@projo.com](mailto:lborg@projo.com)