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Mayors say schools should play an expanded role

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PROVIDENCE — Students spend only five or six hours a day in school, so how do communities keep children safe and engaged during the remainder of the day?

“Forty-seven percent of student achievement is determined by factors outside of the classroom,” said Dishon Mills, who coordinates the afterschool programs for the Boston public schools. “Afterschool programs are how we close the achievement gap.”

Mills said Boston saw improvements in attendance rates, test scores and behavior after the city implemented its first afterschool program 10 years ago. On Monday, leaders from Boston, Providence and Chicago discussed how they have created successful after-school programs in their cities. The forum was a final-day program of the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, in the Rhode Island Convention Center.

Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino said that the first thing he did was take the keys from school custodians — who essentially had the say on what times schools would be sealed up for the day — and give them to the principals. Now, principals, not custodians, decide what activities occur after school. In Boston, the afterschool program is run by the School Department in collaboration with a nonprofit organization.

“You can’t expect schools to do all of the work,” Menino told his colleagues. “We need to make learning fun and connect what kids are learning in school with what they are doing after school.”

Boston set up “peace councils” in the most crime-plagued neighborhoods to get families talking about the issues in their communities. The city also knocked on

nearly every door in a 10-block radius of a given school to find out what services parents wanted and why.

“Now that we are doing something positive,” Menino said, “crime in those neighborhoods has been reduced.”

The Providence afterschool program, run by the nonprofit Providence After School Alliance, began in 2004 with a \$5-million grant from the Wallace Foundation and now reaches about 2,200 middle school children. Instead of duplicating existing services, the Alliance created neighborhood hubs, called After Zones, that coordinate existing programs at libraries, Boys & Girls Clubs, recreation centers and arts organizations.

One of the biggest challenges is persuading nonprofit groups that typically compete for funding to work together for a common goal. Both Providence and Chicago created neutral third parties to get schools and nonprofit agencies to collaborate.

In Chicago, After School Matters helps high school students learn work skills and finds them jobs. The largest program of its kind for teenagers, After School Matters pairs professionals from business, sports, journalism and the art world with student apprentices, who are paid a stipend for their work.

School and city leaders said that it is important to train nonprofit groups on how to create high-quality programs and then analyze the data to see if the programs work.

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