A brighter future for Charlotte youth

My staff and I continue to work with key partners in the community to determine the best path forward in supporting out of school time (OST) programs in Charlotte. Since our summit this spring, we have been working with OST expert Greg Schermbeck, of Schermbeck Consulting, to examine our OST data, identify best practices in other cities, and to locate a partner in the Charlotte non-profit community to serve as a home for our future OST initiatives.

Our goal is to help this partner secure the public and private funds necessary to create an intermediary for parents to find the best programs in their neighborhoods, expand access to affordable programs, and ensure the quality of local middle school OST programs.

Of the 20 largest cities in the country, Charlotte is the only city

without an organization dedicated to coordinating out of school time for middle and high schoolers. Constructive learning environments after school are critical because students spend 75 percent of their time outside of the traditional school day. More than 15 percent of Charlotte youth are unsupervised for 3 or more hours after school and studies show that communities save at least $3 for every $1 invested in quality OST.

OST programs are important not just to increase high school graduation rates and keep our kids at grade level, they are critical for public safety as well. According to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police, the hours between 3pm and 6pm on weekdays experience some of our highest crime rates. Too many of our young people with working parents are left unsupervised, often engaging in activity that crosses the line between mischievous and illegal. Many, if not all, of these variables have a clear impact on economic mobility for our Charlotte youth.

Cities such as Dallas, Greenville, Nashville, and many others have experienced similar academic and public safety challenges with their youth and responded by supporting programs that provide productive OST environments. Not coincidentally, these other cities rank higher in economic mobility than Charlotte. We have learned from these other cities that Charlotte does not need to re-invent the wheel when it comes to OST--we can learn from what they have done and incorporate their best practices.

One of the key lessons learned from looking at other cities is that we must start small in Charlotte, achieve specific goals, and build on those successes.

"Dallas started its program in 2007 with just three volunteers and a very small budget," says Greg Schermbeck. "Currently, Dallas

time employees that serve K-12 programs across 130 sites throughout Dallas."

We have also learned that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to

OST challenges. While some programs focus on academics, others focus on enrichment such as arts, music and even entrepreneurship. One promising program helps kids to create art, furniture and other consumable products and to sell them in a donated storefront. The store is run by youth and proceeds are reinvested in the program to help make it sustainable. A primary challenge we face is to ensure that we have a broad range of programs available to accommodate the needs and interest of all our students.

I am encouraged by the positive reaction of the community to improving OST and I am dedicated to making real and lasting progress. By December 1, we will have identified a community partner to carry out this important work. We will also have identified sources of revenue for local middle school OST programs and a collaborative structure for moving ahead. Together, we can spread opportunity to every corner of our city.

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