

COMMENTARY

After school mountaineering

Imagine listening to the soothing see-saw baritone of "Prairie Home Companion's" Garrison Keillor closing another show with ... "And that's the news from Fairfield, where the children are joyful, strong, healthy, creative and productive and the families are above average."



Kevin Ryan

I imagined that cozy fantasy while attending the July 11 city council study session on after school programs where city council members, staff and engaged citizens proposed to weave a protective

cloak for Fairfield's greatest asset, its youth.

Reminiscences of a gentle past can forge dreams and goals for a promising future. That future is our youth and the goal is wellness; physical and social, intellectual, environmental and spiritual. A community's commitment to the development of its youth is an indisputable barometer of its sanity, safety, civility and sustenance.

Crime is a multi-headed Hydra. Slaying the monster takes weapons and wisdom. Intense enforcement, arrests, litigation and incarceration are crucial but are not effective alone. Relentlessly getting the bad guys and sending a zero-tolerance message to criminals is vital. Making the sustainable sea change to a safe and healthy community also takes building a better boat, a better Fairfield.

The notion that children are raised by villages is quaint, romantic and has some merit. However, we all can agree that ill-educated, unproductive, non-creative, and poorly-trained and non-engaged youths will most certainly raze the village.

Here are just a few gee-whiz highlights from the Departments of Labor and Education, multiple foundations and alliances, the U.S. Census and over 45 major carefully done studies:

Mid- to late-afternoon hours are prime moments with bad outcomes stemming from teens messing with drugs, smoking, alcohol, sex and crime at rates three times those for teens who are in after-school programs.

Some argue that massive coordinated community commitment to after school programs is not justifiable. But consider this data: A youth wasted in crime costs about \$1.5 million. Evidence suggests a three-to-one return just from saving the costs of remedial education, grade repetition and enforcement, litigation and incarceration.

Some economic realities will not change. Three quarters of mothers are employed and work weeks have increased 7.9 percent since 1960. The gap between the school day ending and the work day ending is 25 hours per week.

D-Day worked due to focused funding, intense coordination and communication and a clear command and control structure after engaging everyone's input.

The city is planning a summit on after-school programs. Climbing that mountain requires we all grab a piton and belay together.

There is grant money out there and coordinated, comprehensive program applications with total community buy-in win the awards. Call council members, talk to John DeLorenzo, Director of Community Services at 428-7465.

Read what works on the Internet and show up at the summit to forge a crucial part of our future — our children.

If we make the climb together, perhaps "Prairie Home Companion" will open one day with Mr. Keillor saying, "Well, it was a quiet week in Fairfield ..."

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