



The Opportunity

For young people, creating spaces that provide them with the opportunities to express themselves, have a sense of belonging, build their self-confidence, and empower them to lead is incredibly important. As recent studies describe the rise in young people across the country experiencing anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress, afterschool programs are a valuable resource to provide a safe space where young people can build connections to caring staff, develop new friendships, feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas, and gain self-awareness and assurance. This is everything that Kids Rank is trying to be for their young people.

The Opportunity

The goal of the Kids Rank afterschool program is to lift up youth voices, be a safe space, and empower young people to be leaders in their communities. A unique aspect of Kids Rank is that they provide programming for military-connected children, having served more than 900 young people over the 10+ years they have been in operation.

A typical day in the Kids Rank afterschool program involves fun, academic enrichment, collaboration and open communication, and of course food. Kids Rank students walk into the program as soon as school ends and have a snack to give their minds a fuel break. Then students talk about the word of the week and take part in activities based on that word. For example, students were asked to define “perseverance” in their own words and apply the word to better understand themselves and the world around them. The activity is also used to create a space for young people to be themselves, speaking openly and honestly and their experiences, while also actively listening to the stories being told by others in an accepting and supportive manner.

Kids Rank has many components that creates a space for young people to be themselves, from their activities to the staff support. For example, Kids Rank has an activity, “We Are Resilience: Masks of Hope.” Masks of Hope is a partnership between Kids Rank and the National Veterans Art Museum that allows students in the program to show that they are resilient military children. Through the masks, students are able to think about what their story is, express themselves, and have a physical representation that tells their story.



YOUTH SPOTLIGHT

Avery Reisinger

Kids Rank

Puyallup, Washington

“From my personal experience with Kids Rank, the after-school program really made me feel safe and come out of my shell. I was nervous at first because I had no friends going into the program. But, there were other kids who were also new, and we all quickly became friends. It was a fun place that was not like school, with hands-on and engaging activities. I took a lot away from the program about myself and others. I learned how to be a better person to myself and to others. Kids Rank was an outlet where I could talk freely about when I was having a good day or when I was struggling. It was a place where I learned to be a leader, where it felt like home, and where I was surrounded by family.”

Outcomes:

Kids Rank’s 2021-2022 report documents that most students surveyed say there are adults (94%) and kids (94%) in the program that they can trust, by being in the program they feel more connected to their community (93%), and that when they have a problem, they can talk about it with members of Kids Rank (82%). All students in the program said that it was very important for them to be a member of Kids Rank and that being a member of the program makes them feel good.

The Challenge:

Despite more than 8 in 10 voters supporting federal, state, and local leaders providing more funding for afterschool programs, and that more than 3 in 4 voters say that local governments and schools should invest some of their COVID-relief funds toward afterschool and summer learning programs, there are too many young people missing out. Nearly 25 million children are not in an afterschool program, but want to be. It’s evident that greater investment in afterschool and summer programs is needed to make sure that all young people have the same opportunities like the young people in Kids Rank.

Recommendations for afterschool programs to be a space where young people can be themselves:

- ▶ Continue questioning how to better support military-connected kids who are struggling with issues that affect their mental health and wellness.
- ▶ Set up more formal feedback loops for students to provide input into programming.