



NEWS RELEASE
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Dallas Afterschool Program Wins National Award for Outstanding Programming for Middle School Students

Big Thought Thriving Minds After-School Program Recognized for Supporting Students with Disabilities and Other Special Needs

The Afterschool Alliance today honored Big Thought's Thriving Minds After-School program at Thomas C. Marsh Middle School in Dallas with the 2014 MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award. The award, sponsored by MetLife Foundation, recognizes the program's success in supporting and benefiting middle school students with disabilities and other special needs. The award was presented at the "Breakfast of Champions," a gala event in Washington, D.C. featuring Members of Congress and national Afterschool Alliance champions.

Big Thought's Thriving Minds After-School program was one of only five afterschool programs in the country recognized for using innovative approaches to help middle school students succeed in the programs, school and life. The Afterschool Innovator Award includes \$10,000 for the program to expand its work. Dolores Raivzee-Bell, Regional Manager in the Programs Department and Kristina Dove, Lead Community Site Manager for Big Thought's Thriving Minds accepted the award on behalf of the program.

"The middle school years are critical years for a child's development," said Dennis White, president and CEO of MetLife Foundation. "Afterschool programs can play a central role in helping middle school students develop confidence and life skills that will help them succeed. We are honored to join the Afterschool Alliance in recognizing Big Thought's Thriving Minds for its outstanding work keeping middle school children safe and supported after school."

Big Thought's Thriving Minds After School program's Explorer Reading Club at Thomas C. Marsh Middle School focuses on creating an environment where students with special needs can benefit from the supportive environment and the opportunity for social interaction with their peers. The program uses literature to improve students' reading and comprehension, and develop their critical thinking and analysis skills. Students select their own books and set their own schedules for finishing the books. Students of all abilities work together and learn to present their thoughts and observations about the books through respectful discussions and constructive feedback. An independent evaluation of the program showed that more than nine in ten Explorer Reading Club students were promoted to the next grade.

"Our Explorer Reading Club is inclusive and student-driven, both of which are crucial to its success," said Raivzee-Bell. "Allowing students to pick their books and read at their own pace provides them with a sense of independence and responsibility. Having all the students share

their thoughts about characters, plot devices and literary elements helps them not only with critical thinking but ensures that the students learn to interact and collaborate – which are also important skills. We are honored to be recognized for this unique and important program by MetLife Foundation and the Afterschool Alliance.”

Big Thought’s Thriving Minds is featured in an [Issue Brief](#) on the Afterschool Alliance’s website on how afterschool programs benefit middle school students. The Afterschool Alliance’s Issue Brief series examines the role of afterschool programs in addressing a variety of contemporary issues facing youth, schools and communities.

“Afterschool programs do so much for students – helping them discover new talents, develop new skills, and have new experiences – all in social environments that help those students feel safe and supported,” said Afterschool Alliance Executive Director Jodi Grant. “There is great potential in these programs to make an important and lasting difference in lives of middle school students who participate in them. We are pleased to work with MetLife Foundation to recognize and honor the programs that are excelling in this area.”

The “Breakfast of Champions” is part of the 13th annual *Afterschool for All Challenge*, sponsored by the Afterschool Alliance, which brings together hundreds of educators, parents, afterschool leaders and advocates from around the country for a series of events and meetings with Members of Congress. After the Breakfast, attendees headed to Capitol Hill for meetings with their senators and representatives to discuss the ways afterschool programs benefit children, families and communities.

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The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at www.afterschoolalliance.org.