

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



Helping students know their rights and responsibilities

Civic engagement starts with our nation’s young people. The afterschool field is an essential partner in ensuring that all children have the ability to participate in relevant, experiential civic engagement opportunities. Involvement in civic engagement has been linked to both short and long-term positive outcomes, including improvements in academics, behavior, and connection to the community and a lower likelihood of arrest. As 3 in 4 superintendents agree that preparing students for engaged citizenship is a challenge for their district, afterschool and summer learning programs are critical partners in strengthening student civic engagement and helping them become informed, involved, and conscientious individuals.

Overview

Alternatives, Inc. is a youth development organization serving the Virginia Peninsula. It focuses on molding creative, compassionate, and responsible adults through innovative programs that promote positive youth development. K.I.C.K. (Kids Involved in Community Kindness) is a youth-focused civic engagement curriculum designed by Alternatives, Inc. and incorporated into their programming to empower young people to become socially competent and confident leaders.

A typical day for students

At Alternatives, Inc. sites, middle schoolers meet in their school cafeterias or libraries immediately after the dismissal bell. Students first eat a healthy supper or snack, then review their group’s “norms and agreements,” a collection of shared policies and practices students develop at the start of the year. Each day, students have time for homework and recreation; the latter provides students time to decompress through activities such as sports or socializing with their peers. Afterwards, students split into small “family” groups to focus on mindfulness. On Mondays and Wednesdays, students have additional opportunities for tutoring; on Tuesdays and Thursdays, students engage in enrichment activities that range from music to mask making. Once a month, students take field trips that have included college campus tours and teambuilding ropes courses.

Outcomes

Alternatives, Inc. use pre- and post-teacher surveys to track changes in students’ motivation to learn, classroom participation, and behavior. On average, teacher surveys record a 10-17 percent behavioral improvement in students participating in the program.

Alternatives, Inc.

Hampton, Va

65 per school

Average number of students served during the school year

66%–90%

Percentage of students qualifying for the Federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program in schools served by Alternatives, Inc.

Main funding sources:

- ▶ 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Program characteristics

During the first three weeks of the school year, program staff implement the Tribes Learning Community model—a curriculum created to promote a positive and caring environment where youth feel safe and included. As a part of this process, students collaborate to establish a set of group norms or agreements for acceptable behavior. As they identify different interpretations and definitions for community principles, students learn the value of social awareness, mutual respect, and peer appreciation. This practice of mindfulness enables youth to understand how to own their responsibilities at the individual, school, and community levels.

Through K.I.C.K., students take on a service-learning initiative to discover the extent to which they can effect change in their communities. Students learn how to identify a community need, determine the root causes of the issue, and create and implement a plan to address the problem. Throughout this process, program staff act as facilitators and stress the importance of student-driven decision making. Past K.I.C.K. projects have included feeding the homeless, implementing gang prevention efforts, and providing learning-aids for elementary students struggling to tie their shoes.

Students seeking additional civic engagement opportunities may become Youth Ambassadors for Alternatives, Inc. and learn how to advocate for education and discuss the value of quality afterschool programs with local policy makers.

Program history

Founded in 1973, Alternatives, Inc. has since created partnerships with a wide range of community organizations and government entities in order to bring high-quality afterschool programs to youth across the Virginia Peninsula. In 2012, they received funding from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative and brought their programming to Hunter B. Andrews PreK-8 School. Since then, Alternatives, Inc. has expanded their afterschool programs to four additional sites in Newport News.

Recommendations

for helping students know their rights and responsibilities:

- ▶ Give students the autonomy to design their own service-learning projects to provide youth the opportunity for authentic decision making and leadership development. Program staff should be supportive project facilitators, trusting students and providing them the space to think, speak, and act independently.
- ▶ Look to your students to help improve program quality. For example, encourage them to speak up about what they think about program activities or provide them opportunities to include their feedback in program evaluations.



Challenges

The U.S. faces a civic engagement predicament, particularly with the nation's young people.

A disengaged public. Between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of voters aged 18-29 years old fell well below voting rates of older age cohorts and volunteerism among 16-to-24-year-olds remains consistently below the national average.

Civics in schools is largely a second-tier subject. The No Child Left Behind Act ushered in a greater emphasis on reading and math, leaving less time for subjects like civics and social studies, despite poor student performance in these areas. A 2018 scan of civics education found that components of high-quality civics education, such as interactive and participatory opportunities for learning, were largely missing.

Civic engagement as an equity issue. Disparities in voting turnout, volunteerism, and circumstances hindering civic participation across income levels and race and ethnicity have been observed. For instance, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that students in classes with a high average socioeconomic status level were more likely to report learning how laws are made, participating in service activities, and taking part in debates or panel discussions.

Read [Promoting Civic Engagement Through Afterschool Programs](#) to learn more.



Afterschool Alliance

afterschoolalliance.org