

# Jenny Brietigam: After-school programs tighten achievement gap

By JENNY  
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Another election season has come and gone and along with it our memories of recent political debates are already fading.

Our recollection of an election 12 years ago is too far in the rear-view mirror for most to remember. On Nov. 5, 2002, Proposition 49 was among seven other propositions on the ballot. Its purpose was to increase funding for before- and after-school programs for elementary and middle schools. It was heavily backed by not-yet-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and passed with a 56% to 43% vote.

Next time you're driving past a school during late afternoon, take notice. You may see up to 200 students actively engaged in after-school learning, with often long lists of interested students and families waiting for a space in their school's free program. The California voters' decision to pass Proposition 49 "The After School Education and Safety Program Act of 2002" has undeniably made a positive impact on our students and the community.

By fall of 2006, \$550 million was allocated to run over 4,500 after school programs throughout the state. Fast forward to November 2014, and today, between 2-6 p.m., you're likely to see Proposition 49 funds hard at work at the majority of school campuses.

In the mid-late 90s, before Proposition 49, many after-school programs had the basic purpose of keeping kids occupied until Mom or Dad got off work. These programs frequently had short and sometimes inconsistent enrollment rosters, a bucket of crayons, glue sticks, maybe some board games and a basketball or two. More robust programs were sprinkled around but were often only accessible for those students whose parents could afford to pay for them. Other students were left to their own devices, and many spent after-school hours engaging in risky, sometimes criminal behaviors.

This year, more than 30,000 students are enrolled in after-school programs in Fresno County. Daily, students receive academic tutoring, homework assistance, nutritious snacks and participate in activities such as leadership classes, sports and physical fitness, cooking, science and engineering, photography, computer science, visual and performing arts, community service and more.

In short, after-school programs give students who may be struggling academically or who have become disenchanted with school an opportunity to experience learning in a new way. Data shows that students who participate in quality after-school programs show increased interest and ability in reading; develop new skills and interests; show improved school attendance and reduced dropout rate; and show higher aspirations for the future, including intention to complete high school and go to college.

Over the past 12 years, the after-school field has evolved to become a major contributor in addressing educational and social needs of students. During the last decade, extensive thought and manpower has been dedicated to developing standards of quality within the field. The California Department of Education established an After-School Division for accountability of after-school funds.

Annually, thousands of professional development opportunities and staff trainings roll out across the state for after school practitioners. Staff who work in the field must pass the rigorous para-educator exam or have at least 48 units of college credit, and each program must maintain a 1:20 staff to student ratio, or less.

Since the passage of Proposition 49, the hours after the dismissal bell rings are now spent expanding and deepening learning opportunities for students. The field has collectively adopted and set forth five principles, rooted in research,

to serve as indicators of quality programs. As Randy Mehrten, senior director of Fresno County Office of Education's Safe and Healthy Kids Department, explained, "the all too familiar 'Achievement Gap' in American education today is well documented and data quantified. However the Fresno County Office of Education and those of us in the after-school field see educational disparity as more of an 'opportunity gap.'"

Our local research shows that the most marginalized young people in our community are making vast strides in closing this gap when given the same learning opportunities that middle- and higher-income children take for granted. After-school programs are opportunities for our children that are creating educational parity among our kids.

Jenny Brietigam is a Project Specialist in the Department of Safe and Healthy Kids, at the Fresno County Office of Education. The Safe and Healthy Kids Department, under the direction of Senior Director, Randy Mehrten and Director, Helena Silva oversee 143 after school programs sites throughout Fresno County, ensuring program quality and state and federal compliance. For more information visit: [www.fresnocountyafterschool.org](http://www.fresnocountyafterschool.org)

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