

## Youth-serving programs can be life-savers

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One of the best things I get to do as a Boston City Councillor is meet with young people from my district, whether at their schools, in their after-school programs, or during their group visits to City Hall. These visits allow me to talk with students and hear firsthand about the power of youth-serving programs. I often explain to the students that but for great mentors and teachers, after-school sports and academic programs, and many caring adults, I would certainly not be where I am today.

Born and raised in Boston, my childhood was filled with instability. When I was 8 months old, my mother died suddenly in a car accident while going to visit my father in prison. I did not meet my father until I was 8 years old because he was incarcerated. My brothers and I bounced around between living with relatives and foster care. That I could count on school and my after-school activities to be consistent and supportive helped me stay focused and on track. Yet I recognize not all of my peers, including my brothers, were so blessed.

Both of my brothers cycled in and out of the criminal justice system during my young adulthood, and my twin brother, Andre, would eventually



pass away while in the custody of the Department of Correction as a pretrial detainee. He was only 29 years old. I often think about Andre, asking myself: how did and do two twins born and raised in the City of Boston end up with such different life outcomes?

In trying to answer this question, I point to the discrepancy in support and opportunity he and I received in and after school.

Though Andre and I both attended all Boston Public Schools, I was usually assigned to better-performing schools and schools that offered incredible job



opportunities, after-school programs, and mentorship, the benefits of which I still reap to this day. Andre, on the other hand, was vulnerable to school environments that lacked academic rigor, quality mentoring, or free after-school programming, and offered few job opportunities. Instead, he was often subjected to harsh discipline policies and little social-emotional support or wrap-around services to support what he faced at home and in the street.

Sadly, my story is not unique. According to the Mass Mentoring Partnership, 41 percent of students feel that they do not have anyone to talk to about challenges they face at home or in their community. Research has shown that without proper support structures in school, students are less likely to graduate and continue their education.

In the Commonwealth, 5,500 students did not complete the 2015-2016 school year. There is a clear need for greater social-emotional support in schools as a remedy to high dropout rates. Those who drop out of school are less likely to have a job, and if they do, they often earn less, do not have health insurance, and are more likely to be incarcerated. This pattern, often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, is a substantial contributing factor to the high incarceration rates in this country, especially among young people of color. For example, the Brookings Institution through a series of policy memos has found that the majority of criminal offenders are between the ages of 11 and 30. Furthermore, sixty percent of black male high-school dropouts will go to prison before the age of 35.

I have experienced the effects of incarceration firsthand, and a disproportionate amount of residents in my district, which is predominantly a district of color, experience these effects as well. However, I also know firsthand the transformative impacts mentoring and youth development programs have on the lives of young people, and I see the need for more such programming in my district.

That's why a consistent priority during my first term in office has been to increase funding for these programs. In March 2016, I held my first City Council hearing not only to explore the variety of youth development programs available to youth in the City of Boston, but also to examine the availability of funding for these programs. At the hearing, numerous young people testified that these types of programs kept them employed, healthy, and in many cases, saved their lives. Providers testified about the power of positive interventions and how innovative and effective youth programming can keep young people out of the criminal justice system and on real paths for success.

Programs like these always need our help! For example, I was sad to see an incredible youth

organization in Dorchester's Codman Square close its doors earlier this year due to lack of funding. As the Boston City Councillor for District 4, which largely includes Dorchester and Mattapan, I was able to get the City, for the first time ever, to establish a \$250,000 youth development program fund in the FY18 budget. This fund will provide a consistent and sustainable source of revenue for youth development programs in the City. My hope is that this fund will grow every year to eventually be in the millions. I will continue to support legislation and funding efforts that will improve the educational outcomes for my residents and those throughout the City and Commonwealth.

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