

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS:
GOOD FOR BUSINESS, GOOD FOR YOU

Speech Written By:

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Five days a week, at the end of every school day, fourteen million children in America leave the safety of their classrooms to care for themselves alone. That's equal to the population of Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico combined.

Imagine for a minute that you're one of these children.

When the school day ends, you've got no one to talk to. No loving parent to share your day with. Your house is empty and quiet. You have to get your own snacks, maybe even care for a younger brother or sister.

There's no one to play with, no one to answer your questions, no one to explain the world to you or open your eyes to new discoveries.

Life becomes joyless, even scary.

For many of these kids, the streets become the new home. The gangs become the new family. Risky behaviors become the new activities.

Children from any home are susceptible to careless behavior ... out of boredom or loneliness or just plain curiosity.

Fortunately, there's an alternative to this situation that can benefit both these kids and the companies you work for.

And that's what I'd like to talk about with you this afternoon. I want to show you why it's in your own best interests to support afterschool programs in the communities where you do business. I want to tell you what JCPenney is doing to live up to this challenge. Finally, I want to end with some easy steps you can take right now to get the ball rolling at your own company.

According to the U.S. census, nearly 1 out of 5 children between the ages of 5 and 14 regularly look after themselves for up to four hours a day.

Why should this be?

The answer lies in the changes that have taken place in the two great pillars of our country: the American home and the American workplace.

The American family has evolved dramatically over the last half century. In 1950, more than half of the families in this country had one parent as wage-earner and one parent as stay-at-home caregiver. Today only 1 out of 4 families fit that description.

And it's not just that both parents are working. It's also the number of hours we work. Americans now spend more time on the job than workers from any other industrialized country -- almost two thousand hours a year on average. Since 1983, we've added over one week of extra work to our lives annually.

Our reputation as overstressed, plugged-in, caffeine-driven, time-strapped, vacation-avoiding workaholics is well-deserved.

Unfortunately, adults aren't the only ones feeling the strain. The situation has created a youth generation increasingly left on its own, with fewer role models and greater danger.

It's no wonder that the juvenile crime rate reaches its peak during the hours of 3PM and 4PM.

It's not surprising that unsupervised youth are more likely to engage in reckless pursuits.

According to a national survey of 10th graders, students who had no access to afterschool activities were 75% more likely to use tobacco or drugs, 37% more likely to become teen parents and 50% more likely to be arrested.

Never in history have more children been so abandoned by a country that has so much.

Now -- contrast that with a place that inspires hope, that gives restless young minds a place to experiment safely, and you'll see the mission of a well-funded afterschool program.

Polls show that nine out of 10 Americans believe all children should have access to afterschool programs. Yet even with popular opinion running high, two-thirds say it's difficult to find programs locally.

This problem exists around the country. No area is immune. Parents feel the shortage in urban, suburban and rural areas alike.

That's where you and I as responsible citizens of the business community come in.

Which leads me into why it's essential for business to step up to the plate and put the full resources of their companies behind afterschool programs.

Now I know what some of you might be thinking: this isn't your problem. These aren't your kids. The solution lies with the parents or the government or the authorities. It simply doesn't affect you.

I understand that feeling.

But my meek, mild unassuming response to those objections can be summed up in the same word General McAuliffe gave to the Germans when he refused to surrender against overwhelming odds during the Battle of the Bulge: NUTS!

The fate of these children affects you dramatically. Not just you individually, but your community and your business, too. Let me give you four reasons why your support is essential.

Number one: Afterschool programs make your neighborhoods safer and more vibrant.

Communities with quality afterschool programs give youth a positive nurturing environment that develops their skills -- and minimizes aimless wandering and risky behavior. Giving kids a wholesome outlet, facilitated by local leaders, makes communities more closely-knit.

Number two: Afterschool programs prepare children to become productive members of the workforce.

At a time when American business must be more competitive and innovative than ever before, the key to success is educated, adaptable workers.

In addition to sharpening basic skills like math and reading, afterschool programs also teach valuable social skills. Children learn how to resolve conflicts without aggression, how to deal maturely with different people and different situations and how to be conscientious.

Number three: Afterschool programs contribute to lowering your taxes.

As we've already seen, children left alone for extended periods have higher rates of teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and juvenile crime.

A Harris poll reports that more than 50% of teachers singled out "children who are left on their own after school" as the primary explanation for students' difficulties in class.

As citizens, you and I pay for the social, medical and legal agencies addressing these problems.

A far more cost-effective way is nipping them in the bud. Afterschool programs provide that constructive solution. They create a safe harbor, build self-esteem and supply a wholesome learning structure.

Number four: Afterschool programs take the pressure off your own workers and reduce your labor costs.

As employers, it costs you time, money and productivity when your employees have to find ways to care for their children or, regrettably, deal with the consequences.

Afterschool programs occupy children emotionally, mentally and physically. They relieve the burden of anxious parents and, in turn, give you more efficient, focused workers.

So there you have it: four self-interested profitable reasons to get behind the afterschool movement.

And since I believe in giving more than I promise, here's a fifth reason: your customers will love you for it! Ninety percent of Americans believe afterschool programs should be made available in their neighborhood. You and your company can ride

the crest of the wave and enjoy a unique opportunity to reinforce ties with consumers.

Now that you understand what's at stake and the rewards to be gained, I want to switch gears and talk about this in practical terms.

In spite of the figures and pictures I threw at you today, I didn't come here to lecture you. That's not my intention. Instead I want to share with you what we at JCPenney have done to support the afterschool movement and to put our money where our mouth is.

In 1999, we created the JCPenney Afterschool Fund, a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that every child is safe and constructively engaged during afterschool hours.

Our goal is twofold.

First, we want to increase the number of quality afterschool programs across the country.

Second, and more importantly, we want to inspire you to begin your own efforts.

The JCPenney Afterschool Fund partners with providers of qualified afterschool programs, such as Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Junior Achievement and YMCA of the USA.

You can, too.

Since 2001, JCPenney and the JCPenney Afterschool Fund together have contributed over \$50 million to this cause. In 2006 alone, the Fund furnished more than 10,000 children with safe, vibrant afterschool alternatives.

You can, too. Let me illustrate.

Instead of being drawn into gang life, a child in Chicago can now join a program called After School Matters, spearheaded by the mayor's wife, Maggie Daley. High school kids are awarded paid internships at Chicago-area companies and gain valuable employment skills.

Instead of traveling down the road to teenage parenthood, a child in Boston now has access to Citizen Schools, a program that builds bridges between them and the corporate community.

Instead of falling behind their peers from more affluent neighborhoods, a child in Ohio can now participate in the Urban School Initiative School-Age Care Project. Fourth-graders in this program saw their proficiency standards jump in math, writing, reading, citizenship and science.

You may be wondering if these improvements are isolated examples.

Here's what we discovered:

Educators report seeing a 29% to 46% increase in mathematics skills and a 25% to 69% increase in reading and language arts, thanks to afterschool programs.

As businesspeople, you and I use a return on investment to measure success.

What's the ROI when you rescue a child from a dangerous, lonely existence and place that child in an exciting environment filled with caring adult mentors?

Where that child finds hope for the future? Where that child begins to believe in himself and the amazing possibilities the world offers?

You and I are trained to look at results.

These aren't fuzzy-headed pie-in-the-sky dreams. They're real accomplishments.

If you want stronger communities, smarter kids and brighter outcomes, then you must make afterschool programs part of your agenda.

And you have to start today.

It's a commitment we at JCPenney take seriously. And it's why we're asking you to join us.

Let me tell you about two strategic programs we launched to support this mission.

First, we created the Afterschool Round-Up Program.

Customers have the opportunity to round-up their JCPenney store purchases to the nearest dollar and donate the extra change to the Afterschool Fund.

Second, we also carry certain Afterschool-designated merchandise. All the net profits from these sales go directly to the Fund.

If you look at your own business, you can find ways to get started.

And if you need an incentive, here it is:

Getting your customers involved is good business, too. Here's what I mean.

Because of the Internet and other avenues of user-generated content, customers are looking for more ways to interact with the companies they do business with.

The Afterschool Round-Up Program and Afterschool-designated merchandise work toward these goals. They build customer loyalty. They put the power to participate in the customers' hands. And they forge stronger community ties among customers, families, businesses and schools.

To end, I'd like to suggest ways that you can take what we've done at JCPenney and make it work for you.

I've identified three simple steps you can put into practice right now. I'm convinced they will jumpstart your own efforts.

First: decide which types of afterschool programs you want to support. Just as the merchandise we sell comes in different colors and sizes, afterschool programs differ, too. One size doesn't fit all. For example, younger children might need a program that stresses safety and security. Older children prefer flexible programs with content relevant to their age group.

I encourage you to find programs that you're most interested in and put your weight behind them to begin with.

Second: Find an avenue that involves your customers in the effort, as we did with the Round-Up Program and the specially-designated merchandise. When you actively involve customers in your efforts, they're more likely to give stronger support for a longer time.

Third, and perhaps most importantly: Support programs in the areas where you do business. The goal of JCPenney is to provide every community with an afterschool program. As laudatory as this is, it has to be done one town at a time.

That's why I encourage you to promote efforts in your own backyard first -- in the places where your own customers live and work and shop. The rewards you reap in loyalty and immediate results will be nothing less than astonishing.

And the reflection on your own business, priceless.

I'm calling on each and every one of you to join with JCPenney in a historic effort to see to it that every community has a vital afterschool program.

That every five-year-old has a warm trusting place to turn to when the school bell rings at three o'clock.

That every youth will have faith in their personal future, pride in their accomplishments and confidence in their skills to move up.

I can't think of a return on investment to be more proud of, can you?

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