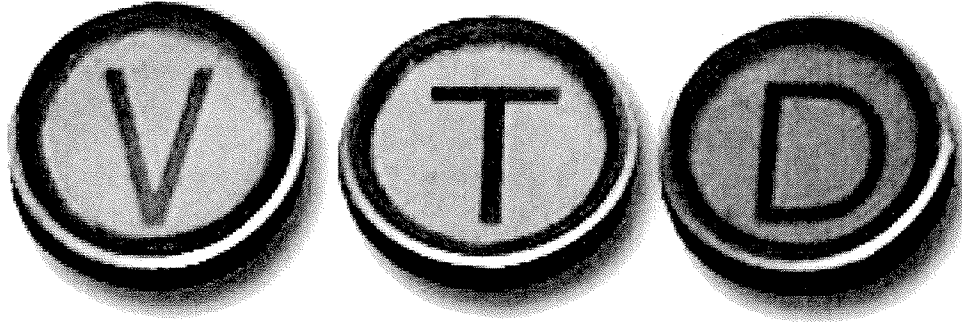


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10/20/15



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## STUDENTS, EDUCATORS ASK LAWMAKERS TO FILL AN EMPTY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM FUND

FEB. 19, 2016, 4:56 AM BY CORY DAWSON 5 COMMENTS



Hunt Middle School students came to the Statehouse as part of a push for state-funded after-school programs. Photo by Cory Dawson.

Scores of middle schoolers marched through the Statehouse wearing lightning bolt-embazoned capes Thursday, with a message for lawmakers: Fund our after-school programs.

The “Zap the Gap” event, a rally to bring awareness to the gap in opportunities between kids who can afford to go to an after-school program and those who can’t, is in its seventh year. This year is the first time the entire event has been held at the Statehouse.

The after-school period from 3 to 6 p.m. is a risky time, said Holly Morehouse, director of the nonprofit organization Vermont Afterschool. If they don’t stay after school, younger kids can sometimes end up at home alone while their parents are working and older kids are more likely to get into drugs, she said.

A fund that was meant to pump money into afterschool programs was added to Act 48 last year by Rep. Michael Mrowicki, D-Putney. The fund — the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund — hasn’t seen any contributions by either the state or private donors. Morehouse’s organization and others are asking lawmakers to add \$2.5 million to the fund this session.

“It’s very hard to get outside funding sources to come in if there’s no state funding,” Morehouse said. She said donors have told her they would give if they saw a similar commitment by the state.

“This is work that’s risen up from the grassroots,” Mrowicki said. “The idea is this should be public and private money. We need to convince the legislators that if we ‘prime the pump’ there will be more money that will be forthcoming.”

Mrowicki noted that perception among his colleagues in the Statehouse about the benefits of after-school programs have evolved quickly.

“Ten years ago when we were talking about some of the more experienced legislators had the question, ‘Why are all these kids being forced to stay after school, are they all being bad?’” he said. “In their day, that’s why kids stayed after school.”

A report from the Vermont Afterschool organization found that for every dollar Vermont invests in after-school programs, the state would get back \$2.18. Morehouse said that 22,000 Vermont kids would go to after-school programs if the programs could take them — on top of the 21,000 who already stay for the programs.

Over 40 fifth- through eighth-graders from around the state wrote essays about why their after-school programs matter to them. Those who wrote got the opportunity to come to the Statehouse for the rally, a tour and to talk to lawmakers about after-school programs, Morehouse said.

“We don’t have much in our town. We only have a dump, a town clerk’s office and our school,” said Faythe Rodger, an eighth-grader at Newark Street School in Burke. Rodger’s school has well under 100 kids.

“A lot of kids are younger and their parents work full time,” she said. “They have to have something.”

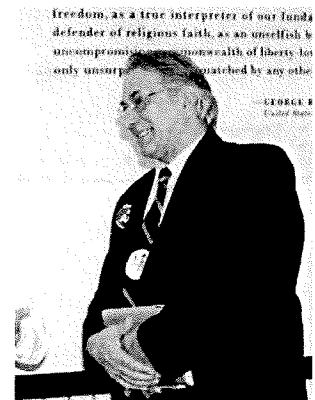
Rodger’s classmate Robin Keon, an eighth-grader, said after-school programs give kids exposure to skills they wouldn’t normally learn about during the school day.

“We have kids who want to be woodworkers, or singers, or chefs. It helps you test out what you hope to be when you’re older,” Keon said.

In the Caledonia North Supervisory Union in the Northeast Kingdom, the majority of children are living below the poverty line, said Diane Janukajtis, program director for the supervisory union.

“We give them a safe place where they can have a hot meal and do homework,” she said. Schools using her programs serve more than half of the children who attend.

Hunt Middle School students Luken Kuntz, an eighth-grader, and Jose Correa, a sixth-grader, said they would play computer games if they didn’t stay after school.



Rep. Michael Mrowicki, D-Putney.  
Photo by Cory Dawson/VTDigger

Janvier Ntakirutimana, an eighth-grader at the Burlington middle school, said without after-school programs, kids would simply waste time. Ntakirutimana wants to be an Olympian and dreams of breaking world records in running. He plays sports after school, but if his school didn't offer them, "I'd be getting out of shape," he said.

"Some people go home and just sit," Ntakirutimana said.

**Filed Under:** Education

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JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR / STAFF PHOTO

Wearing superhero capes, about 40 kids from around the state gathered at the State House in Montpelier on Thursday to advocate for funding after-school programs and summer learning. The "Zap the Gap Superhero Capes" expressed their hope that legislators will put \$2.5 million into the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund that was created last session but is currently empty. Many of the kids wrote essays which are compiled in a book that describes how valuable afterschool and summer programs have been to them.