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Programs can build on classroom lessons

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As public school districts continue to struggle to do more with less, many are seeking new, cost-effective ways to build students' math, technology, and science skills.

Innovative approaches, such as extended school day learning initiatives, have already started in some of the poorest districts throughout New Jersey. Traditional school-age child care programs in districts of all types and sizes can also play a vital role in sparking students' interest in and knowledge of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), without additional cost to the district or taxpayers.

The main purpose of child care providers is to offer safe and enriching environments for children who need supervision while their parents work, including for school-age children. In addition to providing recreational activities, nutritious snacks and some "down time," the hours before and after school are an ideal time to support and enhance what is taught in all subject areas during the school day, including STEM.

President Barack Obama's "Educate to Innovate" campaign is designed to help American students move to the top of the pack internationally in science and math, and quality child care programs have an opportunity to contribute. Quality after-school programs have already proven to build youth development skills for career success such as communication, problem solving, teamwork, self-regulation and initiative. Within the after-school program model, students have time for learning opportunities that the constraints of the classroom (time, class size) do not always allow. These hands-on experiences allow students to apply, explore, reinforce and extend skills and concepts learned in the classroom.

Forward-thinking after-school programs have expanded on these opportunities and include STEM skills as part of their curriculum by participating in projects such as The National Partnership for After School Science 2 (NPASS-2). The goal of NPASS-2 is to improve the quality and quantity of after school science through intensive professional development for after school staff.

Archway Programs' Just Kids is an enthusiastic participant in NPASS-2. Of the 15 instructors trained in NPASS-2 in New Jersey, two are from Just Kids and 26 of the program's child care professionals have been extensively trained in and implementing "inquiry based learning," which is utilized throughout all the curriculum, encouraging innovation and creative thinking. To date, Just Kids has engaged and inspired more than 340 students in 10 schools in Camden and Gloucester counties through hands-on science and engineering projects.

School-age child care programs have the time, opportunity and ability to be part of the solution along with schools in developing our children's interest, skills and excitement in STEM and do not require additional funding from school districts or taxpayers. Many, like Archway's Just Kids, are leading the way. Talk to your after-school provider about ways they can do the same.

The author is the director of Archway's Just Kids Program, a nonprofit before- and after-school child care provider that serves 33 schools in Camden, Gloucester and Salem counties.