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Spotlight On:
By the Hand Club for Kids

By: Kristina Lasker

After-school programs provide a safe space for students to go after their school day has ended. These programs provide a place where students can go to socialize with their peers, have access to positive role models, and have a greater chance for academic success. After-school programs have been shown to reduce problematic behaviors in children, the use of drugs and alcohol, and provide parents the opportunity and peace of mind to work longer while their children remain supervised.

Parents do their best to protect their children but unfortunately, many families, specifically families from low-income areas, “do not have the capacity to focus on their children’s daily lives, to monitor their well-being, to seek out external resources, and to provide important supports such as help with homework.” In the past decade, attention has turned to after-school programs targeting children in low-income areas. There are four factors behind the interest in targeting this demographic:

1) a belief that public spaces such as streets and play grounds are no longer safe for children’s out-of-school time, (2) a sense that it is stressful and unproductive for children to be left on their own after school, (3) a concern that many children need more time and individual attention than schools can provide to master basic academic skills, and (4) a conviction that low-income children deserve the same opportunity as their more advantaged peers to explore expressive arts, sports, and other developmentally enriching activities.

One of the most important benefits of after-school programs is ensuring students’ safety. A safe place where children can go after their school day has ended keeps students off of the streets and possibly out of an empty home. It has been found that nearly 19% of juvenile violent crimes, which include murder, violent sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault, occur between the hours of 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. on school days. Finding ways to reduce juvenile crime after school has the potential to decrease a community’s violent crime rate. A study done by the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that:

Regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs is linked to significant gains in standardized test scores and work habits as well as reductions in behavior problems among disadvantaged students. These gains help offset the negative impact of a lack of supervision after school.

This is where organizations such as By the Hand Club for Kids (“By the Hand”) become involved in students’ lives. By The Hand is a faith-based, nonprofit organization that serves children from four of Chicago’s most under-resourced, dangerous communities. The organization, founded by Donnita Travis in 2001, has locations in Cabrini-Green, Altgeld-Murray, Austin and Englewood. The 1,360 children and teenagers that currently attend By The Hand and Club For Big Kids have been handpicked by the team at By The Hand, who work closely with school

principals to identify the children who are most likely to drop out, whether it be by failing to meet reading standards or often facing significant hardships that require special attention to overcome.

Prior to 2000, Donnita Travis was the president of an advertising agency. It was on May 12, 1997 that Donnita says the vision for By the Hand was revealed to her by God. Over the next three years, she volunteered at The Moody Church to help minister to children living in the Cabrini-Green area. By March 2001, Donnita had resigned from her job at the advertising agency and had begun to use classrooms at Moody where she launched "By the Hand Club for Kids" with her first 16 students. A picture of the first 16 students can be found on the By the Hand website.

By September of 2001, By the Hand had opened a location of their own, due to the support of the Chicago Housing Authority ("CHA") at 419 West Oak Street, in the heart of Cabrini-Green, a neighborhood where many kids were in need of critical intervention. In only six months, By the Hand had expanded from 16 to 42 students. Donnita was determined, though, to reach 1,000 children by 2012, the number and year shown to her in the vision she saw four years prior. Because of this growth, the organization needed a larger space. Donnita went back to CHA and, for only \$100 per month, CHA gave her a 5-year lease for a 24,000-square-foot area building that had classrooms and a gym. It was during this time that Club for Big Kids, the organization's high school branch, was started in order to serve high school students. It was a combination of the larger space and Club for Big Kids that allowed By the Hand to continue to grow, and eventually serve 214 children in 2004. By 2005, CHA was referring to By the Hand as their "most effective social service agency" and requested that By the Hand open a second location in Altgeld-Murray, a neighborhood known for its open drug markets and frequent shootings. On March 7, 2005, By the Hand agreed to open a location if \$600,000 was raised in 60 days. By May 6, 2005, By the Hand announced that it would be opening its second location in Altgeld-Murray, beginning with 66 children.

The idea for the third By the Hand facility began in April 2007. With tremendous support from Chicago First Church of the Nazarene and a local general contractor, who understood Donnita's vision, the doors to the Austin facility opened on September 5, 2007. Austin is one of Chicago's most under-resourced neighborhoods and the 8,000-square-foot facility is located on one of the most dangerous corners, a location that Donnita states is "the perfect location for reaching kids from the neighborhood." With 132 kids at the Austin location, By the Hand was serving 500 children between its three facilities by the end of 2007. The fourth and final By the Hand location opened in September 2008 in Englewood, another one of the city's most under-resourced neighborhoods, serving 88 children.

The children who attend By the Hand go to their respective location Monday through Friday, during after-school hours. For district-based schools, By the Hand provides transportation from schools to the club and from the club to students' homes after the completion of the program for the evening. The organization is open year-round, including in the summer, at which time By the Hand provides summer programming, camps, and field trips for its participants. A typical day for a child at the By the Hand includes chapel, dinner, homework, read aloud, computer learning, enrichments and snacks. The children who attend By the Hand receive a full scholarship to attend the program. The cost for each student to attend is approximately \$6,300 per year. By The Hand has no endowment fund and the only money that is received from government funding makes up

5% of the budget, and subsidizes the healthy meals and snacks provided to the kids. The organization receives its funding primarily from individuals, churches, foundations and corporations.

From the moment a child or teenager has been chosen to attend By the Hand, the organization is committed to helping them in all facets of their life.

From the time they enroll in our program until they're walking independently as well-adjusted, responsible adults, our mission is to literally and figuratively take our kids by the hand and walk alongside them. We tutor them to academic excellence. We mentor them to make wise, life-defining decisions. And we care for them as our own, meeting their basic nutritional and healthcare needs.

By The Hand provides a safe learning environment and a loving staff to support these children during the after-school hours. The hours after school are the most dangerous time of day and the time when the most crimes are committed by and against youth. The best part about By the Hand's mission of "taking kids by the hand and walk[ing] with them through college, helping them have abundant life—mind, body and soul," is that it is seen in the results.

When By the Hand sees a common need among its students, the organization works to meet that need. For example, a primary cause of reading failure for beginning readers in public schools is due to problems with their vision. Up to 25% of all school age children have vision problems that are significant enough to impair their academic performance. Poor vision has been found to be related to academic and behavioral problems among at-risk children. By The Hand has tackled this issue by trying to make sure its students receive eye exams, and if necessary, glasses. In 2016-2017, 92% of students received an eye exam and 381 of them received a pair of eyeglasses.

Similarly, children with tooth pain are four times more likely to have a lower grade point average than children without dental pain. Roughly one out of every nine children have untreated decay which can lead to serious effects on school performance, sleeping, speaking, eating and overall poor health. For 2016-2017, 100% of By the Hand students received dental checkups and cleaning. For the 363 students that needed advanced care, they all were able to receive fillings or root canals.

Additionally, By the Hand also recognizes that a student is unable to meet their full intellectual capacity, learn, or interact with others if they lack nutritious food. Therefore, all students receive a hot, nutritious meal every day.

By The Hand has made it a point to choose children from schools whose reading levels are below average and are on track, statistically speaking, to drop out of school. For example, children who are struggling to read in the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school. This rate increases five times if a child is black or Latino and living in poverty. For each student who makes the choice to drop out of high school, it costs taxpayers \$221,000. If that high school dropout then chooses to move into a life of crime and drugs, the taxpayer cost per dropout goes up

from \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million. Currently, 36% of third-graders read below the “basic level”. Reading levels have become predictive of future incarceration rates with 70% of prison inmates unable to read above a fourth-grade level.

In recognition of these statistics, in 2008, By the Hand made the decision to add a reading specialist to its staff in order to assist children from 4th grade and up who could not read. During the 2008-2009 academic year, such children, on average, advanced two grade levels in their reading. In 2009, the organization added a college specialist to its staff in order for the high schoolers in Club for Big Kids to gain more exposure to college preparatory classes. Decisions like these have garnered tremendous results for the students who attend By the Hand. In the 2016-2017 school year, 85% of the 1,360 students who attended By The Hand passed all their classes; 61% made all A's, B's, and C's, a 20% increase from the year before; and the average GPA on a 4.0 scale was 2.82. Also, in 2016-2017, 82% of the high school freshman that attended By the Hand graduated from high school. Since 2008, By the Hand has seen 88% of their high school graduates enroll in a college, university or certified technical school. Comparing this statistic to the mere 40% of Chicago Public School students (who did not attend By The Hand) since 2008 who have enrolled in any type of continuing education, it is clear why after-school programs like By The Hand can monumentally change the course of a student's life.

By The Hand has proven the tremendous benefits an effective afterschool program can have on a child's academic success, social life, and personal life. The organization is determined to go the extra mile when it comes to meeting the needs of its students. Although studies have shown that poverty is a significant barrier to academic success and one out of every three children in Chicago lives in poverty, By the Hand has made it their mission and has given children the chance to obtain a better outcome. By The Hand Club For Kids has shown what a vision coupled with faith can do for students in need.

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