

## After-School Special

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You don't have to worry what fourth-graders Brendan King, Desmond Mitchell, Jasmine Smith or Trenie Brice will be doing after the school day ends at the Dr. Bernard Harris School in East Baltimore.

They won't be on the neighborhood's tough streets. They will, as they'll be the first to tell you, be playing baseball and basketball, line dancing, doing aerobics--and also solving math problems, reading and using computers. They are eager to live up to a slogan posted on one of the public school's walls: "Strive Not to Equal, but to Excel."

The Miracle on North Caroline Street? It's always miraculous to watch children learn, and we rarely pay much attention to the daily achievements of African American kids in our poorest urban neighborhoods. Crime stories make the 11 o'clock news. Learning stories rarely do.

But there is nothing miraculous about what's happening in the Bernard Harris School, if miraculous is defined as that which is all but impossible under normal circumstances. The achievements of the roughly 135 kids who stay after school here are the perfectly normal result of their energy, the devotion of their teachers, the volunteer efforts of their parents and--you're not supposed to say this anymore--some shrewdly invested government money mixed with some private contributions.

Under pressure from an organization called BUILD--Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development--the city has created the Baltimore Child First Authority to support after-school programs such as the one at Bernard Harris.

Why an "authority?" As any sports fan knows, Baltimore is a city that has given us exceptional sports stadiums, including the justly acclaimed Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Cities all over the country have created "stadium authorities" which dole out taxpayer funds, guarantee the money will be available over long periods and ensure it's spent only on the stadium projects.

BUILD's organizers asked a simple question: If building stadiums is such a high priority, shouldn't the future of the city's children have at least the same standing? "When a government says something is so important that they don't want it subject to the vagaries of the budget, they create an authority," said Arnie Graf, a BUILD leader and senior organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation, which sparks neighborhood activism across the country. So the Child First Authority was created with--when you consider the cause--the modest annual budget of \$ 960,000 (It includes, it should be said, a substantial donation from Orioles owner Peter Angelos.) The authority has served 1,500 kids this year at nine after-school programs, according to Carol Reckling, a former oil company executive who is now Child First's executive director. As they say in business, that's a lot of "product" for the money.

Child First is still looking for a secure long-term funding source--the revenue from a corporate stadium box or two might be nice. But its very existence already challenges our priorities. We

can come up with money for all sorts of amenities (I freely confess to enjoying Camden Yards as much as anyone), but can't muster the commitment to make sure all our kids have useful things to do between the time schools close and the time many parents return home from work. Isn't it by now a no-brainer that those famous hours from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. can either be the most dangerous hours of the day for kids or their most useful learning and playing time?

When politicians promise "universal after-school programs," the phrase has a deadly bureaucratic ring to it. There is nothing bureaucratic about what goes on in the Bernard Harris School. While the kids in one room are reading, kids are working math problems in another. In a third, the teacher has divided her students into teams and challenged them to come up with the right words to describe their moms for Mother's Day cards they're making. Each side is eager to win, and their performance matches the adjectives they shout out: "Outstanding," "excellent," "magnificent," "tremendous," "superior" and "marvelous."

The principal, Lucretia Coates, has raised test scores in the school, and the after-school program is integral to her efforts. "We look at it as being a focal point for instruction," she says. Kids who are behind get help catching up, and kids who are excelling learn even more. "It's not just time they're idly here and we're just watching." And because the program only works with the help of many parent volunteers, it has reinforced another of her objectives: "to have parents comprehensively involved in the school."

The most famous line about baseball stadiums is, "If you build it, they will come." That's just as true of after-school programs that help children cultivate their own fields of dreams.

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