

El Paso Times

BOOST Network can help families find quality programs that benefit children

Sandra Day Special to the El Paso Times

Published Oct. 18, 2021

Do you remember an adult who made a difference in your childhood?

For me, it was a coach named Mr. Castillo. I was born in Cd. Juárez, and when I moved to El Paso I was shy and self-conscious.

Coach Castillo was someone I could look up to and get advice from. He turned a group of adolescents into a team, and those teammates became my friends, giving me a sense of belonging.

Of course, I didn't realize this at the time. I thought I was just learning to play soccer. My parents were just grateful I had something to do after school. But looking back, I see what a difference my out-of-school time activities made in my life.

Not every student in El Paso is moving here from another town or country, but nearly all of them are dealing with major transitions this fall. The COVID-19 pandemic ruptured their academic and social worlds. Virtual learning caused many young people to disconnect from the support services and extracurricular activities that once provided the needed structure, meaning and mentorship.

They all could benefit from something like what I found: a structured safe space under the guidance of a trained, caring adult.

Thankfully, the El Paso region offers dozens of programs designed to help kids develop social emotional skills, stay on top of their studies, and learn something new when they are not in school. Many are members of the [BOOST Network](#), which helps families find a quality program and makes it easier for program coordinators to network, learn best practices from each other, and access the latest information on youth engagement and development.

Every October, the BOOST Network hosts a Lights On Afterschool event to celebrate the amazing work that afterschool programs are doing to transform the lives of youth in the El Paso area, southern New Mexico, and Ciudad Juárez,. This year, we are celebrating in a big way thanks to partners like KVIA-TV and the El Paso Chihuahuas, who have helped us raise awareness about the positive impact of afterschool programs.

Research at the national level shows that young people who participate in a high-quality “out-of-school time” program are more likely to excel academically and to be involved in their communities and less likely to skip school or get in trouble with the law.

Of course, school can also provide structure and supervision. But the school day ends by mid-afternoon, and students have their favorite teacher for only a few subjects -- or a brief academic year. Programs like Kids Can in Doña Ana County, Girl Scouts of the Desert Southwest, Creative Kids, or the Boys and Girls Clubs of Las Cruces offer young people consistency even when things at school or at home are changing.

And a lot is changing right now. Most kids haven't been able to socialize with others outside their family for approximately 18 months, and certainly not in a group setting. Test scores show that many struggled with remote learning. Now is the time to help them reconnect.

Coach Castillo helped me develop a sense of self-confidence and taught me a lot about overcoming challenges and being a good teammate. As a young adult, I joined a church choir and became part of a youth group that supported each other. I went on to be the first person in my family to graduate from college and today I get to help kids connect to supportive, transformative afterschool programs.

If you want to help your child navigate the new school year -- or just find some new friends or a new passion --- visit theboostnetwork.org.