Planting SEEDS of community: After-school programs support local youth

"Yup, all activities are free!"

That creed is splashed across the SEEDS web site.

And Bill Watson wants families to know about it.

From his Traverse City office, Watson oversees various SEEDS youth initiatives, including the unique after-school programs offered at middle schools and high schools in seven Northwest Michigan districts.

While the after-school programs aren't the only thing SEEDS does--it was started in 1999 as a collective creating local solutions to global problems including energy sustainability, education, community-building and ecological issues--they certainly mean a lot to many area youth and their families.

"We have so many opportunities for kids--there are 10 after-school programs for sixth through twelfth-graders right now, and we have between three and four hundred middle school and high school students participating each day," Watson says.

Strong academic support and tutoring, along with homework help, are curriculum staples, and coordinators at the school sites have a long list of cultural and social enrichment options to choose from at any given time--activities that, according to Watson, are designed to boost youth self-esteem, encourage personal strength, foster growth and help to solidify future goals.

"This is a safe, welcoming environment where kids have a voice. We try to help them see the pathways to their own personal successes," Watson says. "We really want to nurture kids and help them become strong community members."

Young people can learn to cook and sculpt through SEEDS after-school programs; play music; practice yoga, or hone skills in martial arts or dance. They develop nature skills, and even take skiing and skating outings. They explore ecology, biology, robotics and, among many other areas of study, have the chance to study film, audio and web development.

"They develop service learning skills and absorb the importance of physical activities in their own after-school settings," he says.

Through SEEDS, children prosper. And when they flourish, their parents sit straight up and take notice.

"Since we live in a rural area, there is not much for children to do around here except get into trouble," says Tabitha Nelson, of Kalkaska. "SEEDS provides a positive place for children to hang out and learn in the process."