# State Network Communications Toolkit: Helping Students Learn and Grow

This document provides templates of four different kinds of materials you can use you to share your messages about the importance of afterschool:

1. A letter to the editor that could be sent to a local newspaper
2. An op-ed that could be submitted for publication
3. A guide for gathering success stories from afterschool program providers
4. A sample success story guide.

These templates focus on emphasizing how afterschool programs can help students learn and grow. There are additional templates that focus on messages about helping parents and keeping kids safe.

## **Letter to the Editor**

### ***Guidance***

Submitting a letter to the editor is a good way to engage in the public debate in your area, and advocate for the importance of afterschool. There are two main steps for submitting these to your local newspaper.

1. Make sure the paper takes letters and review guidance it offers about length or how to submit them. You can check the paper’s website or call. Some newspapers will have strict word limits for submitted letters so be mindful of those. If no count is listed, it’s general practice to keep them short: 200 words or fewer.
2. Find an article or issue to which you want to respond. The most straightforward way to approach this would be to respond to any media coverage related to afterschool. But you could also comment on an article on a related topic and connect it to afterschool. For instance, there might be a story about education, STEM, ESSA, or student test scores or attendance rates in a specific school district. Your letter will have a better chance of getting placed if you highlight something the article missed.

Below is a template letter you can adapt to your purposes.

### ***Template***

Dear Editor,

I’m writing in response to the article on [afterschool programs] published on [DATE], *(provide the headline of the article in parentheses)*.

The article highlights the value of afterschool programs here in [PLACE]. Unfortunately, too many students and families across [STATE] are not able to take advantage of those benefits.

Right now, [#] students in [STATE] participate in an afterschool program, but another [#] are waiting for an open spot.

We know these programs help students learn and grow. Kids in afterschool attend school more often, get better grades, and are more likely to graduate, plus research shows that consistent participation in quality afterschool programs is linked to significant gains in student test scores and work habits. Regular participation in afterschool programs can expose students to new opportunities and improve their reading, and math performance and grades.

In short, afterschool works and [STATE] can’t afford to lose these programs.

Sincerely,

Your name and credentials. *(It’s important to include your connection to afterschool to indicate your expertise.)*

## **Op-ed**

### ***Guidance***

As you consider placing an op-ed, it’s important to research the possible outlets in your area, including newspapers or other online publications that accept outside writing. Then be sure to figure out how to submit your piece and whether the outlet has strict length requirements. If you can’t find a specific number, it’s best to aim for between 500 and 700 words.

Generally, newspapers will require that any piece they accept only be published in their paper. So you should pick your top choice, submit to them, and if they eventually say no or you don’t hear back, you can go to option two. It’s generally not a good idea to submit to multiple outlets at the same time.

Finally, you will be most successful if you are commenting on something already in the news, and offering a new or different opinion from those that have been covered already. You might also attempt to tie the topic of afterschool into other debates that are ongoing in your area. For instance, if there’s a discussion of academic achievement or career readiness, you could submit an op-ed emphasizing how afterschool programs help students learn and get skills they can use professionally.

### ***Template***

If you were to walk by a school in the afternoon as the bell rang, it might be natural to think that the learning day is done. School buses are filling up and pulling away. Students are walking toward home with their friends. For a brief moment their thoughts have turned away from the book they’re reading or the math homework they have.

But we know that learning is never truly over, and high-quality afterschool programs are a critical part of education, one kids don’t get anywhere else. These programs get kids excited about learning, help them develop critical skills, and stay on track for a bright and successful future. Studies show that kids in afterschool attend school more, get better grades, and are more likely to graduate.

Afterschool programs are essential for [STATE] children and families but right now too many kids are missing out. In fact, for every child in an afterschool program here in [STATE], two are waiting to get in. Our state policymakers in [CAPITAL] and our representatives in Congress must do all they can to make sure every child who wants to can participate in an afterschool program.

*[The next section should contain a story to help illustrate the value of afterschool and the need to improve access. The story should emphasize how afterschool programs support learning and give kids opportunities to explore their passions and possible career paths. It could be a profile of a student who did better in school because of their afterschool program, or it could highlight a local afterschool program that is doing something interesting to support student engagement and achievement. The story should take up no more than two to three short paragraphs.]*

This story shows how high-quality afterschool programs let kids explore, express themselves, connect and have fun. Programs can inspire interest in growing fields like STEM and help kids build skills like teamwork, communications, and critical thinking. These are skills they’ll use every day and skills that will help them land their first job.

But afterschool doesn’t just work for students. It’s a lifeline for parents too. When parents have afterschool choices, they don’t have to coordinate rides or juggle daily schedule changes. They can work a full day without having to worry about what their children are doing when school lets out.

They know their kids are with caring adults, they’re having fun, they’re learning and trying new things. They know their kids are getting physical activity, aren’t sitting in front of a screen, and are getting help with their homework. Most importantly, their child is safe, protected from risky behaviors both online and offline.

Afterschool helps children learn and grow, and is a huge support to parents. Every child deserves a program like [name of child from story]. Unfortunately, too many families are unable to take advantage of the benefits afterschool provides. We’re leaving those kids behind.

We need leaders at all levels to step up. Afterschool is a critical support for our children and families. *[We encourage you to add a few sentences describing a state-specific call to action here. Who do you want to prompt, and what do you want them to do?]*

As parents and leaders, our most important job is ensuring that we give our children—all children—opportunity to achieve their full potential and build a successful future. Afterschool programs are one of the best ways to do that.

*[If possible, refer back to the story here. For instance: Kids like XXX benefit from afterschool programs. Parents like YYY want them. If that doesn’t work, a general reference will do.]* Children benefit from these programs. Parents rely on them. And communities across [STATE] need more of them—we cannot let them down.

## **Success Story Gathering Template**

The [INSERT NAME OF STATE NETWORK] works to communicate the value and importance of afterschool and summer programs. The most powerful stories are those that come directly from program providers and focus on children and families who participate. This template serves as an easy guide for gathering stories that showcase how afterschool and summer programs offer fun, creative experiences that get kids excited about learning and spark their interest in future careers. We’re building a collection of compelling stories to share with policymakers and other stakeholders in [STATE], in our print or digital materials, and on our website or blog. We will let you know before publishing your piece. Please read the instructions carefully before submitting your story.

### ***How to Submit a Success Story***

**Step 1** – Save this template on your computer.

**Step 2** – Complete the template.

**Step 3** – Save the completed template and send it as an attachment with related photo(s) to INSERT NETWORK NAME at INSERT EMAIL ADDRESS. Guidance about photos is provided at the end of this document.

### ***Basic Information:***

Program Name:

Number of Youth Served:

Ages of Kids Served:

Grades of Kids Served:

Program Contact Person:

Program Contact Email Address:

Program Contact Phone Number:

Program Website (if applicable) and any social media platforms:

***Types of Activities Offered:*** (please be specific and avoid jargon, for example: use ‘step dancing’ or ‘mural design and painting’ or ‘junior robotics league’—not ‘art/music programs’ or ‘science activities’)

### ***Creating Your Success Story:***

**First:**
Think about the ways your program helps kids learn and grow. Does it help them get more interested and engaged in school, improve their grades, try new things, discover new talents, or develop skills that will help them land their first job?

**Then:**Answer two or three questions below. Include details that will help others visualize activities kids are engaged in and understand how those experiences impact kids, their families, schools, and the community. It may be helpful to have a specific child or family in mind as you’re describing experiences and impact.

**Finally**:
If possible, include a compelling quote from a child, parent, teacher, principal or staff member that supports your response (along with name and age of student quoted or name of parent, or name/title if quote is from someone else).

Can you think of an example of a student or set of students:

* whose grades have improved due to the program?
* who have had future career interest sparked in STEM, the arts, business, etc.?
* who are more excited about learning?

(pick one and describe what the program did and how the student(s) responded)

Describe 2-3 activities your program offers that complement school-day learning or are very different from typical school day (e.g., building and flying drones or performing at a local community center).

How does your program help to close the opportunity gap between racial, community, or gender groups? Please be as specific as possible about a change or difference or impact on specific kids and families.

How does your program spark greater interest in school-day subjects or give kids choices and freedom to explore topics more deeply or try new things?

Describe, in detail, how your program is helping to inspire kids about future career possibilities.

Describe 2-3 activities your program offers that help kids develop skills they need to land their first job, including teamwork, communication, responsibility, leadership, or problem solving.

QUOTE:

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**Photos:** Please submit high resolution digital photos that feature kids working with other kids or an adult or kids actively participating in hands-on learning or physical activity. All children/adults featured in the photos must have a signed photo release on file with your program. The release should give approval for the photos to be used on non-commercial websites like [INSERT NAME OF STATE NETWORK] website. If needed, providers may request and use the Afterschool Alliance photo release.

Provide descriptions of the activity in the photo so captions can be created if necessary. Preferable file formats for photos are .jpg or .png.