# State Network Communications Toolkit: Keeping Kids Safe

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 keep kids safe. There are additional templates that focus on messages about helping students learn and grow, and helping parents.

## **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 discussion regarding growing concerns about youth crime or drug use or issues linked with the juvenile justice system. 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, [# or % of] students in [STATE] are alone and unsupervised from 3 to 6 p.m. These hours are the peak time for juvenile crime and victimization.

Study after study shows that afterschool works to keep our kids safe. Kids in afterschool are less likely to smoke, drink, use drugs or become teen parents. These programs keep kids engaged with positive role models who get to know them, get involved, and won’t let them slip through the cracks.

Afterschool immerses kids in fun, creative projects and team building activities that help them learn to make better decisions and boost their self-esteem. This helps young people avoid risky behaviors and situations—both online and offline.

In [STATE], [##%] of parents say afterschool programs give them peace of mind about their children when they’re at work and [##%] agree they keep their kids safe.

Our kids, families, and community 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 youth safety, or growing concern about drug use, you could submit an op-ed emphasizing how afterschool programs help students stay safe during the peak hours for juvenile crime.

### ***Template***

During the week, students spend more waking hours at school than just about anywhere else. Between about seven hours at school, hopefully eight hours of sleep, and time at home for breakfast and dinner, it might not seem like there’s much more room in a student’s day. But those afterschool hours, from 3pm to 6pm, are critical.

Afterschool programs are essential for [STATE] children and families. Juvenile crime peaks during this window—and today, more than [XXX] youth statewide are alone and unsupervised during those hours. In our current climate, this is both dangerous and unacceptable. *[If possible, change this sentence to reflect specific, urgent local or state challenge, such as youth crime, drug use, etc.]*

Afterschool is a critical strategy for addressing this [challenge, crisis, epidemic]. These programs provide kids with a safe haven and help protect them from risky behaviors, both online and offline.

Kids in afterschool are less likely to smoke, drink, use drugs, or become teen parents. They connect with caring adults who won’t let them slip through the cracks.

Study after study shows that high-quality afterschool programs keep kids on track for success—in school, college, careers, and beyond. Our state policymakers in [CAPITAL] and our representatives in Congress must do all they can to make sure every child and family who wants an afterschool program has that opportunity.

*[The next section should contain a story to help illustrate the value of afterschool and the need to improve access. To continue the main message theme, the story should emphasize how afterschool programs keep students safe. It could be a profile of a student who avoided trouble with drugs or a gang because he or she participated in afterschool. Or it could highlight a local afterschool program that is doing something interesting to keep students safe and engaged with positive role models. The story should take up no more than two to three short paragraphs.]*

Every parent in [STATE] wants their child to be safe after school, just like [*CHILD from the story*] is. But the benefits of afterschool extend far beyond safety—families rely on them too.

When parents have afterschool choices for their children, they don’t have to worry about what their children are doing or coordinate rides for them. They know their kids are with caring adults, learning, trying new things, and having fun. They’re getting time for physical activity and help with their homework. Across [STATE], [XX] percent of parents say afterschool programs help them keep their jobs.

Unfortunately, too many families are unable to take advantage of the benefits afterschool provides. Right now, more than [XXXXXXX] students in [STATE] participate in an afterschool program. But more than [XXXX] are waiting to get in. We’re leaving those kids behind.

As parents and adults, our most important job is ensuring that we give our children—all children—the opportunity to achieve their full potential and build a successful future. Afterschool programs are one of the best ways to do that. *[Ideally you can add a few sentences as a more state specific call to action in this section. Who do you want to take action, and what do you want them to do?]*

*[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 keep kids safe, engaged and empowered to avoid risky situations—off and online and offer an active and social alternative to idle screen time. 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 keeps kids safe afterschool. Does it help kids build their self-esteem, make better decisions, gain life skills, connect them to their school community, or protect them from cyberbullying?

**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, member of law enforcement, principal, or community leader that supports your response (along with name and age of student quoted, name of parent, or name/title if quote is from someone else).How does your program keep kids safe?

How do the activities or supports your program provides help kids make responsible decisions? Can you think of an example?

Describe how your program gives kids opportunities to engage with positive role models: staff, counselors, mentors, law enforcement officials, community volunteers, or leaders. Describe the impact of those opportunities on a specific youth or set of youth.

Explain how your program helped to create a positive school community that in turn lessened bullying.

Share how your program engages kids in active learning and offers a positive alternative to idle screen time.

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

* behavior or social skills improved after participating in your program due to a mentor relationship or an improved attitude toward school?
* decision-making skills have improved which has allowed them to make healthier choices for themselves, their families, and friends?
* feelings toward or contribution and connection to their community has changed because they now have a circle of positive friends and/or family and mentors that they can trust and that support them?

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

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.