

The evidence base for afterschool and summer

Prior to the pandemic, close to 8 million young people in kindergarten through 12th grade were in afterschool programs where they had the opportunity to engage in academically enriching activities, take part in physical activities, build friendships, gain confidence, learn how to make responsible decisions, and seek advice and support from caring adults and mentors.¹ At the time of the release of this brief, many students have been participating in remote or hybrid school schedules for a full year and all students stand to benefit from additional enrichment and learning opportunities that afterschool and summer programs afford.

Through the pandemic, afterschool programs have been an instrumental partner for schools and families—programs remained connected to their students, complemented school-day lessons, and provided essential supports for families. As the country now looks to reopening and recovery, afterschool and summer programs will continue to be a valuable resource.

This brief includes a small sampling of evaluations—including randomized and quasi-experimental studies—that demonstrate the evidence of the positive impact programs have on academics, social and emotional skills and competencies, and overall well-being to help students re-engage in learning and emerge from the pandemic strong, resilient, and hopeful.



Afterschool programs step up during COVID-19

A national February/March 2021 survey of program providers found that 3 in 4 providers reported being physically open in at least some capacity, providing critical supports including a safe and supervised space during virtual school days, distributing or delivering meals, and connecting families with community resources. For example, Camp Fire Heartland in Kansas City, Missouri, supports more than 800 low-income students during virtual school days and after school. Staff members help students stay on track in school, checking in with teachers on students' progress and assisting students with school-day lessons. To support remote learning, Camp Fire supplemented students' technology needs and purchased chargers and headphones. Additionally, Camp Fire is prioritizing students' health and emotional well-being, from providing professional development for staff in trauma-informed care to providing breakfast and lunch for students.

As programs such as Camp Fire continue to serve students during the pandemic, program providers also report concerns about their ability to continue their services and the overall future of their programs.

Afterschool programs are meeting the needs of their communities

Afterschool programs are serving:

- ▶ Youth remotely **57%**
- ▶ As a safe and supervised learning environment during virtual school days **57%**
- ▶ As a meals site, delivering meals, or distributing other resources **57%**
- ▶ To support families by connecting them with community resources **53%**

At the same time, programs' concerns are high

Afterschool programs are concerned about:

- ▶ Long-term funding and future **82%**
- ▶ Being able to meet the needs of families **77%**
- ▶ Staffing issues **75%**
- ▶ Not being able to provide services during the 2021-22 school year **46%**



Supporting academic growth and engagement in learning

Studies have found that afterschool programs promote academic gains and improve students' engagement in learning and motivation to learn.

- ▶ **Engages students in learning:** A 2020 evaluation of Colorado's 21st CCLC programs found that based on teacher reports, among students in need of improvement, an overwhelming majority saw improvements in their classroom participation (73 percent), motivation to learn (66 percent), and attentiveness in class (66 percent). Teachers noted that students who attended afterschool programs for the full year made significantly more improvement. Findings from a 2020 evaluation of the Girls Inc. program indicate that girls who participated in the program reported more positive attitudes and behaviors than a comparison group of girls. All 14 outcomes related to academics were statistically significant in year two, including school engagement; finding school fun in areas like reading, math, and science; getting excited about science; and post-secondary readiness.²
- ▶ **Promotes gains in math and reading:** An evaluation of high-quality afterschool programs serving 3,000 low-income elementary and middle school students found that regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs resulted in significant gains in math test scores, where students who regularly attended programs over two years demonstrated gains of up to 20 percentiles and 12 percentiles in standardized math test scores respectively, compared to their peers who were routinely unsupervised after school.³ A separate review of nearly 9,000 children in grades K-3 found that afterschool program participation is linked with improved reading proficiency. Youth who regularly attended afterschool programs were 26 percent more likely to finish the year at or on track for grade level reading compared to non-attending peers. Every one day of afterschool participation resulted in a 1.7 percent increase in the likelihood of moving up to reading at grade level.⁴
- ▶ **Improves grades:** Students who participated in the Higher Achievement afterschool and summer program had statistically significantly higher report card grades in math, English, and science, as well as higher overall GPAs, compared to an equally motivated matched control group after two years in the program.⁵
- ▶ **Increases school-day attendance among regularly attending students:** Statewide evaluations of 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool programs found positive impacts of regular program participation on school day attendance. In New Jersey, 21st CCLC participants had lower unexcused school-day absences than non-attending peers.⁶ Evaluations of the Texas' Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) consistently found that students with high levels of attendance in the program saw particularly strong results, where students participating for 60 days or more had a lower school-day absence rate than students who did not participate in the program.⁷

Summer program participation positively impacts school year performance^{8,9}

A longitudinal study of summer learning programs that followed 3rd-7th grade students found positive academic gains among randomly assigned program participants compared to the control group. After the first and second summer of program participation, program attendees outperformed control-group students. Statistically significant differences were found in math achievement after the first summer, and math, language arts, and social and emotional skills after the second summer. After the third summer, while academic benefits were no longer statistically significant, they were still large enough to be meaningful.

Similarly, a 2020 quasi-experimental study of the Aim High summer program found that program participation resulted in significant benefits during the school year, including a 22 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism, a 37 percent reduction in suspension rates, and a 6-point improvement in English language art scores.





Fostering key foundational skills and boosting students' well-being

From developing critical thinking skills to improving decision-making skills, and from building communication skills to boosting self-confidence, afterschool programs have been found to help develop the foundational skills and competencies that contribute to young people's health and overall well-being.

- ▶ **Builds foundational skills:** A 2019 randomized control study of WINGS, an afterschool program serving low-income students in grades K-5, found positive gains in teacher-rated classroom skills for students who participated for two years. The study followed kindergarteners in the program for two years, and showed that after two years of program participation, strong or marginally strong effects were found for 12 out of 16 measures, including decision-making, relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, and better teacher-student relationships.¹⁰ Similar findings were reported in a statewide evaluation of Massachusetts' 21st CCLC programs, where a majority of students improved their critical thinking skills (62 percent), leadership skills (59 percent), ability to self-regulate (57 percent), perseverance (55 percent), and communications skills (54 percent).¹¹
- ▶ **Decreases risky behaviors:** The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), conducted a meta-analysis reviewing close to six dozen studies of afterschool programs and found that students who participated in afterschool programs exhibited significant improvement in their feelings, attitudes, and indicators of behavioral adjustment. Students in programs also saw reductions in drug use and problem behavior, such as aggression, noncompliance, and conduct problems.¹² In a randomized-control evaluation of Chicago's After School Matters program, students participating in the program reported significantly higher self-regulation and significantly fewer problem behaviors than their peers who did not participate in the program. For example, youth in After School Matters were more likely to report that they could manage their attention and their emotions and were less likely to report selling drugs or participating in gang activity.¹³
- ▶ **Improves physical health:** A national evaluation of the Up2Us Coach program by the American Institutes for Research found that youth who participated in the sports-focused youth development program made significant improvement from the beginning of the year to the end of the year in fitness, nutritional habits, and high-impact attributes that contribute to healthy decision-making, including positive identity, situational awareness, discipline, social confidence, and overall well-being.¹⁴

Beneficial cumulative effects of early childhood education and afterschool program participation^{15,16}

A 2020 study that examined the effects of early childhood education and afterschool activities found that both higher quality early child care and afterschool programs in the elementary years (K- 5th grade) are associated with higher reading comprehension and math achievement scores in high school. The effects were cumulative, with students who participated in both experiencing increased benefits. An indirect link was also found between early childhood education and adult problem behaviors via afterschool program participation, with children who participated in center-based early childhood education more likely to participate in afterschool activities in middle childhood, and in turn less likely to exhibit problem behaviors in adulthood including less impulsivity, risk-taking, and police contact.



- ▶ **Supports the overall well-being of vulnerable youth:** Higher participation in an afterschool program aimed at reducing violence-related behaviors among high-risk, urban middle school youth in economically disadvantaged areas throughout the year was linked to better communication skills and better relationships with adults and peers,¹⁷ while a 2018 quasi-experimental study of an afterschool program located in four public housing neighborhoods found promising gains in participants' academic achievement and behavior. Compared to their matched peers, students in the programs located in the public housing neighborhoods were significantly less likely to be suspended or expelled and had higher rates of school attendance, as well as significantly greater increases in reading assessment scores and significantly higher math and science proficiency ratings compared to their matched peers, based on teacher reports.¹⁸
- ▶ **Improves foundational skills over time:** Researchers found positive impacts of afterschool program participation on later behavioral development when compared to youth who did not participate in programs. The study, published in the journal *Child Development*, found that students who participated in afterschool programs in kindergarten through 5th grade displayed greater social confidence in high school, such as speaking aloud in groups and meeting new people.¹⁹



The strength of student-staff relationships in afterschool programs²⁰

A 2020 Search Institute study compared various youth-serving organizations—including out-of-school time (OST) settings, student support groups, and schools—and found that OST settings were more likely to foster high-quality relationships and provide inclusive, equitable environments to help youth thrive. More young people reported having strong developmental relationships with program staff in OST (70 percent) compared to staff in student support programs (62 percent) and teachers in school (40 percent). Additionally, youth in OST were most likely to report a more equitable environment, which included feeling welcome, being treated fairly, and acceptance and support of different cultures and backgrounds (73 percent). The study found that strong relationships positively impact youth development, where close to 2 in 3 youth who reported strong relationships (68 percent) had higher self-rated social and emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills.





Setting youth up to thrive post high school

Across a range of studies, afterschool programs have been found to encourage and build the skills and competencies that benefit young people through their school years and into adulthood.

- ▶ **Positive impact on graduation:** A 2020 evaluation of Oregon's Mathematics, Engineering & Science Achievement (MESA) program, a national pre-college academic afterschool program that works with underrepresented students to develop STEM skills, found positive impacts on high school graduation. Students in the MESA program were significantly more likely to graduate from high school compared to their matched peers; 87 percent of MESA students graduated from high school in four years compared to 73 percent of the comparison group. MESA students were 3.13 times more likely to graduate from high school in four years compared to their matched peers, equivalent to a 21 percent increase in the probability of graduating high school in four years.²¹
- ▶ **Prepares students for college and career:** More than 7 in 10 students who regularly participated in Virginia's 21st CCLC programs agreed that the program helped them learn the knowledge and skills needed to be ready for a job or career (76 percent) or helped them learn what is necessary to be ready for trade school or college (71 percent) in a 2020 statewide evaluation of 21st CCLC.²² Additionally, a randomized control trial of the Urban Alliance High School Internship Program found that participation in the program had positive impacts on students' preparation, attendance, and predicted completion of college. The program increased students' level of comfort with FAFSA and scholarship opportunities and improved students' workplace skills, including speaking with co-workers, giving presentations, and knowing how to use common office equipment and computer programs.
- ▶ **Develops a positive STEM mindset:** In a 2019 national study of 158 STEM-focused afterschool programs that received support from one of 11 state afterschool networks, it was found that students made significant gains in positive STEM attitudes. Specifically, the findings show that a majority of students made significant gains in STEM engagement, career interest, career knowledge, activity participation, and identity. Latinx/Hispanic youth reported the greatest gains.²³
- ▶ **Builds employability skills:** Youth who participated in the Girls on the Run program showed improved positive emotional behaviors, social behaviors, and social relationships, as well as improved setting and accomplishing goals. More specifically, girls exhibited greater leadership skills, increased confidence, improved conflict resolution skills, greater commitment toward completing tasks, and were more inclusive.²⁴
- ▶ **Benefits last into adulthood:** A 2020 study found that children's organized afterschool activities were directly associated with fewer problem behaviors later in life. Specifically, the study found that those who consistently participated in afterschool activities in elementary school reported less impulsivity and less police contact at age 26.²⁵ A similar study found that participation in organized activities in elementary school contribute to better academic grades and a more rigorous course load taken in high school, leading to greater adult educational and occupational attainment.²⁶



Endnotes

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