

Executive Summary

The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities



As rural children and families grapple with issues such as poverty, lower wages and educational attainment levels, food deserts and obesity, the need for additional supports in rural communities is undeniable. Afterschool and summer learning programs hold enormous potential to fill the gaps in rural communities while also helping these communities prosper. Afterschool and summer learning programs are providing new learning opportunities for children—helping them to discover newfound interests, explore a variety of topic areas, and learn about different cultures and communities

beyond their own zip code. Across the nation, afterschool programs are stepping up their efforts to provide more than a safe place for children to go when they get out of school. The role of afterschool programs is growing, and research shows that quality programs are helping their students make academic gains, activating a greater interest in learning, providing supportive mentors, and helping kids stay healthy and active with exercise and healthy foods.

The 2014 report *America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand*, found that a strong majority of parents of children participating in an afterschool program report that their child’s program offers a variety of supports, from homework help to opportunities for physical activity, and from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programming to nutritious snacks and meals. The national picture of afterschool programs shows that they are an integral component in the system of support that families need, helping children from Alabama to Wyoming learn, grow and thrive.

This special *America After 3PM* report, *The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities*, takes a closer look at the afterschool experiences of children and families living in rural communities and compares these experiences to those of children and families outside of rural communities. This report also serves to examine the ways programs are increasing opportunity in these often-underserved and overlooked communities, and what more can be done to make certain that all children, regardless of geographic location, are given the array of supports they need to achieve their full potential.¹

¹Surveys were completed through an online survey using a blend of national consumer panels. All survey participants live in the U.S. and are guardians of a school-age child living in their household. America After 3PM was first conducted in 2004, with follow-up surveys in 2009 and 2014. A detailed description of America After 3PM’s survey methodology can be found in America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand, available at: http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/AA3PM_National_Report.pdf. All references and citations can be found in the full version of *The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities* available at http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Afterschool_in_Rural_Communities.pdf.

The Current Landscape for Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs in Rural Communities

The number of rural children who are taking part in afterschool and summer learning programs continues to grow. Three iterations of the *America After 3PM* study, conducted over the course of a decade, demonstrate that more children than ever are taking part in an afterschool program. In 2014, 13 percent of children in rural communities—approximately 1.2 million children—participated in an afterschool program, an increase from 11 percent in 2009, and the percentage of rural families with a child enrolled in a summer learning program in 2013 was 28 percent, compared to 20 percent in 2008.

However, a large number of rural children are still unable to participate in afterschool and summer learning programs. The percentage of rural children who would be enrolled in an afterschool program if one were available held steady over the past five years, remaining close to the national average, but leaving many interested students and families without access. In 2014, 39 percent of rural children not currently in an afterschool program would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them—3.1 million children. In regard to summer learning, close to half of rural parents (45 percent) report that they wanted their child to take part in a summer learning program in 2014, but only 28 percent had a child enrolled in a summer program in 2013.

In rural communities, the overall demand for afterschool programs among minority and low-income families is particularly strong, and as a result, both participation in and unmet demand for afterschool programs is high. For instance, more than half of rural Hispanic children (51 percent) and close to half of rural African-American children (45 percent) who are not in a program, would be enrolled if a program were available to them, 14 and 8 percentage points higher than rural White children (37 percent). Among rural children in low-income families, 44 percent who are not in a program would be enrolled in one if a program were available to them, compared to 34 percent of rural children in higher-income families.



What Drives Afterschool Program Participation and Demand in Rural Communities?

The *America After 3PM* survey asked parents in rural communities a series of questions about their views on afterschool programs to better understand their perceptions, as well as expectations, of programs.

Parents in rural communities value the role that afterschool plays for both children and families. Rural parents not only consider afterschool programs a support system for children’s academic growth, social development, and overall health and wellness, but also regard programs as a critical resource for working families. For example, a strong majority of parents living in rural communities agree that afterschool programs can help children with their homework assignments (73 percent), help reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in risky behaviors (72 percent) and offer healthy foods (61 percent). Additionally, more than 7 in 10 rural parents agree that afterschool programs help give working parents peace of mind about their children when they are at work (73 percent) and help working parents keep their jobs (72 percent).



What Does the Afterschool Experience Look Like for Rural Children and Families?

A close look at the responses of rural parents reveals that, as with parents nationally, most rural parents are happy with their child’s afterschool program overall and report that their child is taking part in a wide range of learning opportunities.

Afterschool programs are helping rural children reach their full potential. Rural parents with a child in an afterschool program paint an encouraging picture of the programs that serve rural communities, with an overwhelming majority of rural parents satisfied with their child’s afterschool program overall (85 percent), the program’s safe environment (89 percent), quality of care (89 percent), the knowledge and training of program staff (89 percent) and the variety of activities offered (84 percent). Rural parents’ are also highly satisfied with opportunities for their child to interact with peers (90 percent), homework help (82 percent), physical activity offered (81 percent), healthfulness of the program’s beverages, snacks and/or meals (79 percent) and STEM learning opportunities (68 percent).

Afterschool programs serving rural communities excel in a few key areas. While overall, the activities and offerings of rural afterschool program providers are similar to those reported by parents living outside of rural communities, a few areas, including family activities and healthy snacks, appear to be areas of particular strength for rural afterschool programs.

Areas of growth also exist for afterschool programs serving rural communities. Although the overall afterschool program experience reported by rural parents is very positive, certain program elements are not as prevalent in rural afterschool programs compared to programs outside of rural areas, in particular activities associated with technology. For instance, only 21 percent of rural parents report that technology and engineering learning opportunities are offered, 9 percentage points below the national average.

The Barriers to Afterschool Program Participation in Rural Communities

Rural communities have made gains toward expanding access to afterschool programs, but challenges remain. While this *America After 3PM* report finds that a growing number of children living in rural communities participate in afterschool programs, it also finds that there remain 3.1 million children who are unable to participate in a program even though their parents would like to enroll them. When contemplating the decision to enroll their child in an afterschool program, rural parents face a number of challenges, including the affordability, availability, accessibility and lack of knowledge of afterschool programs.

- **Affordability:** The cost of afterschool programs is a challenge for rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, as well as a deterrent for parents who might wish to enroll their child in a program. Among rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, 6 in 10 (59 percent) agree that current economic conditions have made it difficult to afford placing their child in a program and among rural parents without a child in a program, 4 in 10 said that the cost of programs was an important reason why they did not enroll their child.
- **Availability:** Finding an available afterschool program is another significant challenge families living in rural communities face. For example, approximately 1 in 3 rural parents with a child in an afterschool program (32 percent) report that a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program is that no other afterschool programs were available, higher than what rural parents reported in 2009 (24 percent).
- **Accessibility:** Issues related to accessibility, including transportation and finding a program that was conveniently located, challenged parents living in rural communities. For instance, among rural parents who do not have a child in an afterschool program, but would enroll him or her if a program were available, close to half (46 percent) report that they opted not to select an afterschool program because of the lack of a safe way for their child to get to and come home from the program, and 42 percent said that inconvenient program locations factored into their decision.
- **Knowledge of afterschool programs:** A review of the responses by rural parents with children not enrolled in afterschool programs reveals a lack of information about afterschool programs in their community, particularly when compared to parents living in cities and suburbs.



Recommendations

Although parents in rural communities are increasingly turning to afterschool and summer learning programs for their children, a review of the data finds that more can be done to help rural communities catch up with the rest of the nation. The following recommendations can help ensure that all children in rural communities have the ability to take part in quality afterschool programs that can help them succeed in and out of school.

Ensure information about afterschool programs is more readily available to parents in rural communities. Providing rural parents with information about the activities and opportunities participating in an afterschool program offers their child, as well as up-to-date resources to help parents locate afterschool programs that meet their child’s needs, can help to make sure that all rural children and families are able to benefit from the supports that afterschool programs have to offer.



Raise national attention around the important role rural afterschool programs play in their communities. Raising the profile of the supports rural afterschool programs provide their community and the unique challenges facing rural afterschool programs through a National Summit on Rural Afterschool or an award competition to recognize exemplary rural afterschool programs has the potential to expand the types of partnerships and supports programs can garner from inside and outside of their community.

Provide opportunities to support and enhance the sharing of promising practices and resources. A summer 2015 Afterschool Alliance survey of rural afterschool program providers found that a limited pool of resources, such as the number of businesses and organizations available for partnerships, was a common challenge rural programs faced. Developing easily accessible and affordable resources and tools for rural afterschool program providers—such as creating an online afterschool resource center geared toward rural communities or holding mini-conferences or symposia—can give much needed support to providers struggling to keep their doors open.

Increase STEM programming in rural afterschool programs. STEM programming, and in particular, technology learning opportunities, is an area in which the *America After 3PM* data indicate rural afterschool programs struggle. Equipping children and youth with STEM skills today—including rural children and youth—can help ready them for tomorrow’s challenges, preparing them for the growing STEM workforce and giving them the critical thinking skills they will need to better understand complex issues.

Increase investment in afterschool programs serving rural communities. Rural afterschool programs provide an integral system of support for the children and families in these communities, creating a safe and supportive environment while nourishing children’s minds and bodies by offering academic enrichment and nutritious foods. However, in addition to the 3.1 million rural children who are not in an afterschool program, but who would be enrolled if a program were available to them, many rural afterschool program providers struggle to secure the funding necessary to keep their doors open. With more than 8 in 10 rural parents in favor of public funding for afterschool (84 percent) and summer learning programs (85 percent), support is very strong for increased investment in afterschool programs serving rural communities, to ensure that all children in rural communities have the supports they need to thrive in school and beyond.

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The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at www.afterschoolalliance.org.