



# Education Beyond the Classroom

*Parent Demand and Policy Support for  
Supplemental Learning Options*

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OCTOBER 2022

# Introduction

The devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately affected the learning<sup>1</sup> and well-being<sup>2</sup> of low-income students. K-12 students and families — especially those furthest from opportunity — deserve an approach to recovery that leverages every available resource, within and beyond the school day. Unfortunately, supplemental experiences and activities are too often an afterthought.

Supplemental opportunities not only empower students to explore areas of interest beyond what's offered in school, but also contribute to a range of positive academic outcomes necessary to address learning loss. Students who participate in supplemental learning experiences outside of school generally have higher levels of student achievement.<sup>3</sup> Extracurricular activities such as instrumental music, debate, cultural-based programs, and community service organizations are associated with higher levels of academic growth.<sup>4</sup> Participation in extracurricular activities can also help decrease high school dropout rates, including in at-risk student populations,<sup>5</sup> and is related to increased school engagement.<sup>6</sup>

Given that supplemental options have long been tied to positive student outcomes, they must be an important strategy to address learning loss during the pandemic, allowing children to receive a more customized and effective educational experience.

Access to supplemental opportunities is often inequitable, however. Low-income families are much less likely to participate in extracurricular options than high-income families. Pre-pandemic, 94% of children from high-income families participated in extracurricular activities, compared with only 70% of students from low-income families. During the fall of 2020, the participation gap remained: 82% of children from high-income families participated in extracurricular activities, compared with 57% of children from low-income families.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, low-income students experienced disproportionate learning loss during the pandemic and are also less likely to participate in supplemental opportunities that can help.

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Recent polling data<sup>8</sup> shed light on the gap between parents' interest in supplemental options for their children and their access to them. The data highlight barriers that prevent students and families from accessing the full range of supports that can aid their recovery from the effects of the pandemic.

## Parent Polling Indicates an Unmet Demand for Extracurricular Options

In July 2022, EdChoice and Morning Consult polled 1,205 parents, representing a range of income levels,<sup>9</sup> about their interest and engagement in eight types of extracurricular and out-of-school supports:<sup>10</sup>

- ◆ **Academic-focused** extracurricular programs, not including tutoring (e.g., robotics club, math team)
- ◆ **Arts-focused** extracurricular programs (e.g., theater, music, visual arts)
- ◆ **Athletics-based** extracurricular programs (e.g., team or individual sports)
- ◆ **Career preparation** opportunities (e.g., apprenticeships or internships)
- ◆ **Community-focused** extracurricular programs (e.g., volunteer opportunities)
- ◆ **Culture-based** programs/activities related to identity, history, or language
- ◆ **Mental health supports** (e.g., counseling)
- ◆ **Religious-based** extracurricular programs (e.g., religiously affiliated youth group)

Students are participating in a variety of supplemental options, but parents expressed an interest in even greater participation (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: MORE U.S. PARENTS ARE INTERESTED IN SUPPLEMENTAL LEARNING OPTIONS THAN ARE CURRENTLY PARTICIPATING**

	Currently Participating	Not Currently Participating but Interested
Academic	26%	43%
Arts	30%	44%
Athletics	42%	36%
Career Prep	21%	48%
Community	23%	47%
Culture	20%	39%
Mental Health	25%	36%
Religious	26%	28%

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult, National Tracking Poll #2207087.

Many parents express interest in supplemental options. In a poll conducted by National Parents Union (NPU) and Echelon Insights in August 2022, 36% of parents believed their child would need extra academic support this school year; among these, 49% believed their child’s school would provide enough support and 41% indicated they would need to find extra support for their child elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Even among parents who express interest in supplemental learning options, however, many of their children are not currently participating in them. In the EdChoice/Morning Consult poll, between 28-48% of parents report that their child is interested in an activity but is not currently participating. The rates of interest beyond those currently participating are particularly high for community-focused (47%) and career preparation (48%) activities, but also for arts and academic activities (44% and 43%, respectively).

What stands between interest in supplemental activities and actual participation? The poll asked parents about multiple factors that may contribute to the gap, and the data suggest the following barriers prevent families from accessing these supports:

**Costs:** The costs are too high.

**Proximity:** There aren’t programs close enough to us.

**Information:** I don’t have enough information for what can work best for my child.

**Time:** There isn’t enough time in my family’s schedule.

**Transportation:** We don’t have transportation to take my child to or from the activity or program.

**Friends:** My child doesn’t have friends participating in the activity or program.

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## Information and Cost Are the Most Cited Barriers To Extracurricular Participation, but Other Barriers Also Contribute

Parents cited a lack of information as the most common barrier to participation. The information barrier was largest for the two types of supplemental options that had the biggest gap between interest and participation: career preparation (37%) and community-focused (35%). However, parents commonly cited a lack of information for other extracurricular options as well (Table 2).

TABLE 2: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR OPTIONS

	Information	Costs	Proximity	Time	Friends	Transportation
Academic	34%	24%	24%	23%	11%	14%
Arts	33%	25%	25%	21%	14%	13%
Athletics	31%	28%	18%	23%	14%	15%
Career Prep	37%	20%	24%	16%	14%	12%
Community	35%	20%	20%	19%	16%	14%
Culture	30%	20%	30%	20%	14%	15%
Mental Health	34%	26%	19%	20%	16%	11%
Religious	29%	18%	18%	21%	22%	18%
Overall Average	33%	23%	22%	20%	15%	14%

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult, National Tracking Poll #2207087.

In the EdChoice/Morning Consult poll, 18-28% of parents cited cost as a barrier to participation. Although some families reported that they could access public or private funding for extracurricular activities, about half of families are paying out of pocket.<sup>12</sup> And of those families paying out of pocket, 5-11% reported needing to use their savings and 9-18% reported using a line of credit to pay, suggesting that the costs of the activities are exceeding their monthly budgets.

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Meanwhile, 66% of parents in the NPU/Echelon Insights poll indicated that the cost of extracurricular activities was a problem. In asking parents who should pay for students' extra academic support, 44% indicated that it should come from existing school funding and 26% indicated that it should come from COVID-19 recovery funding.

Other barriers are the logistics of getting the child to the extracurricular activity and its proximity. Not all communities offer a variety of activities. Parents cited proximity as a barrier particularly for culture-based activities (30%), but for other activities as well. Related to proximity is transportation. The farther away an activity is, the more transportation is necessary to participate. Between 11-18% of parents cited transportation as a barrier.

Finally, 16-23% of parents noted insufficient time for children to participate in activities.

Despite the interest of parents, barriers to access prevent too many students from realizing the potential benefits of supplemental activities. A student struggling to adjust to his social environment may not have transportation to the sports activities that build a sense of community; a student struggling to reengage in high school may not have the information she needs to find work-based experiences that connect her academics to postsecondary opportunities; a student struggling with learning loss may not have access to the tutoring he needs because his parents cannot afford the fees.

## **Sector Leaders Can Do More To Help Families Assemble the Educational Experiences Their Children Need**

Families are demonstrating a great deal of interest in supplemental activities. Given this level of demand and the potential for supplemental options to help address learning loss and other adverse effects of the pandemic, policymakers should take steps to improve families' ability to get their kids what they need.

### **1. Fund Families' Access to Flexible Education Dollars**

Policymakers should provide flexible education dollars to enable more families, particularly low-income families, to participate in affordable and high-quality extracurricular activities. For instance, Ohio's Afterschool Child Enrichment (ACE) Educational Savings Program provides low-income families

with a \$500 credit that can be used to pay for supplemental activities such as music lessons, field trips, and day camps that extend beyond academics.<sup>13</sup> The ACE accounts are currently funded through federal COVID-19 school relief funding and could serve as a model for other states interested in expanding access to extracurricular activities through flexible education dollars.

## **2. Inform Parents of Existing Opportunities**

In many cases, opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities exist, but parents are unaware of them.

Policymakers must incentivize schools to serve as information hubs to help families navigate available options. This can be accomplished by funding the development of more community school models, with more porous boundaries among family, school, and community. Policymakers must also provide adequate funding for communications and awareness campaigns to inform families as a part of policy implementation efforts.

Finally, policymakers should partner with trusted community organizations and web-based platform providers to help families navigate the ecosystem of options to find those that fit their children's needs.

## **3. Provide Innovative Transportation Options**

Policymakers must consider increased flexibility in transportation services to improve access to extracurricular activities.

For instance, Maryland allows county boards to provide transportation to and from school using vehicles other than school buses.<sup>14</sup> Boards also can contract with taxi-like services, such as HopSkipDrive or EverDriven, providing additional flexibility in transporting students.<sup>15</sup>

Alternatively, programs such as Arizona's Transportation Modernization Grant Program can reduce barriers by providing transportation grants directly to schools, local governments, or nonprofit organizations — a model that could also help reduce parents' out-of-pocket spending to transport their children to activities.<sup>16</sup>

# **Conclusion**

To counter learning loss and other effects of the pandemic, students deserve access to all available supports, including supplemental options. Unfortunately, access to supplemental options is just as disproportionate as the effects of the pandemic. Too many barriers stand between students and the supports that could help them recover and reengage in learning.

Policymakers can play a critical role in helping more families provide their children with the extracurricular options that fit their unique learning needs: providing parents with funding to cover the costs of participation, improving information and communication about available options, and fostering innovations in transportation. ✨



# Endnotes

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- 7 Adam Newman, Tanya Rosbash, and Andrea Zurita, *School Disrupted, Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, Tyton Partners, May 2021, <https://d1hzn4d3dn6lg.cloudfront.net/production/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>; See also Yeris Mayol-Garcia, "Children Continue to Be More Involved in Some Extracurricular Activities," U.S. Census Bureau, July 26, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/07/children-continue-to-be-involved-in-extracurricular-activities.html>.
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- 9 Thirty-one percent of the respondents reported incomes of less than \$35,000 per year.
- 10 Unless otherwise specified in the text, all polling data are drawn from EdChoice/Morning Consult, National Tracking Poll #2207087.
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## About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit [bellwether.org](http://bellwether.org).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many individuals who gave their time and shared their knowledge to inform our work on this project. We are particularly grateful to the Walton Family Foundation for its financial support of this work, as well as to Paul DiPerna and the teams at EdChoice and Morning Consult, and to Peri Lynn Turnbull and the teams at National Parents Union and Echelon Insights for fielding these survey questions.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Alexis Richardson and Valentina Payne for their help coordinating this work and Mark Blumenthal for sharing his expertise in polling. Thank you to Alyssa Schwenk, Abby Marco, Andy Jacob, Zoe Campbell, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.



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