

# More Work Remains for Full Return to Normalcy

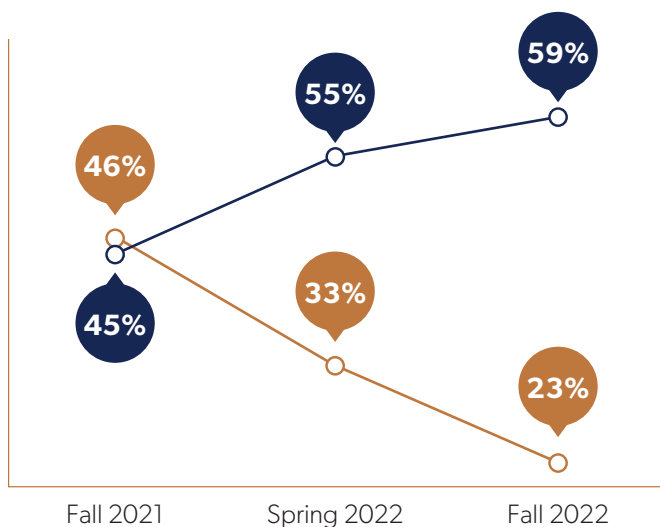
## Findings from a fall 2022 survey of afterschool program providers

On the surface, the 2022-2023 school year looks like a return to normalcy. Nearly all public schools report offering full-time in-person classes; most have stopped COVID protocols such as daily screenings, masking, and social distancing; and the percentage of schools reporting that staff or students have been quarantined is down.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a survey of 1,016 afterschool program providers conducted between October 24 and November 30, 2022, representing more than 7,400 centers, found that 94 percent of afterschool program providers are physically open. Programs report providing their students with academic supports, opportunities to connect with their peers, and time to build foundational skills, such as communication and critical thinking skills. Although the above are positive signs pointing to recovery, a closer examination reveals irregularities indicating that more work remains to be done before declaring a rebound from the pandemic. Schools report an increase in both student chronic absenteeism and teacher absences compared to before the pandemic, while the U.S. Census Bureau found an increase in homeschooling.<sup>2,3</sup> Among afterschool program providers, while a majority that are open are operating at pre-COVID capacity limits (59 percent)—an increase from 45 percent in the fall of 2021 and 55 percent in the spring of 2022—still nearly 1 in 4 program providers report that they have not yet been able to return to their regular operational capacity (**See Figure 1**).

**FIGURE 1:** Although the percentage of afterschool program providers reporting operating at pre-COVID capacity is increasing, nearly a quarter of programs report operating at reduced capacity

% of program providers who are open who report that they are:

■ Operating at pre-COVID capacity ■ Operating at reduced capacity



### Afterschool programs are supporting students' academic and social well-being

Afterschool programs report that they are providing:

Academic enrichment	<b>95%</b>
Time to interact with peers and build social skills	<b>90%</b>
Physical activity opportunities	<b>89%</b>
Homework or academic help	<b>86%</b>
Outdoor activities	<b>85%</b>
Opportunities to develop life skills	<b>83%</b>
Opportunities for students to talk with peers or staff members	<b>83%</b>
Reading or writing time	<b>79%</b>
STEM learning opportunities	<b>78%</b>
Family or parent engagement activities	<b>66%</b>
Leadership opportunities	<b>59%</b>
Snacks and/or meals	<b>58%</b>

## Stressors preventing a return to normal

Results from the fall 2022 survey provide encouraging findings, where a majority of afterschool program providers (59 percent) report that they have returned to normal operations and are able to serve at least the same number of students served prior to the pandemic. In addition, more currently open program providers report a waitlist (53 percent) than in any previous round of the survey. Yet, nearly 1 in 4 programs report operating at reduced capacity (23 percent), raising questions about why some programs are struggling to return to pre-pandemic levels of participation. A review of survey responses identifies three primary issues contributing to programs' reduced capacity.

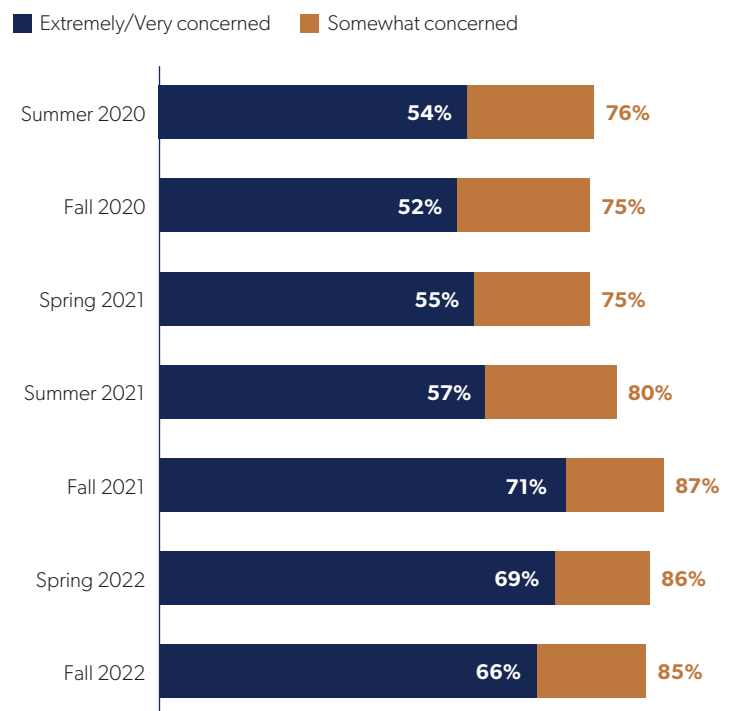


### 1 Recruiting and retaining staff is a significant difficulty for most afterschool programs

Similar to the workforce struggles other sectors are encountering, the afterschool field is also in the midst of a workforce shortage. Approximately 8 in 10 program providers who were serving a smaller number of children during fall 2022 (81 percent) report that staffing was a contributing factor for their program's reduced capacity, an increase of 10 percentage points from the spring of 2022 (71 percent).

When asked about the level of difficulty their program has faced hiring staff, retaining staff, or both, more than 2 in 3 providers (67 percent) say that the experience has been very or somewhat difficult for their program. Additionally, beginning in the fall of 2021, program providers who report that they are concerned about their ability to find staff or keep staff onboard has dramatically increased. For example, in spring 2021, 55 percent of providers reported that they were extremely or very concerned about recruiting or retaining staff. This number increased 16 percentage points, reaching a high of 71 percent in the fall of 2021, and slightly decreasing in the spring (69 percent) and fall of 2022 (66 percent). Overall, 85 percent of providers in the fall of 2022 report that they were at least somewhat concerned about staffing issues (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: An overwhelming majority of afterschool program providers report that they are concerned about their ability to hire or retain staff



“The big thing is just staffing. The demand for our program is higher than it has been in the last 8+ years, and the number of students enrolling with special needs are also quite high. So these needs combined with a staffing market that is lacking teachers and most of our teaching positions being only part-time makes it really hard.”



– Massachusetts afterschool program provider

“Afterschool programs are being asked to be shifted more toward academic programs and less recreational programs to aid in closing the learning loss caused by the COVID pandemic. We understand the need, however, expectations for my staff are significantly higher and can lead to burnout. My staff members are part-time staff and full-time college students. Adding the additional stress and pressure to resemble teachers in the afterschool programs is asking a lot from them.”



– Texas afterschool program provider

## 2 The increased costs of running afterschool programs is preventing some from increasing capacity

Although inflation is seeing a cool down, the high cost of goods—from gas to eggs—persists, and survey results confirm that program providers are also grappling with increasing costs of serving students in their communities. Among providers who report that they are serving a smaller number of students than they were before the pandemic, nearly 1 in 4 (23 percent) report that it is due to the increased costs of running in-person programming.

Additionally, for the first time since including the question asking providers if their weekly cost-per-child for in-person services has increased, a majority of program providers surveyed (52 percent) report that it has. This is 8 percentage points higher than the spring 2022 survey results (44 percent), as well as an increase from the fall (47 percent) and summer of 2021 (43 percent). Forty-six percent of providers estimate that their weekly cost-per-child has increased 10 percent or less, while 39 percent say it has increased between 11-25 percent, 6 percent say it has increased 26-50 percent, and 2 percent say it has increased more than 50 percent.

Another consideration regarding program providers' increased costs of running in-person programming is its interdependent relationship with staffing. While a majority of program providers who report that their cost-per-child increased say it was due to inflation (67 percent) and supplies (58 percent), more than 8 in 10 (83 percent) point to staffing expenditures as the reason for increased costs (See Figure 3).

Worries about sustainability also remain high among program providers. More than 3 in 4 program providers (77 percent) say that they are concerned about their long-term funding and the program's future, including nearly half (48 percent) who are extremely or very concerned.

## 3 The demand conundrum

An interesting survey finding is the contrasting circumstances among program providers. As mentioned above, a majority of program providers (53 percent) report a waitlist for their program, however, 24 percent of programs who report that they are operating at reduced capacity say that it is in part due to the inability to fill student slots, a slight increase from spring 2022 (21 percent). Additionally, in a new question to the survey, 17 percent of programs that are open report that filling student slots is a challenge and among this group, 81 percent say that it is more difficult for their program to fill student slots than it was before the pandemic.

FIGURE 3: Staffing-related costs are the most common reason program providers report that their weekly cost-per-child costs have increased



“...staffing has been our biggest challenge and rising costs of snacks and supplies and having to increase wages to entice staff have all contributed to having to increase cost to parents and having to find more funding.”

—Montana afterschool program provider

“We have done our best to not increase the cost of tuition for our families, however, in the future a larger increase will need to happen. The inflation that has occurred to increase overhead costs as a whole has been major.”

—Washington afterschool program provider

Other survey findings also illustrate a spectrum of demand faced by providers. A majority of program providers (53 percent) are worried about challenges recruiting and enrolling families in programming on one side, while on the other, there are a majority of program providers who are concerned about waitlists and their ability to meet families' demand for programming (55 percent). There is not yet tracking data regarding providers' concerns about recruiting and enrolling families, however it is worth noting that concerns that families will feel safe sending their child to an afterschool program and if families will return to programs have both seen steady declines (See Figure 4). At the same time, the percentage of program providers reporting that they are concerned about waitlists or being about to meet the demand for programs has also seen a decline—from 61 percent in the fall of 2021 to 58 percent in the spring of 2022 and reaching 55 percent of providers in fall 2022—although smaller decreases than worries about families returning to afterschool programs.



Our primary areas of concern have been the following:

- Finding adequate and reliable staffing.
- Increased inflation and cost of living. We know parents are looking for the most affordable options, but operating costs are increasing with inflation.
- Many parents are choosing to work from home and have decided to just keep their children with them."

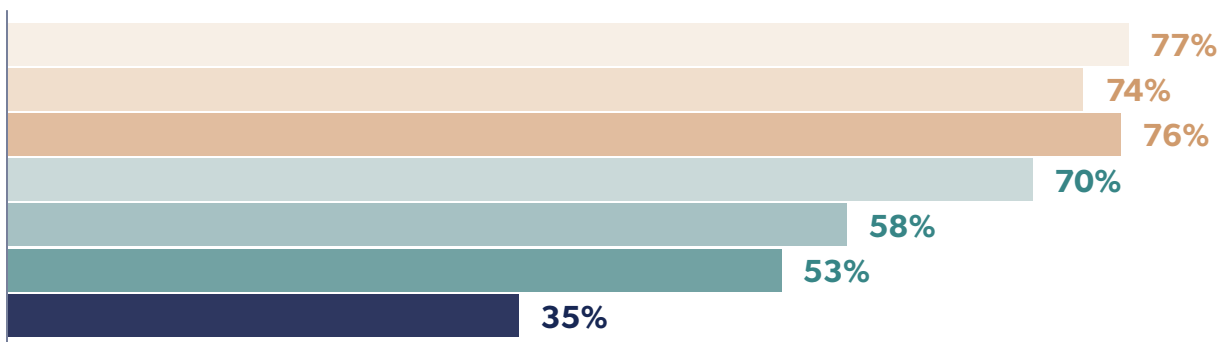


– Virginia afterschool program provider

**FIGURE 4: Program providers' concerns about families returning to afterschool programs is decreasing, while majorities in the fall of 2022 are concerned about the ability to meet demand and challenges with enrollment**

Summer 2020    Fall 2020    Spring 2021    Summer 2021    Fall 2021    Spring 2022    Fall 2022

Whether families will come back given where we are with COVID-19



Whether families will feel safe sending their child to an afterschool program



Waitlists for students/being able to meet the demand for programs



Challenges with recruitment and enrollment of families



## Strategies taken to return to normal

Although the challenges afterschool program providers face in their efforts to serve comparable numbers of students as pre-pandemic are daunting, the afterschool field is showing its resilience and taking steps to do its best to reach the students and families in their communities who need their support.

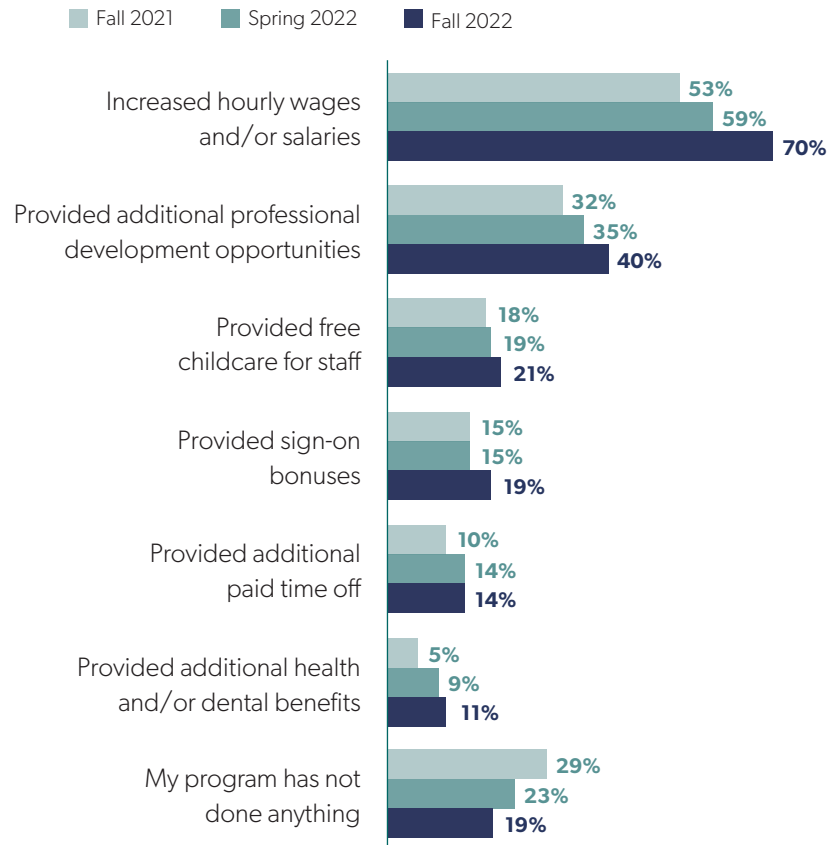


### Employing multiple measures to attract and retain staff

More afterschool program providers surveyed have now taken at least one action to recruit staff, keep staff onboard, or both, compared to previous surveys. Increasing hourly wages or salaries is the most common response, with 70 percent of providers reporting instituting this change, an increase from 53 percent of providers in fall 2021 and 59 percent in spring 2022. Afterschool program providers also report offering additional professional development opportunities (40 percent), free childcare for staff (21 percent), sign-on bonuses (19 percent), additional paid time off (14 percent), and additional or new health and/or dental benefits. The fall 2022 survey saw the lowest percentage of program providers reporting that they have not taken any steps to attract or retain staff (See Figure 5).

Afterschool program providers are also looking for advice on staff well-being. The most requested support providers say would be helpful to their program is advice on staff burnout and keeping their teams engaged, with nearly half of providers surveyed (48 percent) selecting this choice. Since spring 2021 when this option was first included, it has remained the top resource that providers say would be most helpful to their program, with a large increase in the percentage of program providers reporting this beginning in fall 2021 (See Figure 6).

**FIGURE 5: Program providers are more likely to report that they have taken steps to attract or retain staff**



**FIGURE 6: When asked about supports that would be most helpful, advice on preventing staff burnout and keeping teams engaged has remained a priority**

Spring 2021	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022
1. Advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (42%)	1. Advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (41%)	1. Advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (52%)	1. Advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (50%)	1. Advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (48%)
2. Advice on funding streams (35%)	2. Advice on funding streams (35%)	2. Advice on funding streams (34%)	2. Tools and trainings for high-quality summer learning programs (34%)	2. Advice on funding streams (38%)
3. Tools and trainings for high-quality summer learning programs (33%)	3. Tools and trainings for high-quality summer learning programs (27%)	3. Tools and trainings for high-quality summer learning programs (28%)	3. Advice on funding streams (30%)	3. Communication tools to help families learn more about the supports and benefits of afterschool and summer programs (28%)

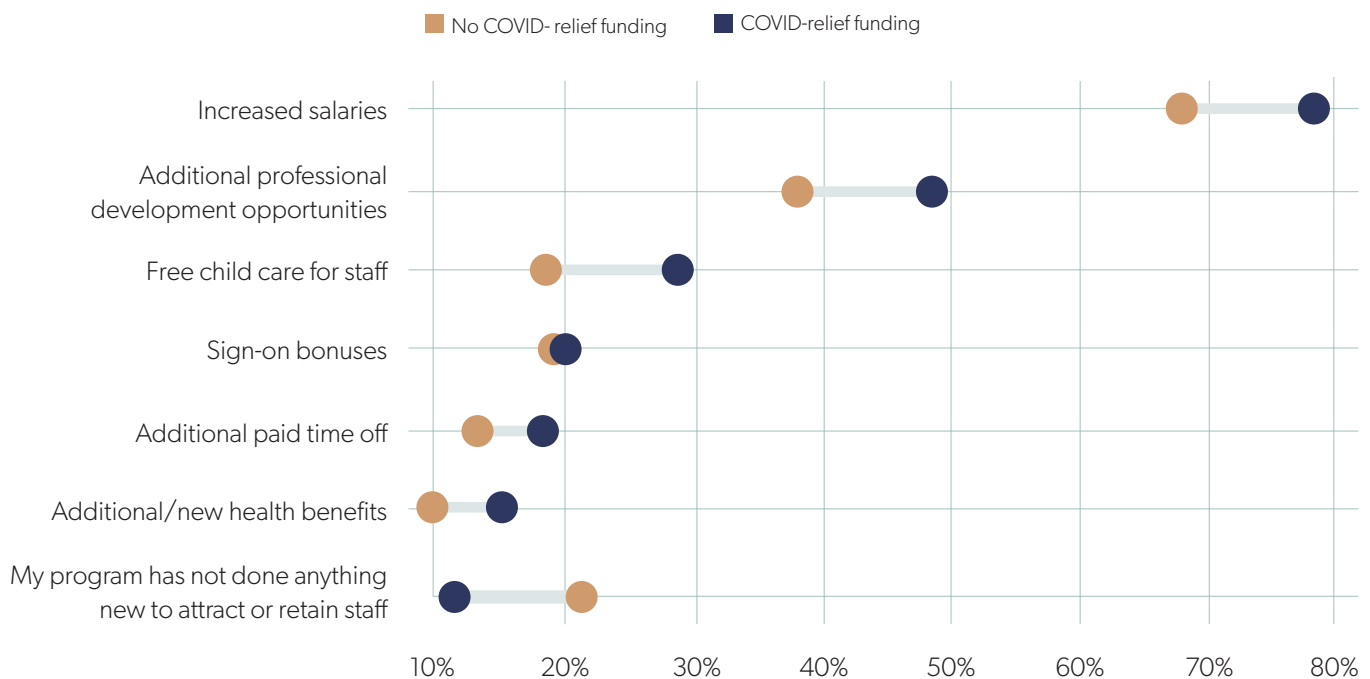
## Accessing COVID-relief funding

Although only approximately 1 in 5 afterschool program providers (19 percent) report that they have received COVID-relief funding, those with this funding stream have been able to use it to keep their doors open and increase access to their program. Among program providers who report receiving COVID-relief funds—which includes, but is not limited to, American Rescue Plan, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER), or Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding—60 percent say that it has supported staff recruitment efforts and 45 percent report that the funding has allowed them to hire more staff. Additionally, program providers report that the funding has helped them to serve more students (43 percent), expand program offerings (30 percent), and extend program hours (13 percent). Nearly 1 in 5 programs (18 percent) report that the funding allowed them to offer a new summer program.

Afterschool programs with COVID-relief funding are also more likely to report taking steps to address staffing challenges compared to those without this funding stream (See Figure 7). For example, 79 percent of programs with COVID-relief funding report that they have increased staff salaries or wages, versus 68 percent of programs without COVID-relief funding. Conversely, afterschool program providers without COVID-relief funding are two times as likely as those with COVID-relief funding to report that their program has not done anything new to attract or retain staff (21 percent vs. 11 percent).



**FIGURE 7: Afterschool programs with COVID-relief funding are more likely to report being able to take steps to help staffing efforts**





## Conclusion

Through the different phases of the pandemic, afterschool programs have been responsive to the needs of their students and families. From expanding services and operating as a meals site or delivering meals to families at the start of the pandemic when food insecurity was a significant issue, to extending operating hours to provide a safe and supervised place for students to go during schools' remote learning, afterschool programs adapted to ensure that their efforts were in service to their community. The public has seen the value of afterschool programs and overwhelmingly supports newly elected federal, state, and local leaders providing more funding for afterschool programs (81 percent). And, more than 3 in 4 voters say that local governments (78 percent) and schools (76 percent) should invest some of their COVID-relief funds toward afterschool and summer learning programs. As parents and experts agree on the pandemic's negative effect on students' education and emotional well-being,<sup>4</sup> afterschool programs' ability to return stronger than before the pandemic is more critical than ever and will be dependent on increased investment at the federal, state, and local levels.



COVID-19 has certainly brought us many challenges. Delivering programming virtually was very difficult and created many hardships for our families. Our top priority was returning to in person learning. It was game changing for our community to reopen in person. There were so many immediate and crucial needs that it has been challenging to keep up. We have increased resources in parent and family engagement, meals, mental health resources, and academic support. Without our program funding sources our community and our families would be much worse off."



– Oklahoma afterschool program provider

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Institute of Education Sciences. (2022). School Pulse Panel. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>
- <sup>2</sup> Institute of Education Sciences. (2022). School Pulse Panel. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>
- <sup>3</sup> Eggleston, C. & Fields, J. (2021). Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Braga, D. & Parker, K. (2022). Most K-12 parents say first year of pandemic had a negative effect on their children's education. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/26/most-k-12-parents-say-first-year-of-pandemic-had-a-negative-effect-on-their-childrens-education/>; Williams, E. & Drake, P. (2022). Headed Back to School: A Look at the Ongoing Effects of COVID-19 on Children's Health and Well-Being. KFF. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/headed-back-to-school-a-look-at-the-ongoing-effects-of-covid-19-on-childrens-health-and-well-being/>