



# Access to Afterschool Programs Remains a Challenge for Many Families

 Afterschool Alliance  
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In a monumental step toward universal afterschool and summer learning programs, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona launched the Engage Every Student Initiative in July 2022. This call to action to ensure that every child has access to a quality out-of-school time program comes at a pivotal moment as children and communities continue to grapple with the difficult circumstances created by COVID-19, with the country now nearly 30 months into the pandemic and many program providers concerned that children in their community need afterschool programming but are unable to access it. A new survey of approximately 1,500 parents or guardians of school-age children provides a snapshot of the current afterschool program landscape, documenting that while children and families who are able to access afterschool programs report high levels of satisfaction, for every child in an afterschool program, there are four more who are waiting for an available program.\*

## High unmet demand for afterschool programs persists

There are 24.7 million children who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled if a program were available to them, according to parents. This projection is greater than the number of children who would have been enrolled in an afterschool program in early 2020—prior to the school closures and stay-at-home orders that were instituted in response to the pandemic, as found in America After 3PM 2020 results (24.5 million children), with the percentage of unmet demand among children essentially the same (49 percent vs. 50 percent).<sup>1</sup> Unmet demand for afterschool programs remains significantly higher than in surveys conducted in 2014 (41 percent), 2009 (38 percent), and 2004 (30 percent).<sup>1</sup>

Unmet demand for afterschool programs by demographics is highest among Latino (60 percent) and Black children (54 percent), and greater among children living in higher income families than children living in families with low incomes (51 percent vs. 46 percent).<sup>§</sup>

### A provider perspective

In a spring 2022 survey of afterschool and summer program providers, many report challenges meeting the demand for programming:<sup>\*</sup>

**51%** of program providers who are open report having a waiting list

**80%** of program providers are concerned that children in their community need afterschool programming but are unable to access it

**58%** of program providers are concerned about being able to meet the demand for programs

————— **Yet, only** —————

**20%** of program providers report that they have received COVID relief funding

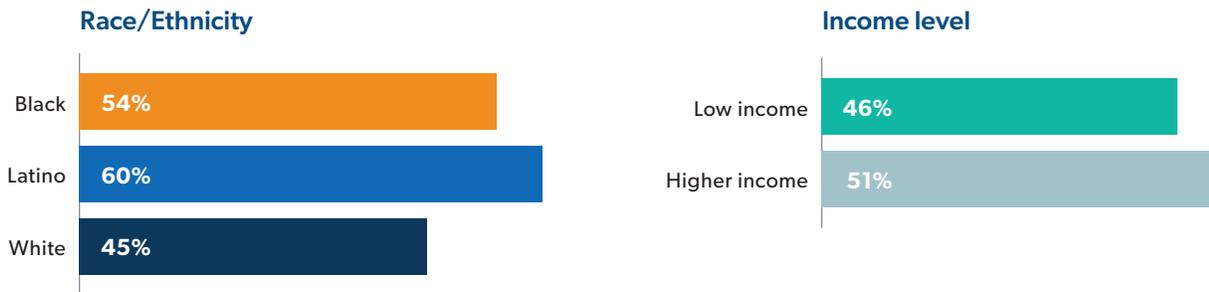
*\*An online survey from March 21-April 12, 2022 of 948 program providers representing nearly 5,500 sites across all 50 states and Washington, D.C.*

<sup>\*</sup> Afterschool Alliance has been tracking afterschool program participation through its America After 3PM study since 2004. As an extension of this work, the organization conducted an interim online tracking survey, from May 12-June 28, 2022, of 1,489 adults who live in the United States and are the parent or guardian of a school-age child who lives in their household. Survey results are weighted by race and income to be representative of the United States' adult population. Projections for child-level data represent the 57.2 million children and youth in the United States based on numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau's October 2019 Current Population Survey.

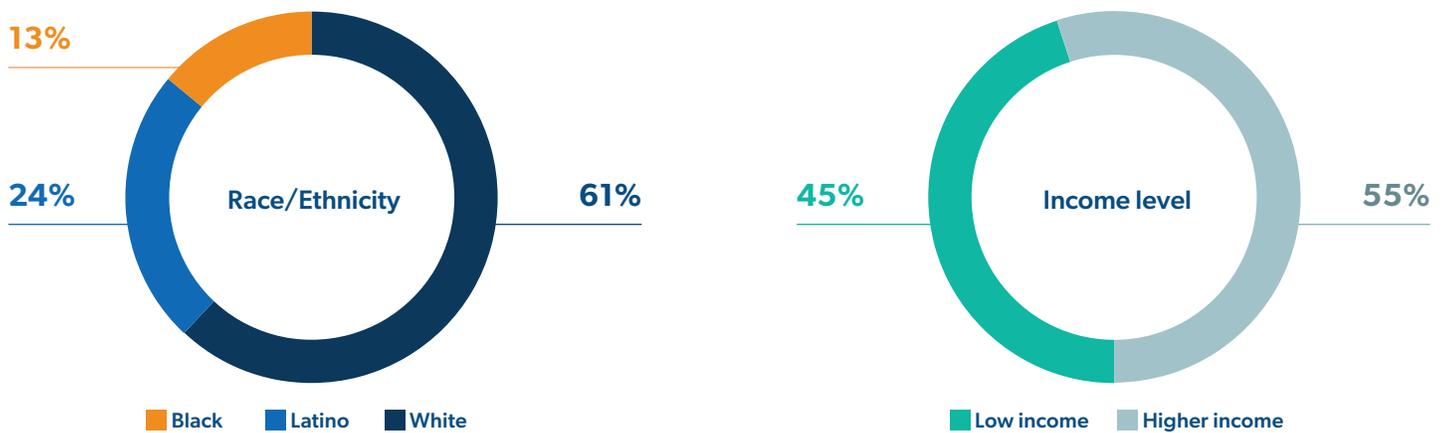
<sup>1</sup> The unmet demand calculations are based on the universe of children who are not currently enrolled in an afterschool program. The larger segment of children who are not currently enrolled in an afterschool program in 2022 compared to America After 3PM 2020 is the basis for a smaller unmet demand percentage among non-participating children leading to a larger projection of children who would participate in an afterschool program if one were available to them when comparing 2020 and 2022 results.

<sup>§</sup> For the purposes of this brief, low-income families are those that qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program, as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program guidelines.

Percentage of non-participant children likely to participate in an afterschool program by:



Composition of likely afterschool program participants by:



## Cost is the top barrier to afterschool program participation

When examining obstacles parents face enrolling their child in an afterschool program, the cost of programs is at the top of the list of barriers.<sup>†</sup> Fifty-seven percent of parents report that afterschool programs being too expensive was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child. Other barriers include lack of a safe way for their child to get to and from programs (52 percent); inconvenient program locations (51 percent); and programs' hours of operation not meeting parent needs (49 percent). Additionally, program availability is a challenge for many parents, including 44 percent who report that afterschool programs were not available in their community, 39 percent who report that there were no spaces available in the afterschool program they preferred, and 37 percent who report that the waiting list was too long for the program they preferred.

Overall, Black and Latino parents are more likely to report barriers to enrolling their child in an afterschool program than parents nationally, in particular around issues related to program accessibility. For example, 58 percent of Latino parents and 49 percent of Black parents report that afterschool programs not being available in their community was an important reason they did not enroll their child, compared to 44 percent of parents nationally.

### A provider perspective

A plurality of program providers (44 percent) report an increase in costs due to COVID-19, citing expenditures including staffing, supplies, and food as factors driving the increase.

*What is causing the increase in your program's cost-per-child for in-person services?*



While not specifically a barrier to enrollment, it is worth noting that 53 percent of parents report concerns that afterschool programs would expose their child to negative influences, experiences, and values was important in their decision-making process. This increase of 3 percentage points from early 2020 may be due in part to parents' increased concern about their children's mental health and well-being during the pandemic. For example, a November 2021 survey by the National Alliance on Mental Illness found that more than 1 in 3 parents (35 percent) reported thinking more about their child's mental health than they did before the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

## In general, Black and Latino parents face greater barriers to enrolling their child in an afterschool program

*Parents reporting the following were important factors in their decision not to enroll their child in an afterschool program:*

	National average	Black parents	Latino parents
Afterschool programs are too expensive	57%	52%	61%
My child does not have a safe way to get to/come home from afterschool programs	52%	58%	67%
Afterschool programs' locations are not convenient	51%	60%	59%
Afterschool programs' hours of operation do not meet my needs	49%	57%	57%
Afterschool programs are not available in my community	44%	49%	58%
There are no spaces available in the afterschool program that I prefer	39%	46%	52%
The waiting list was too long for the afterschool program I prefer	37%	42%	48%

<sup>†</sup> This includes answer choices that relate directly to challenges in enrolling a child in afterschool and excludes answer choices that pertain to reasons for not needing an afterschool program, such as "my child/children is/are old enough to care for themselves."

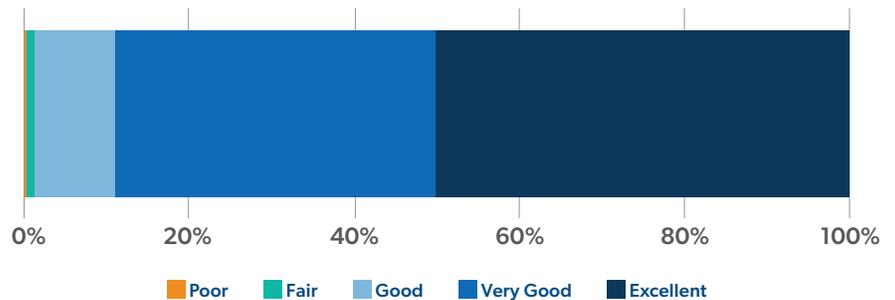
## Afterschool programs keeping kids safe, connected, and engaged in learning

For the children and youth who are able to access afterschool programs during the pandemic, programs are providing a supportive environment, academic enrichment, physical activity, and healthy meals. Fully 95 percent of parents are satisfied with their child’s afterschool program, with an overwhelming majority of parents reporting that their program is helping their child build social skills (91 percent), providing time for physical activity (87 percent), connecting their child with caring adults (79 percent), offering time for reading or writing (80 percent) and homework help (79 percent), helping develop life skills (78 percent), and providing healthy snacks and/or meals (76 percent).

In a new question about program quality, 90 percent of parents rate the quality of their afterschool program as excellent or very good. Just over half of parents (51 percent) rate the quality of their afterschool program as excellent, 39 percent rate it as very good, and 10 percent rate it as good. Only 1 percent of parents say that the quality of their program is fair and no parents report that the quality of their child’s afterschool program is poor.

Parents also report that their child’s afterschool program is helping them to keep their job or work more hours (86 percent); providing them with opportunities to build skills through classes, workshops, or both (76 percent); and connecting their family with community resources (67 percent).

Nearly all parents report that the quality of their child’s afterschool program is either **excellent**, **very good**, or **good**.



### AFTERSCHOOL INSIGHT



For students attending school remotely or through a hybrid model during the pandemic, afterschool programs have been a vital resource, opening their doors during virtual school days. More than 5 in 6 parents with children who attended school completely or partially remotely (86 percent) report that their afterschool program provided a safe, supervised learning environment during virtual school days.

## Spring 2022 afterschool program participation

The percentage of children participating in afterschool programs during the spring of 2022 is lower than it was prior to the pandemic in early 2020 (11 percent vs. 14 percent). Compared to early 2020, the use of parental or guardian care increased while all other forms of after school care saw a decrease, as did children’s reported participation in all types of organized after school activities, from sports to volunteering.

The decrease in afterschool program participation takes place across demographics, however, of note is that afterschool program participation among higher-income children only decreased from 15 percent to 14 percent, while participation among children living in families with low incomes saw a steeper decline—dropping from 11 percent to 8 percent. Similarly, afterschool program participation saw a greater drop among Black children (18 percent vs. 13 percent) than White (14 percent vs. 11 percent) and Latino children (16 percent vs. 15 percent). Additionally, among households with both parents working outside of the home, afterschool program participation is greater than for parents overall (20 percent vs. 13 percent), and only slightly lower than the percentage of households in which both parents were working in 2020 (22 percent).\*

\*Data was collected at both the child and household level. Child level data represents all school-age children living in households surveyed and household level data reflects responses based on the parent or guardian representing a household.

## Parents continue to view afterschool programs as providing critical supports for children and families during the pandemic

Parents overwhelmingly agree on the positive role of afterschool programs in young people's academic and social development. Strong majorities of parents agree that afterschool programs are keeping kids safe and out of trouble (82 percent), helping young people build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (78 percent), and providing additional academic support to help children catch up and keep up in school (77 percent). Two in three parents (66 percent) agree that afterschool programs are helping parents build connections to their child's school day education.

Regarding the benefit to families, most parents agree that afterschool programs provide working parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised (85 percent), help working parents keep their jobs (83 percent), and provide support to parents who are trying to find a job (77 percent).

## Conclusion

These survey findings reveal the difficult task ahead as districts, schools, leaders at the federal, state and local levels, community-based organizations, intermediaries, parents, young people, and advocates consider how to make progress on the promise of the Engage Every Student Initiative. More than 8 in 10 parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs (83 percent) and favor public funding for afterschool programs in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth (88 percent). This indicates a high level of support behind afterschool for all and indicates there is the will to bring the number of young people missing out on afterschool opportunities from 24.7 million to zero.

### Endnotes

- 1 Afterschool Alliance. (2020). America After 3PM: Demand Grows, Opportunity Shrinks. Retrieved from <http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2020/AA3PM-National-Report.pdf>
- 2 National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2021). Poll of Parents Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021). Retrieved from [https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Publications-Reports/Survey-Reports/Poll-of-Parents-Amid-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-\(2021\)](https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Publications-Reports/Survey-Reports/Poll-of-Parents-Amid-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-(2021))

### AFTERSCHOOL INSIGHT



Afterschool programs continue to be a lifeline for working families during the pandemic. For families with parents working onsite (87 percent) or working at all (87 percent), as well as for working moms (85 percent), agreement that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs is even higher than the national average (83 percent).



**“What I appreciate about my program is the empowerment. If you had asked me five years ago, ‘Are you going to be speaking at the U.S. Department of Education,’ my answer would have been ‘no.’ But here I am, I’m speaking on this stage, and it wouldn’t have been possible if not for my afterschool program, HANDY, Inc. They’ve provided me so many resources—mentorship, tutoring, food. I’m tired of seeing so many kids missing out on the opportunities that I have. Afterschool programs provide the resources, the love, the care, the honesty, and the transparency to allow us to be our true selves.”**

#### – Angeles Mejia-Sierra

Youth Force- L.I.F.E. program, HANDY, Inc.

*Remarks for the Engage Every Student Event at the U.S. Department of Education*