

**Subject Line:** FY26 Written Public Testimony for the Record  
**To:** LH.Approp@mail.house.gov  
**From:** Felicia Simpson  
**Organization:** Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance (AELA)

On behalf of the Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance (AELA), our national partner the Afterschool Alliance, and the afterschool and summer learning programs that support working families across our state and nation, thank you for your continued investment in the U.S. Department of Education's Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC, Title IV Part B) program. I respectfully urge you to build upon the investment in 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC in FY 2026 by increasing funding to \$2.09 billion—ensuring more children and youth can access the critical support of afterschool and summer learning programs.

In Alabama, afterschool and summer programs don't just support student learning, they strengthen our workforce and fuel our economy. These programs allow working parents to stay employed, knowing their children are safe, supported, and engaged in enriching activities beyond the school day. For many families, especially those in high-poverty and rural communities, afterschool is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Businesses depend on these programs. When the school bell rings at 3 p.m., production at worksites across Alabama shouldn't have to slow down. Our afterschool and summer initiatives help ensure that parents can continue working without interruption, providing the reliable afterschool support that industry, manufacturing, education, healthcare, and small businesses count on every day. Simply put: our workforce can't thrive without these essential services.

The Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance is committed to ensuring that every child has access to high-quality, out-of-school-time programming. These programs promote academic growth, build life skills, provide caring mentors, and offer hands-on experiences in STEM, the arts, literacy, and career readiness. Students develop problem-solving skills, collaborate with peers, and explore their passions—from robotics and gardening to coding and culinary arts.

The 21st CCLC initiative serves about 17,868 children in 141 communities around Alabama and approximately 1.4 million students nationally in more than 10,000 sites. These programs engage local schools, community-based and faith-based organizations to provide students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade with a safe and supportive environment where they participate in academic enrichment opportunities. 21st CCLC programs are driven by local needs and provide students with foundational skill supports, while getting students excited about learning new things and connecting them with caring mentors before school, afterschool, and during the summer months. Parents choose for their children to attend these programs, and an overwhelming 91% of Alabama parents are satisfied with their child's afterschool experience. 21st CCLC programs serve students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools, primarily in rural, suburban, and urban communities across all 50 states and the territories. These afterschool and summer learning programs are essential to getting students engaged in their own education, accelerating student learning, and have a solid track record of

combatting chronic absenteeism. In the 2022–2023 school year, 96.7% of Alabama students who previously had poor attendance improved their school attendance after joining a 21st CCLC program. Nationally, 60% of chronically absent students showed improvement. We know these programs work.

In Alabama, the Tuscaloosa City Schools summer program exemplifies the critical role high-quality out-of-school-time programming plays in supporting student success, family stability, and workforce development. Recognized as one of the highest quality programs in the state, this 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funded program offers full-day learning opportunities at no cost to parents that blend academic instruction with engaging, theme-based enrichment. The program helps prevent summer learning loss, boosts college and career readiness, and provides safe, structured environments during a time when many families struggle to find affordable childcare. These experiences not only reinforce essential academic skills but also spark student interest, creativity, and confidence—laying the foundation for long-term educational and personal growth.

Last summer, two students from Paul W. Bryant High School in Tuscaloosa City Schools participated in the National Summer Learning Association’s (NSLA) Youth Leadership Institute, a prestigious summer program held in Washington, D.C. Both students, currently sophomores, spent a week on the campus of American University, where they experienced college life firsthand. During their time in D.C., they reflected on their Out-of-School Time (OST) experiences and had the unique opportunity to share their personal stories on Capitol Hill. This life-changing experience exposed them to new possibilities and environments they may have never otherwise encountered. If they choose to pursue higher education, both students would be the first in their families to attend college, a powerful step toward breaking barriers and building brighter futures.

It is opportunities like these that truly impact and change the trajectory of a student’s life. By stepping outside of their everyday surroundings, students are empowered to see themselves in new roles—as leaders, scholars, and changemakers. These experiences ignite hope, confidence, and a vision for what’s possible, especially for those who may not have previously seen college or national leadership as within reach. With exposure, support, and inspiration, students begin to believe in their potential—and that belief can transform not only their futures, but the futures of their families and communities.

Programs like this demonstrate how intentional, community-responsive design can transform the summer months into powerful seasons of learning and opportunity for all students. However, the greatest weakness of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program is not its design or effectiveness—but its limited reach due to insufficient funding. Despite overwhelming evidence of their positive impact, far too many students and families are left without access to these critical services. Nationally, only 1 out of every 3 requests for 21st CCLC funding is approved. That means two-thirds of highly qualified, community-driven programs are turned away—not because they lack merit, but because the federal funding pool is simply not large enough to meet demand.

Over the past decade, an estimated \$4 billion in local grant requests were denied due to inadequate funding and intense competition. That's \$4 billion worth of missed opportunities for students to build academic confidence, explore career pathways, receive mentorship, and engage in safe, enriching environments after school and during the summer. In Alabama alone, approximately 335,480 students who would benefit from afterschool programs are unable to access these opportunities due to barriers such as cost and availability.

This is more than a funding issue—it is a missed investment in our youth and our future workforce. Every child denied access to these programs represents a student who may fall behind academically, a working parent left without reliable care, or a business struggling to maintain productivity because of workforce disruptions after 3 p.m.

The consequences of underfunding are measurable and preventable. When students miss out on afterschool opportunities, they also miss out on:

- Improved academic performance in reading and math
- Higher school attendance rates and lower chronic absenteeism
- Skill development and mental well-being support
- Hands-on, real-world learning experiences in areas like science, technology, engineering and math, arts, and financial literacy
- College and career readiness, including developing workforce-aligned skills like collaboration, problem-solving, and communication
- Safe and supervised environments that prevent risky behavior and support overall well-being

The demand for quality out-of-school-time programming is only growing—and without increased investment, the gap between those who have access and those who do not will continue to widen. If we are serious about closing academic achievement gaps, addressing workforce shortages, and building stronger, more resilient communities, we must prioritize and expand funding for 21st CCLC programs.

These programs are not optional, they are essential. Let's ensure that all students, regardless of their zip code, income level, or family situation, have the opportunity to participate in programs proven to enrich learning, strengthen families, and support our economy.

When considering funding for FY 2026, I urge you to recognize the indispensable role that afterschool and summer learning programs play in supporting our students, working families, communities, and the overall economic well-being of our state. Please increase funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program to \$2.09 billion so that more young people can benefit from the vital services these programs provide.