

AFTERSCHOOL ALERT POLL REPORT

No. 6



Funding provided by the C.S. Mott Foundation
A Report on Findings of the 2003 Nationwide Poll of Registered Voters on Afterschool Programs

Across Demographic and Party Lines, Americans Clamor for Safe, Enriching Afterschool Programs

Voter support remains high, intensity gains, and concerns about funding are revealed

The Afterschool Alliance first polled voters on their views about afterschool programs in 1998. That year and each year since, through good times and bad, voters have consistently expressed strong support for sustaining and expanding afterschool opportunities for America's children and families. The 2003 poll shows that, as in years past, **nine in ten Americans think afterschool programs are important.**

But today's voters are also concerned. More than ever, **they see afterschool programs as critical.** Voters are not simply worried that cuts in funding might impact the availability of programs—they are worried that funding is not being increased. Voters fear negative consequences in their communities if afterschool resources are not expanded. They want to see action taken, and are even willing to invest their own tax dollars to ensure that programs thrive.

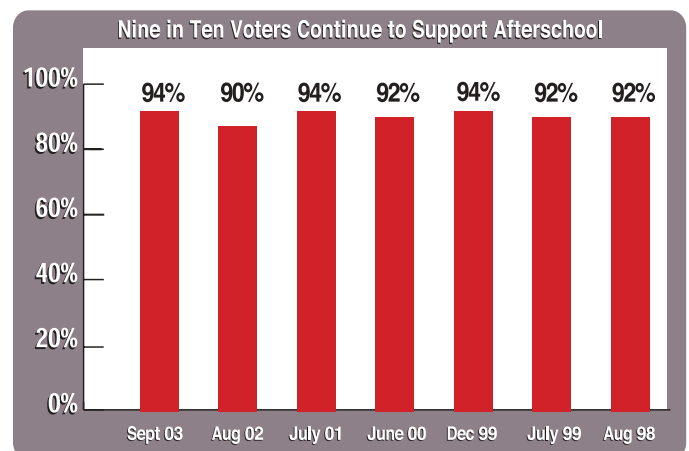
Americans want afterschool programs in their communities because they provide a **safe place** for children and teens to go after school. Voters also place a high value on the learning opportunities offered by afterschool programs, although they want programs to remain distinct from the school day and to offer creative, engaging activities.

The 2003 poll numbers reveal increased intensity of support for afterschool. **Ninety-four percent of respondents agreed that there should be organized activities or places for children and teens to go every day that provide opportunities to learn.** Of those, 66 percent strongly agreed with this sentiment—a climb of 11 percent from 2002. An 11 percent increase in strong support is good news for the afterschool community and

a signal that voters recognize the value of enriching afterschool opportunities.

This increase in intensity was also seen when voters were asked about their views related to afterschool as an absolute necessity for their community. When posed with the question, "Thinking about the children and the hours after school, would you say that afterschool programs are an absolute necessity for your community?" 80 percent of those polled agreed—48 percent strongly so. In 2002, 72 percent of those polled agreed, and 38 percent agreed strongly. This year's results show that voters not only believe that afterschool programs are important, they believe that they are an **absolute necessity** and strongly support comprehensive programs to provide enriching learning opportunities for America's children and teenagers.

Americans support public investment in afterschool and are concerned about its future. When told that no new funds are being dedicated to afterschool at



The findings discussed in this publication are based on a nationwide survey of 800 registered voters. The poll was conducted between September 9 and 14, 2003 by the polling firms of Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Groups. The margin of error for this poll is +/-3.5 percent. Lake Snell Perry & Associates and the Tarrance Group also designed and conducted four focus groups of registered voters in July and August of 2003.

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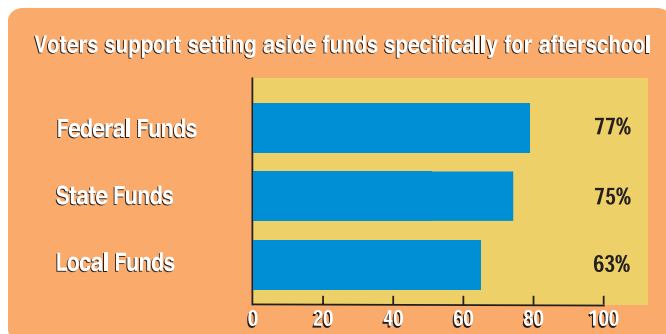
the federal level, and that this move will mean not only no new programs, but also the prospect of reducing services or closing programs, 76 percent of voters expressed concern. Further, over three-quarters (77 percent) of voters—across all demographic groups—favor the federal government putting aside specific funds to be used for afterschool programs.

Voter support is broad and deep, and even reaches voters' wallets. This year, when respondents heard a description of a comprehensive afterschool program and were told that the program may cost \$1,500 per student annually, 62 percent voiced support for using federal and state funds to put these programs in their community. In addition, **voters said they were willing to increase their own state taxes by \$100 annually to pay for every child to attend an afterschool program** (52 percent favor). This support grew to 60 percent of respondents when they were told the funds would be protected so that they could only be used for afterschool programs.

Support for afterschool extends across every region of the country, and includes majority support among Republicans, Democrats and Independents alike. In addition, **African Americans feel even more strongly about the importance of afterschool**—ninety-four percent of them support a comprehensive afterschool program that operates five days a week, compared to 88 percent of all voters. Further, voter commitment to afterschool programs is strong enough that **they support their local, state and federal governments setting aside funds specifically for afterschool programs.**

Voter Support Thrives and Affects Voting Decisions

Last year, polling found that support for afterschool programs did not grow significantly from 2001 levels. In 2003, voter support for afterschool programs rebounded. Strong support for afterschool, and a call for increased investment at local, state and federal levels, survived a declaration of war and uncertain economic times in 2003.



“Young people need the influence of caring adults and positive role models in their lives. Good after-school programs can accomplish that by helping youngsters develop the knowledge, skills and healthy habits to achieve their greatest potential.”

—US Secretary of Education Rod Paige and Afterschool Advocate Arnold Schwarzenegger at the 2003 Afterschool Summit hosted by the US Department of Education and Arnold Schwarzenegger

While voters are concerned with numerous international and domestic issues, they sense that there are not enough afterschool programs available for children in their area. Less than a third of voters (29 percent) believe there are enough or more than enough programs in their area, while a majority (55 percent) believes there are not enough. Parents are the most likely to say there are not enough programs (67 percent), yet even non-parents sense a shortage (48 percent say there are not enough).

Further, three in four voters (75 percent) are concerned about President Bush's commitment to leave no child behind when they are informed of his 2003 proposal to cut federal funding for afterschool programs. Seventy-six percent of voters are also concerned that the lack of new funds means not only that no new programs will be created, but also that existing programs may be forced to close their doors or reduce services. Additionally, 80 percent of voters are concerned that budget problems in states have already resulted in some programs reducing their services or ceasing operations.

As we move into a presidential election year, voters remain committed to afterschool and say this commitment enters voting decisions. In 2004, candidates will be vying for votes at all levels. The results of this year's voters' poll show that the electorate is reluctant to support candidates who advocate cutting afterschool funding. Overall, 61 percent of voters say that a candidate's support for cutting afterschool funding could cost them their vote.

Afterschool Programs Meet a Variety of Needs

Over the last six years, the issue of afterschool has gained more prominence. The value of afterschool programs to working families,

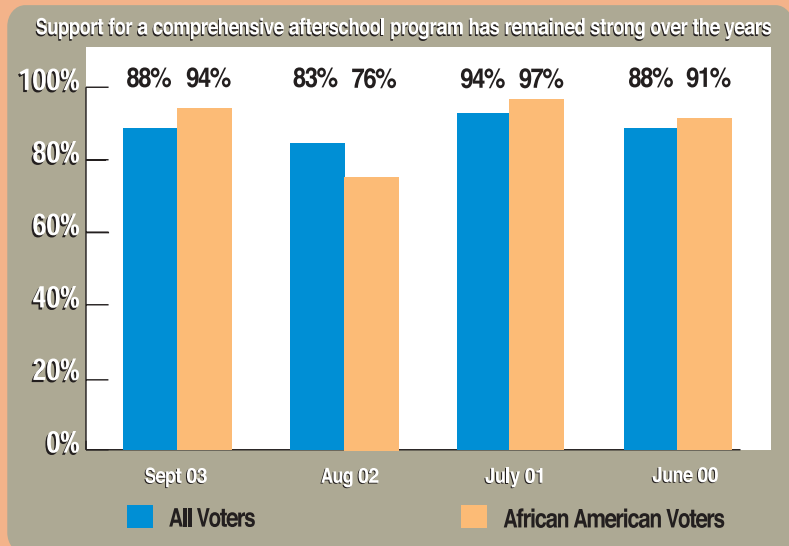
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Key Findings

- ◆ **Nearly nine out of ten voters are concerned that children are unsupervised after school with too much unstructured time.** Half are very concerned. They are equally concerned about children and teens. Voters' concerns about children cluster into a supervision dimension and a safety dimension.
- ◆ **Nine out of ten voters agree that children need some type of organized activity or place for children and teens to go after school every day.** Voters show great concern if children have no place to go after school.
- ◆ **Eight out of ten voters agree that afterschool programs are an absolute necessity.** Across party lines afterschool programs are seen as a necessity.
- ◆ **More than half of voters say there are not enough afterschool programs available to children and teens.** Independent voters are less likely to think there has been improvement in availability.
- ◆ **Voters want to see all levels of government make a commitment to afterschool programs.** They would like the federal, state and local levels to set aside specific funds to be used for afterschool programs.
- ◆ **Voters show a commitment to afterschool through good and bad economic times.** Voters say they are willing to use taxpayer money and even pay more in taxes.
- ◆ **Voters worry that if no new funds come to the programs, as a result of reduced federal funding or because of budget problems in the states, programs will have to reduce their services or close their doors.**
- ◆ **Voters do not want to see afterschool programs become an extension of the school day and do not believe that improving test scores should be the primary goal of the afterschool programs.** Focus group respondents also make it clear that improving test scores cannot be the purpose of programs. Voters want to see children in afterschool programs offered hands-on learning opportunities, recreation, community service, and creative activities that inspire them to learn and grow.

African American voters are more likely than other voters to support comprehensive, five-day-a-week afterschool programs, more willing to see taxes used to implement afterschool programs in their communities, and more likely to vote against candidates who support cutting afterschool funding.

- ▶ **Ninety-four percent of African American voters support a comprehensive afterschool program** that operates five days a week, extends beyond the traditional academic style and gives children more individual attention.
- ▶ **Nearly three-quarters of African American voters (73 percent) polled are willing to support the use of federal or state taxpayer money to implement an afterschool program in their community** that would cost \$1,500 per child, compared with 62 percent of all voters polled.
- ▶ **African American voters are also more likely than other voters polled to consider a candidate's commitment to afterschool when voting.** Twenty-eight percent agree that "officials who want to cut funding for afterschool don't deserve my vote." Overall, only 16 percent of voters agree with that statement.
- ▶ **Nearly nine in ten African American voters (88 percent) support the federal government setting aside funds for afterschool.** Seventy-seven percent of all voters polled share this sentiment.



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employers and communities is being recognized. The 2003 poll clearly shows that while voters agree that afterschool programs are important, they may not agree with their elected representatives on their goals.

Recent federal legislation emphasizes academic achievement and accountability. The No Child Left Behind legislation being implemented by the Bush Administration has affected education at every level, and made significant changes in the federal government's largest afterschool program—the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. Program administration, the national distribution of available funds, and the goals of the program have been altered. The Administration's emphasis on academic achievement and improved test scores extends to the 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Voters are sending a strong message about what they expect from afterschool programs. They believe that afterschool programs should serve many purposes, and should offer enriching learning experiences. They do not believe that afterschool programs should be judged solely on academic or test performance. Most voters (52 percent) do not believe that improving test scores should be the primary goal. Further, more than half of those polled (56 percent) say afterschool programs should not be simply more school. They agree that afterschool programs should offer hands-on, enriching learning opportunities, recreation, community service, and

creative activities in a relaxed, fun environment and that afterschool programs cannot be expected to fix the problems of a failing school system.

"They can pick up maybe where the traditional school left off but there should be a sense of fun there too. You can learn math and have fun with it. That's half of your battle to even learn it or learn it even better if you are having fun doing it."

—Kansas City, MO focus group participant

"You don't want to make an afterschool program strictly school, learn this, learn this, learn this. Kids are not going to want to go. They are going to look at it like, 'I just left school.' You just don't want to put the main goal on that."

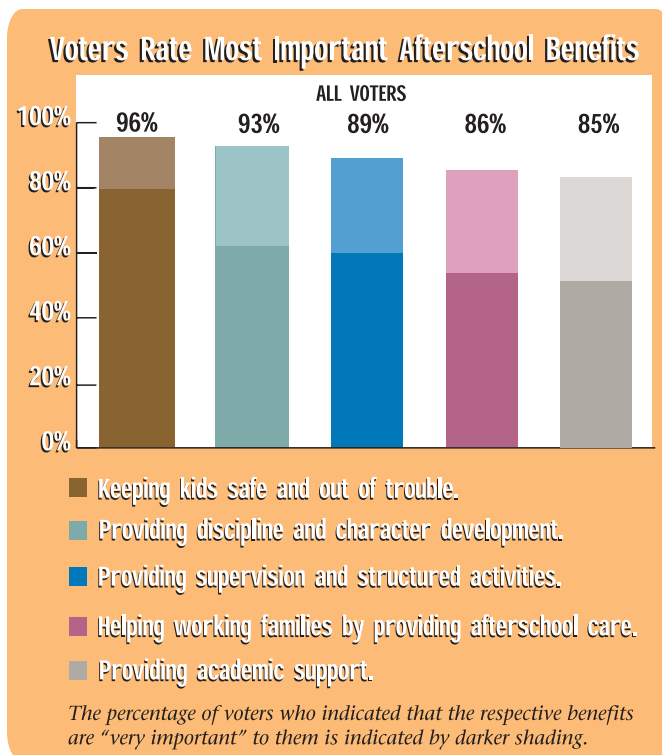
—Kansas City, MO focus group participant

Afterschool Programs and Safety

When asked to cite any and all concerns they have about children during the afterschool hours, the majority of voters' (70 percent) volunteered responses related to supervision and safety. Further, nearly nine out of ten voters are concerned that children are unsupervised after school with too much unstructured time. Half are very concerned.

When presented with a question related to how concerned they would be if children in their community had no place to go after school, 85 percent of voters said they would be somewhat or very concerned. Nationwide, voters view afterschool programs as a safe haven for kids during hours they would be otherwise unsupervised or exposed to perilous conditions. Voters think about safety, structure and supervision when they think about afterschool. These are the issues that motivate voters to support afterschool programs.

Voters' attitudes are supported by research. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a bipartisan, nonprofit anti-crime organization led by police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, victims of violence and leaders of police officer associations, has found through a series of studies that violent juvenile crime is most likely to occur between 3 pm and 6 pm, and that youth are more likely to engage in risky behaviors—smoke, drink, or do drugs—during these



“I just basically want a safe place for my child to be until I get home from work and a place where he can interact.”

—Tampa, FL focus group participant

“A safe environment, this is good.”

—Tampa, FL focus group participant

hours. Unsupervised youth are also most likely to get in car accidents during these hours. These points are not lost on voters. Clearly, their opinions related to the supervision and safety of youth are affected by what they see during the afterschool hours in their own communities.

Conclusion

Afterschool programs keep kids safe, help working families, and inspire success among youth. Through six years of significant changes in economic, social and political landscapes, voters remain strongly supportive of comprehensive afterschool programs. This support conveys to voting decisions and

affects opinions related to taxes and public funding. Voters do not see afterschool as an extension of the traditional school day, and show great concern if children have no place to go after school. Ultimately, voters look toward a future of continued funding at the federal, state and local levels, to sustain and create afterschool programs that provide children enriching learning opportunities.

“Americans value afterschool programs and recognize the many benefits they provide. The public recognizes that afterschool programs reduce juvenile crime, help working families and give kids needed help with their schoolwork. Federal, state and local lawmakers can learn a lot about what matters to their constituents by looking at this research.”

—Mayor John DeStefano, President of the National League of Cities and Mayor of New Haven, Connecticut

Other Findings Support 2003 Voters Poll

In 2003, several other highly respected organizations conducted surveys of segments of the American public on afterschool. The findings of these surveys support the findings of the Afterschool Alliance 2003 Voters Poll in a number of ways.

When asked how important after-school programs are for children in their area, 95 percent of PTA member respondents said “important” or “very important” for elementary school and middle school children, and 82 percent said “important” or “very important” for high school students.

The full details of this poll can be found on the PTA’s web site at www.pta.org.

According to a survey done on behalf of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, despite public focus on school shootings and other violence during the school day, nearly nine in ten working mothers said they are most concerned about their children’s safety during the afterschool hours.

Details on the complete survey can be found at www.fightcrime.org.

PTA members believe afterschool programs’ primary benefit is safety and supervision, followed closely by development, consisting of learning new things, social interaction, and academic achievement.

The full details of this poll can be found on the PTA’s web site at www.pta.org.

Fifty-two percent of surveyed National School Board Association members expect that their afterschool programs will have to be reduced somewhat or even cut entirely in the next few years due to proposed funding cuts.

More details on the results of the NSBA survey can be found at www.nsba.org.



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Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization supported by a group of public, private, and nonprofit entities dedicated to ensuring that all children and youth have access to afterschool programs by 2010. The Alliance is proud to count among its founding partners the C.S. Mott Foundation, US Department of Education, JCPenney Afterschool, Open Society Institute/The After-School Corporation, the Entertainment Industry Foundation, and the Creative Artists Agency Foundation.
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