



Afterschool Ambassador Program: Legacy of Leadership

News Release

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Christine Balak of Indianapolis Named One of 16 Afterschool Ambassadors in the United States This Year

Balak Will Work to Make Quality Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs Available to More Students and Families, Locally and Nationwide

Washington, DC – The Afterschool Alliance has selected Christine Balak, Director of Community Programs at the Central Indiana Educational Service Center (CIESC), to serve as a 2026 Afterschool Ambassador – one of just 16 leaders in the entire nation chosen for the honor this year. Afterschool Ambassadors continue supporting local afterschool programs while serving the one-year Afterschool Ambassador term during which they engage with policy makers and community leaders to organize events and in other ways grow support for the afterschool and summer learning programs that students and families rely on.

“The country urgently needs strong afterschool advocates, so we are thrilled that Christine Balak will serve as an Afterschool Ambassador for the Afterschool Alliance this year. She will help spread the word that too many children and youth are without the afterschool programs that help them succeed in school and in life,” said Jodi Grant, executive director of the Afterschool Alliance. “This is a pivotal year when we must continue building support for these essential programs, which keep kids safe, inspire them to learn, and give parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised after the school day ends. Balak is exactly the kind of champion we need.”

“I’m thrilled to be working with the Afterschool Alliance to build more awareness and support for these programs this year. I’ve seen firsthand how afterschool and summer learning help students stay on track and give families a much-needed lift,” said Balak. “Right now, with rising costs and student engagement being a real challenge, these programs aren’t just ‘extra’—they’re essential. They give kids a space to find mentors and dive into what they’re actually passionate about. I’m proud to be part of the afterschool movement and to be a 2026 Afterschool Ambassador.”

The Central Indiana Educational Service Center (CIESC) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit providing free and at-cost educational programs throughout central Indiana and beyond. Its mission is to partner with districts, educators, and students to provide high-quality, sustainable, and affordable services that ultimately enhance academic achievement and operational efficiencies. One of the services CIESC provides is the management of the 21st Community Center Learning Center grants in the MSD of Pike Township. It currently serves 400 students in grades 3-5 and 9-12 per year in 6 schools – five elementaries and Pike High School. Its programs include tutoring, homework assistance, and enrichment activities such as mentoring, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), art, music, physical

fitness, and social-emotional learning. These activities reinforce what happens during the school day, and CIESC works collaboratively with school staff to better support youth and achieve positive student outcomes.

Each Afterschool Ambassador will organize a major event for *Lights On Afterschool*, the Afterschool Alliance's annual rally for afterschool. Most of the thousands of local *Lights On Afterschool* events will be on or around Thursday, October 22, 2026.

The 2026 Afterschool Ambassadors are:

- **Alabama, Tuscaloosa:** Lindsey Blevins, Tuscaloosa City Schools
- **Alaska, Fairbanks:** Lindsay Weaver, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
- **Arkansas, Hot Springs:** Amos Gray, High Impact Movement, Inc.
- **Arkansas, Texarkana:** Tina Jones, Four States Urban Development Project
- **DC, Washington:** Katrina Owens, DC SCORES
- **Florida, Miami:** Sean Prospect, South Florida After-School All-Stars, Inc.
- **Indiana, Indianapolis:** Christine (Chrissy) Balak, Central Indiana Educational Service Center, MSD of Pike Township Schools
- **Mississippi, Cleveland:** Tracy Henshaw Cameron, Delta Area Association for Improvement of Schools
- **Mississippi, Hattiesburg:** Jo Hawkins-Jones, Going Beyond Apprenticeship 21st CCLC Program
- **North Dakota, Grafton:** Lori Zahradka, North Valley Career and Technology Center
- **Oklahoma, Oklahoma City:** Les Thomas, Urban Bridge
- **Pennsylvania, Milton:** Travis Stevens, Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, STEAMS Afterschool & Summer Programs
- **Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh:** Ana Kay Yaghoubian, Building for Success in School and Life, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania
- **Texas, Dallas:** Angelica Portillo, Dallas Afterschool
- **Virginia, Arlington:** Paula Fynboh, Aspire Afterschool Learning
- **West Virginia, Shinnston:** Michelle Frase, Buzz Learning Academy

A [2025 household survey](#) found that the parents of 29.6 million children want afterschool programs for their children – but less than 7 million kids are currently enrolled. Another 22.6 million children would attend an afterschool program if it were available. That means three in four kids whose parents want afterschool programs for them (77%)—including many in middle- as well as low-income families – are being left behind. Cost and accessibility are the barriers that many families cannot overcome. It's no wonder that 89% of parents favor public funding for these programs. Ninety-five percent of parents with children in after-school programs are satisfied with the program their child attends.

A large and powerful body of evidence demonstrates improvements in grades, school attendance, behavior, and more among children who participate in afterschool programs. Researchers have also found that students in afterschool programs are more engaged in school, more excited about learning, and develop critical work and life skills such as problem solving, teamwork, and communication.

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The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at

www.afterschoolalliance.org.

Central Indiana Educational Service Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit providing free and at-cost educational programs throughout central Indiana and beyond. Last year, it served over 314 schools and organizations to provide a better educational experience to over 234,322 children. With comprehensive services, it allows organizations to function at the lowest possible cost while maintaining the highest possible quality. CIESC programs include many collaborative ventures with other organizations and non-profits to improve the learning process. Membership with CIESC provides Indiana school districts with valuable benefits and opportunities that translate to substantial savings for member school districts. Its full range of resources complements a district's needs and creates impact for its students.