



## **Afterschool Ambassador Program: Legacy of Leadership**

### **News Release**

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### **Dr. Jo Hawkins-Jones of Hattiesburg Named One of 16 Afterschool Ambassadors in United States This Year**

*Hawkins-Jones 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 Jo Hawkins-Jones, Associate Teaching Professor at The University of Southern Mississippi and Program Director of the Going Beyond Apprenticeship 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Program, 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 working with their local 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 Jo Hawkins-Jones 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. Hawkins-Jones is exactly the kind of champion we need.”

“I am honored to partner with the Afterschool Alliance this year, championing the power of afterschool and summer learning programs to expand opportunity, ignite potential, and ensure every child has the support they need to thrive,” said Hawkins-Jones. “I’ve seen up close the many ways these programs help students succeed and help families overcome challenges. That’s especially important now, as so many families are struggling with high costs, and too many students are disengaged. Afterschool and summer programs are uniquely positioned to help students connect with peers and caring mentors, explore their interests, and discover their passions. I am proud to be part of the afterschool movement and to be a 2026 Afterschool Ambassador.”

The Going Beyond 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Apprenticeship Program in Hattiesburg serves approximately 40 high school students per year at Hattiesburg High School through four specialized apprenticeship-based pathways: Early Childhood Education, Advanced Manufacturing, Cosmetology/Esthetician, and Polymer Science. Operating on one primary site with strong community and industry partnerships, the program provides structured afterschool and summer programming focused on career readiness, workforce development, and academic support. Apprentices receive individualized mentoring, scholarship

assistance, ACT preparation, financial literacy training, and professional skills development, including communication, teamwork, and workplace ethics.

Each 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 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 afterschool 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 communications.

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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](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org).

*The Going Beyond CTE Apprenticeship 21st Century Community Learning Center Program is a career-focused youth development initiative designed to strengthen college and workforce readiness for high school Career Technical Education students at Hattiesburg High School. Supported by The University of Southern Mississippi College of Education and Human Sciences, the program provides structured academic support, service-learning opportunities, and hands-on apprenticeship experiences in pathways such as early childhood education, engineering (including CAD and polymer engineering), construction core/electrical, and most recently added cosmetology.*