



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

### **News Release**

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### **Les Thomas, Sr. of Oklahoma City Named One of 16 Afterschool Ambassadors in United States This Year**

*Thomas 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 Les Thomas, Executive Director of Community Engagement at Urban Bridge, 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 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 Les Thomas, Sr. will serve as an Afterschool Ambassador for the Afterschool Alliance this year. He 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. Thomas is exactly the kind of champion we need.”

“I’m honored to serve as a 2026 Afterschool Ambassador and to partner with the Afterschool Alliance to help more students and families access quality afterschool and summer learning programs,” said Thomas. “Through my work with Urban Bridge and Hope Culture Leadership, I’ve seen firsthand how afterschool programs provide safe spaces for students to grow, build relationships, and discover their potential. These programs don’t just support academic success; they also help shape confidence, character, and future opportunity. At a time when many families need support the most, afterschool programs are an essential investment in our young people and our communities. I’m proud to advocate for the afterschool movement across Oklahoma and beyond.”

Thomas is also the In-Game Host/Hype Man at Oklahoma State University.

Urban Bridge infuses hope in the lives of middle and high school youth in Northeast Oklahoma City through free, holistic programming that focuses on bridging opportunity gaps. Built on their “4 E’s” framework (Education, Empowerment, Exposure, and Economic Development), Urban Bridge currently offers three key programs, including The Bridge Impact Center, Natruwell Mental Health Services, and Hope Culture Leadership. In 2025, Urban Bridge collaborated with 167+ local community organizations and 160+ resource partners to power potential in the lives of over 5,322 youth in their community.

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).*

*Urban Bridge is a community-based nonprofit that infuses hope into youth by creating pathways to health, wholeness, and economic opportunity. To learn more about its programs or how to support Urban Bridge, go to [urbanbridge.org](http://urbanbridge.org) (<http://urbanbridge.org/>).*