



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

### **News Release**

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### **Lori Zahradka of Grafton Named One of 16 Afterschool Ambassadors in United States This Year**

*Zahradka 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 Lori Zahradka, Project Director of the North Valley Extended School Project, 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 Lori Zahradka 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. Zahradka is exactly the kind of champion we need.”

“I am pleased and excited to have the opportunity to work with the Afterschool Alliance to increase awareness and support for afterschool and summer learning programs this year,” said Zahradka. “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 North Valley Extended School Project provides high-quality before school, afterschool, and summer learning opportunities for students across northeast North Dakota. Built on strong partnerships with schools, families, and regional employers, the program offers hands-on career exploration, STEM enrichment, leadership development, and mentoring that connect classroom learning to real-world pathways. These experiences help students build the skills and confidence to become “Choice Ready” for college, careers, and community engagement. Serving more than 1,000 K-12 students annually at sites in Cavalier, Drayton, Grafton, Hatton, Midway, Minto, Northwood, Park River Area, and Valley-

Edinburg, the project is administered by the North Valley Career and Technology Center and funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, and valued community partners.

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).*

*At North Valley Career and Technology Center, we are committed to excellence in education by serving diverse populations and providing learning opportunities that reflect the changing needs of the community and workplace. More information is available at [www.northvalleyctc.org](http://www.northvalleyctc.org).*