



Youth Afterschool Ambassador Program
A Project of the Afterschool Alliance

NEWS RELEASE

January 9, 2024

CONTACT: [Magen Eissenstat](mailto:Magen.Eissenstat@afterschoolalliance.org), 202/609-9889

**Gadsden City High School Student Selected As One of Ten in
Country to Serve as a Youth Afterschool Ambassador in 2024**

*Youth Ambassadors Will Raise Awareness About the Importance and Impact of
Afterschool Programs*

Washington, D.C. -- The Afterschool Alliance announced today that Willany Sayles, a Gadsden City Schools 21st Century Afterschool Program participant and Gadsden City High School 9th grade student, is serving in its 2024 cohort of Youth Afterschool Ambassadors. Sayles is one of just ten students from across the nation chosen for the honor on the basis of her essays in a recent competition.

The ten Youth Afterschool Ambassadors will spread the word about the importance of afterschool programs by sharing their personal experiences and their perspectives on how these programs support young people and their communities. The Youth Ambassadors will hone their advocacy and leadership skills by participating in the annual Afterschool Alliance Youth Voice Week as well as connect with members of Congress and their aides as part of the annual Afterschool for All Challenge later this year. They also write for the [Afterschool Snack](#), the Afterschool Alliance blog, about the impact afterschool programs have had on their lives.

“We are so grateful that Willany Sayles is serving in the 2024 cohort of Youth Afterschool Ambassadors,” said Jodi Grant, Executive Director of the Afterschool Alliance. “She has a powerful perspective to share with community leaders, advocates, educators, and lawmakers about how the support afterschool programs provide has helped unlock her potential. Afterschool programs keep students safe, inspire them to learn, give working parents peace of mind, and help youth feel connected and supported. Unfortunately, unmet demand for afterschool is at an

all-time high. It is more important than ever that we learn from the experiences of young leaders like Willany. We know she will do fantastic work promoting the benefits of afterschool for all.”

“I’m excited to serve as a Youth Afterschool Ambassador,” said Sayles. “My elementary school’s afterschool program was a huge source of support for me. It was a safe, supportive atmosphere where I could play, take part in fun art activities, and get personalized help with my schoolwork. The experience was so meaningful that I chose to volunteer at the program throughout middle school. I was proud to give the kids the same fun experience I had in the program, and I grew a lot as a leader. I’ve continued to develop those skills as a member of Etowah County Youth Advisory Leadership Board and as a page for the Alabama state senate last summer. Throughout my afterschool experiences, I’ve learned that no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. I’m proud to play a role in the movement to increase access to supportive afterschool programs as a Youth Ambassador.”

The ten Afterschool Ambassadors in this year’s cohort live in Alabama, the District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Texas. They are:

- **Jay’Len Clark-Carr** (he/him) IGNITE Afterschool Program, Philadelphia, PA, age 16
- **Edgar Euceda** (he/him), Elsik Debate Club, Houston, TX, age 16
- **Ava Havidic** (she/her), Broward Youth Coalition of United Way, Fort Lauderdale, FL, age 17
- **Gabrielle Haynes** (she/her), Boys & Girls Club of Truckee Meadows, Reno, NV, age 14
- **Jully Myrthil** (she/her), Young Voices, Providence, RI, age 17
- **Issa Ouairid** (he/him), Life Pieces to Masterpieces, Washington, DC, age 14
- **Willany Sayles** (she/her), Gadsden City Schools 21st Century Afterschool Program, Gadsden, AL, age 14
- **Brandon Tibbs** (he/him), ComED Youth Ambassadors and Black Male Leadership Academy, Chicago, IL, age 15
- **James Tonetti** (he/him), Project Connections, Stockbridge, MA, age 14
- **Aurie-Anne Vixama** (she/her), After-School All-Stars South Florida, Miami, FL, age 13

Some 24.7 million U.S. children not in an afterschool program would be enrolled, if a program were available to them, according to a [survey of 1,500 parents](#) commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance and conducted by Edge Research in 2022. That is the highest number ever recorded. Unmet demand for afterschool programs is significantly higher among Latino and Black children (at 60% and 54% respectively) than among children overall (49%). Cost is the top barrier to enrollment, cited by 57% of parents as a reason for not enrolling their child. Ninety percent of parents rate the quality of the afterschool program their child attends as excellent (51%) or very good (39%).

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 and excited about learning and develop critical work and life skills such as problem solving, teamwork, and communications.

[Torani](#) is a generous supporter of the Afterschool Alliance's Youth Ambassador Program.

#####

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.