

A Mix of Highs and Lows for Afterschool Program Providers

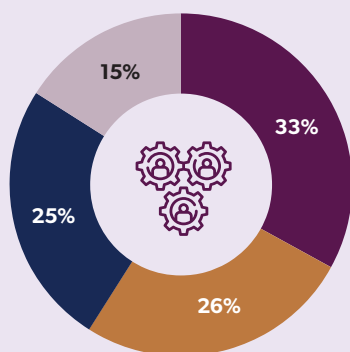
Nearly five years later, a majority of afterschool programs are able to serve as many or more students as they served before the pandemic began. Still, most providers are concerned about their programs' sustainability and staffing capabilities. Overwhelming majorities of afterschool program providers report offering their students academic enrichment, STEM learning opportunities, wellness activities, and time to develop life skills. But at the same time, concern regarding students' well-being has increased. Tracking the state of afterschool program providers, a new national online survey conducted by Edge Research between October 29 and December 10, 2024, of 1,223 afterschool program providers representing more than 9,200 programs across all 50 states and Washington, D.C., finds that the afterschool field is experiencing areas of growth, but still grappling with challenges that impact their ability to best meet the needs of their students and families.

BY THE NUMBERS Fall 2024 Program Provider Survey Highlights

Operations

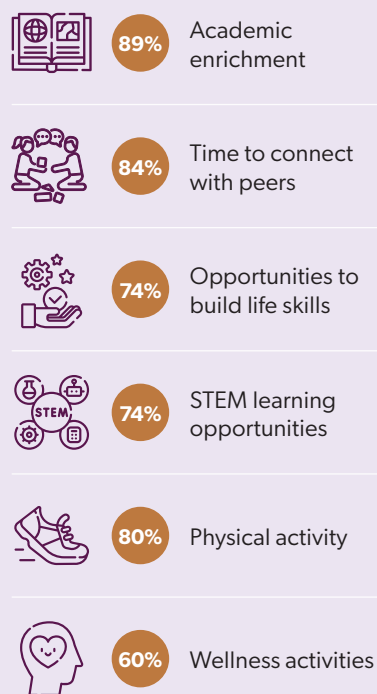
Afterschool programs' capacity now compared to before the pandemic:

- Higher
- Same level
- Lower
- Unsure/not applicable



Supports

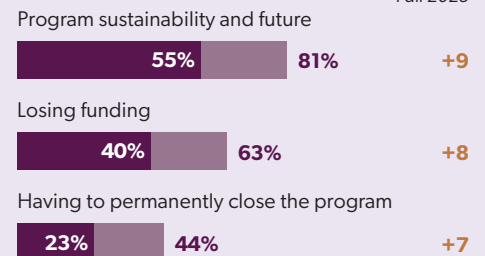
Afterschool programs are providing:



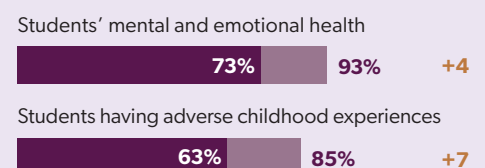
Concerns

Afterschool program providers' levels of concern about their program's sustainability and future grow:

- Extremely/very concerned
 - Concerned
- Extremely/very concerned percentage point change from Fall 2023*



Worries about students' well-being also increase:



The Highs

A positive indicator of the health of the afterschool field is that more afterschool programs today report having recovered from the setbacks experienced during the pandemic than in previous waves of the survey. They also report that they continue to help their students' academic and social development.

1 More afterschool programs are operating at an increased capacity compared to five years ago

The number of afterschool program providers that report they are operating at a higher capacity than they were before the pandemic grew from fall 2023 to fall 2024, increasing from 28% to 33%. At the same time, providers reporting that they are operating at lower levels decreased slightly, from 27% to 25%. Now, fully 6 in 10 afterschool program providers report that they are operating at the same level or higher than they were in 2019, including majorities of providers in rural, suburban, and urban communities (60%, 55%, and 60%, respectively), and regionally, including providers in the Northeast (60%), Midwest (54%), South (63%), and West (59%).

This is a significant shift from the fall of 2021, where a plurality of afterschool program providers reported that they were operating at reduced capacity (46%) and notes a change from afterschool programs on the road to recovery to a return to normalcy. For those afterschool program providers currently operating at a reduced capacity compared to five years ago, the top two contributing factors reported include staffing issues (50%) and lack of funding or insufficient funding (41%).

2 Programs continue to provide a holistic set of supports to students and families

Young people in afterschool are benefitting from academic enrichment, STEM learning opportunities, outdoor and physical activities, snacks and meals, time to interact and build social skills, and more. An overwhelming majority of afterschool programs are providing their students with a mix of academic help, support for their physical and mental well-being, and opportunities to build the skills that will benefit them in school, work, and life (see Figure 1).

Additionally, 7 in 10 afterschool program providers offer family or parent engagement activities, 3 in 10 help connect students and families to community resources (29%), and 1 in 4 include family leadership opportunities (26%), such as parent advisory boards or teaching parents how to advocate for their children's education.



Despite more afterschool program providers serving a greater number of students, it is worth noting that a majority of afterschool programs (53%) continue to report a waitlist, similar to survey results from fall 2023 (52%), 2022 (53%), and 2021 (54%). This reality may help to explain why more than 8 in 10 program providers (82%) are concerned that there are children in their community who need afterschool programming but are not able to access it, with 56% extremely or very concerned about this circumstance.

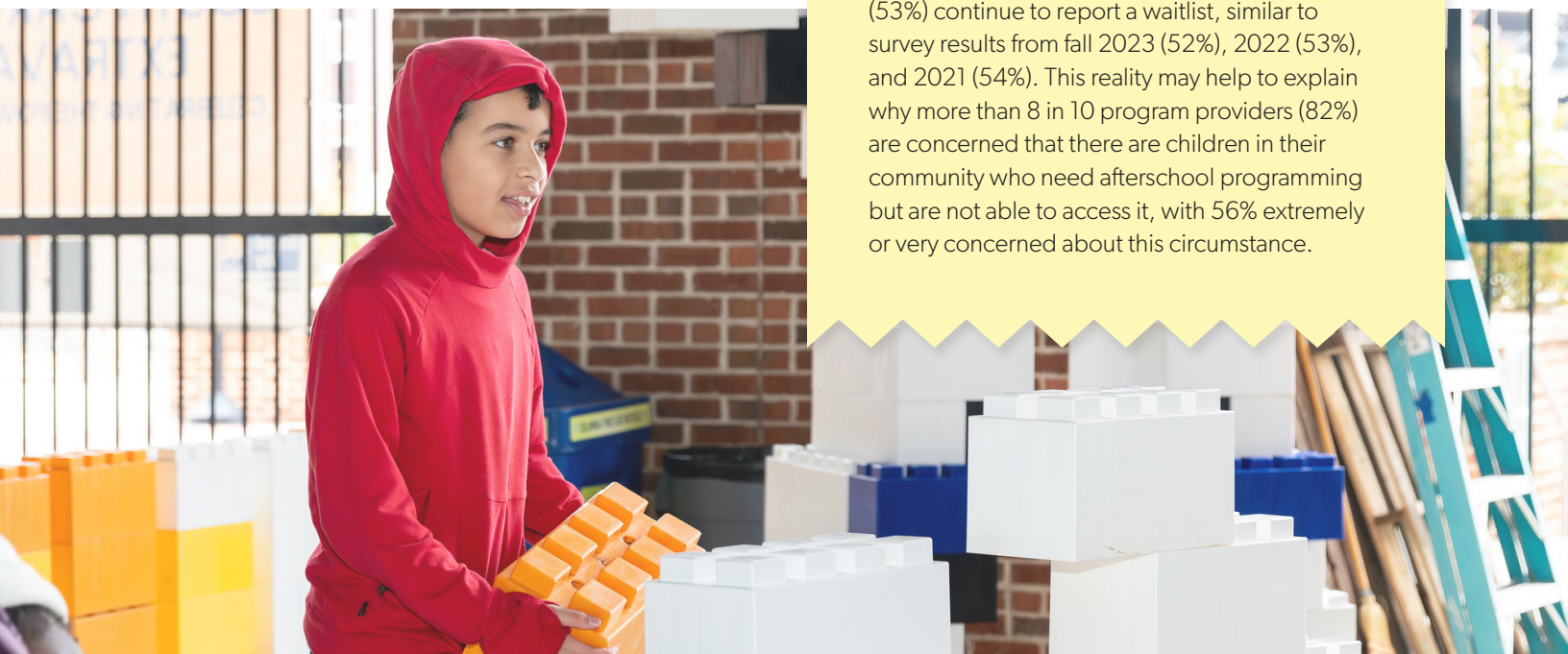


FIGURE 1: Afterschool programs are providing a critical set of supports for students

Percentage of program providers reporting that they offer the following to their students:



*Among programs serving high school students



The Lows

As in previous surveys, there are challenges afterschool program providers report facing and worries they carry for their students and their program as a whole. While 62% of program providers are optimistic about the future of their afterschool program, this is a 10-percentage point decrease from a year previous, and providers reporting pessimism has more than doubled from previous years, growing from 6% in fall 2022 and 2023 to 14% in the most recent survey. Although still a small portion of afterschool program providers overall, this increase in pessimism is primarily driven by growing concerns regarding programs' long-term sustainability. There was also a notable increase in providers' worries about the well-being of their students.

1 Most afterschool program providers remain concerned about sustainability and staffing

Afterschool program providers reporting concerns about their program's long-term funding and future jumped 8 percentage points to 81% and is currently higher than it has been since spring 2021 (see Figure 2). Additionally, for the first time since 2021, a majority of program providers (55%) say that they are extremely or very concerned about their sustainability. Similarly, the percentage of afterschool program providers concerned about the loss of funding to their program is higher than it has been since 2021, with 63% of providers concerned and 4 in 10 extremely or very concerned.

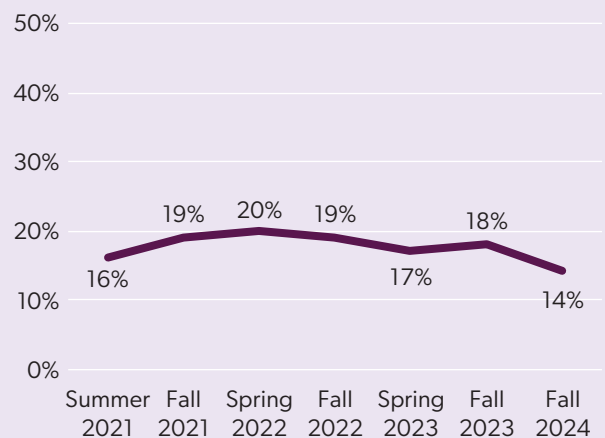
Urban and rural program providers are more likely than providers located in suburban areas to say that they are extremely or very concerned about their sustainability (60% and 55% vs. 47%) and loss of funding to their programs (46% and 41% vs. 33%). Unsurprisingly, programs with pandemic-relief funding are also much more likely to have a high level of concern about loss of funding to their program this year than programs without pandemic-relief funding (51% vs. 38%).



Advice on funding took the top spot as the resource that program providers said would be most helpful, with 44% of providers selecting this option, followed by advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged (34%), and tools and resources to help provide benefits and support to staff (31%).

Pandemic-relief funds wind down

While past program provider surveys found that only a small portion of afterschool and summer programs reported receiving pandemic relief funds, it is now at its lowest level at 14%.



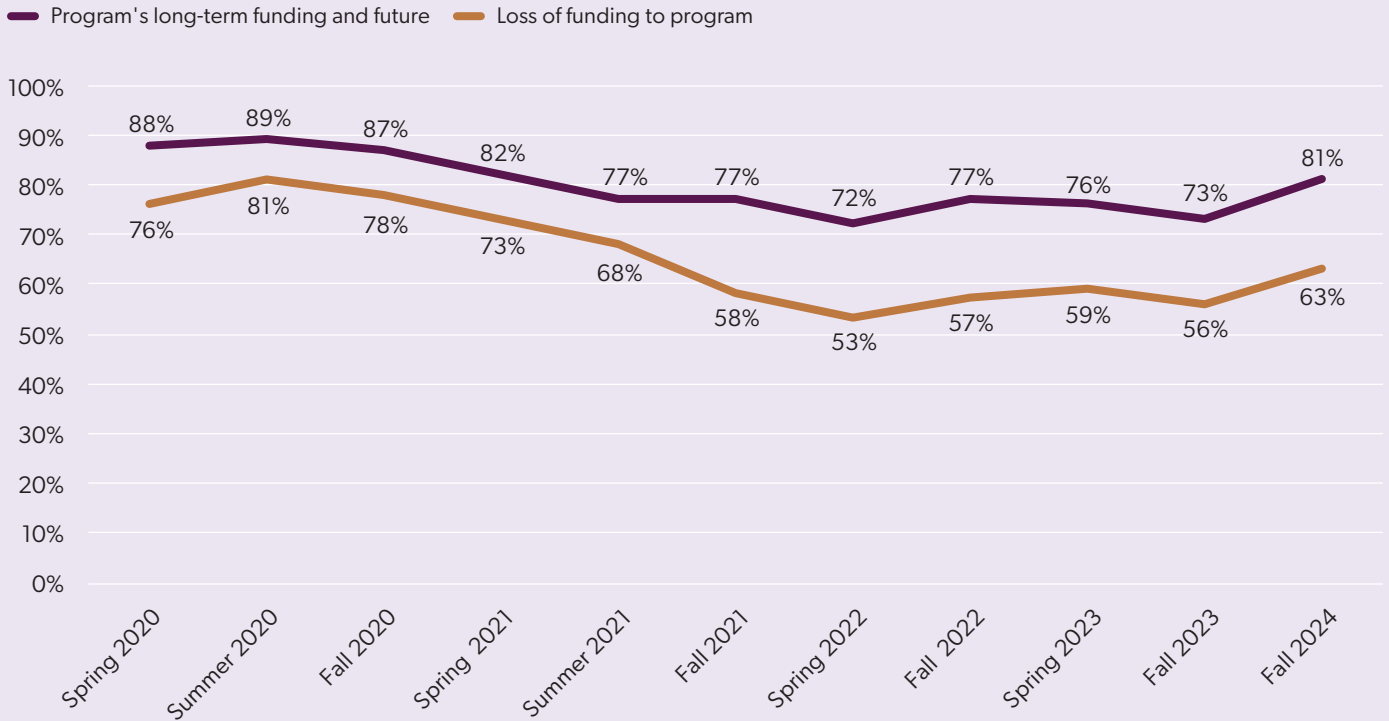
Afterschool program providers report that pandemic relief funds have helped them to support staff recruitment efforts (47%), hire more staff (46%), serve more students (42%), expand program offerings (35%), and extend program hours (14%). However, with this funding ending, providers report that they anticipate needing to reduce their number of staff (36%), programming offered (35%), and students served (29%).

Families will feel the effect of this funding loss

Nearly 1 in 4 programs (23%) say that they will need to close one or more program sites, while 14% of programs report that they will need to start charging parent fees and 28% will need to increase parent fees to fill the funding hole left with the ending of the pandemic relief funds.

FIGURE 2: Afterschool program provider worries about sustainability is higher than it has been since 2021

Percentage of afterschool program providers reporting that they are concerned about the following:



Afterschool program providers who serve mostly children from families with low incomes and children of color are also more likely to express high levels of concern about funding. For example, there are double-digit percentage point differences between programs with more than 75% of their students qualifying for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program who are extremely or very concerned about their program’s long-term funding and loss of funding compared to programs serving a minority of students from families with low incomes (see Figure 3).

Staffing also remains a significant concern for most afterschool program providers, with roughly 8 in 10 concerned about their ability to pay their staff a livable wage and benefits (83%) and finding or retaining staff (79%). In both instances, a majority of providers are extremely or very concerned (59% and 52%, respectively).

A bright spot is that for the first time since asking the question about the level of difficulty of recruiting or retaining staff, less than half of afterschool program providers (47%) report that they are facing difficulties hiring staff, keeping staff, or both, while the percentage of program providers reporting that it has been easy to find and/or keep staff increased 10-percentage points from 22% in fall 2023 to 32% this past fall. However, program providers that struggle with staffing report it has far-reaching negative impacts on their program, including increased staff stress (75%), their inability to serve more students (66%), and a decrease in staff morale (50%).

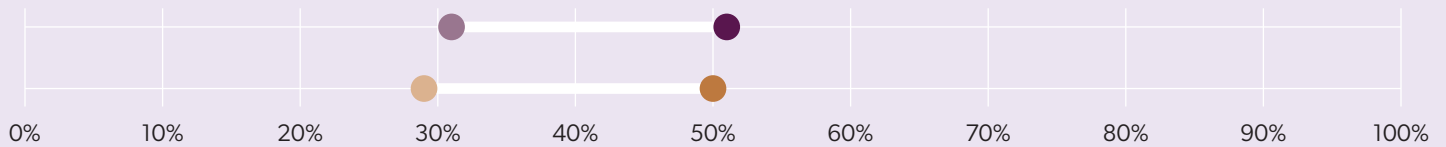
Another source of optimism is afterschool program providers reporting an increase in their program’s cost-per-child is at its lowest level, with 42% of providers reporting an increase in the past year. For example, the percentage of providers reporting an increase in fall 2023 was 49%, 52% in fall 2022, and 47% in fall 2021. Conversely, the percentage of afterschool program providers reporting a decrease in their cost-per-child tripled, from 3% in fall 2023 to 9% in 2024.

FIGURE 3: Afterschool programs reaching underserved communities are more likely to report funding concerns

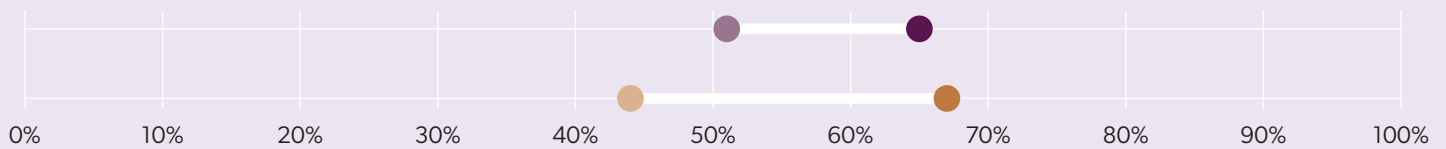
Percentage of afterschool program providers reporting that they are extremely or very concerned about the following:

- Serving ≤ 50% children of color
- Serving > 50% children of color
- Serving < 50% FRPL students
- Serving > 75% FRPL students

Loss of funding to the program this year



Long-term funding and the program’s future



2 Afterschool program providers are increasingly concerned about students’ mental, emotional, and social well-being

Questions related to students’ well-being have been included in every wave of the program provider survey. Consistent with previous waves of this survey, students’ mental and emotional health is the leading student-related concern (93%). However, the concerns in this area have grown. A greater percentage of program providers report concern about their students’ mental and emotional health compared to fall 2023. Concern regarding students’ adverse childhood experiences, as well as concern about students missing opportunities for social connections with their peers and caring adults saw a marked increase. And concern for each of these items has intensified (see Figure 4). Additionally, in a new survey question, nearly 9 in 10 program providers (87%) report concern about the negative effects of unproductive screen time on their students’ well-being, including 63% who are extremely or very concerned.

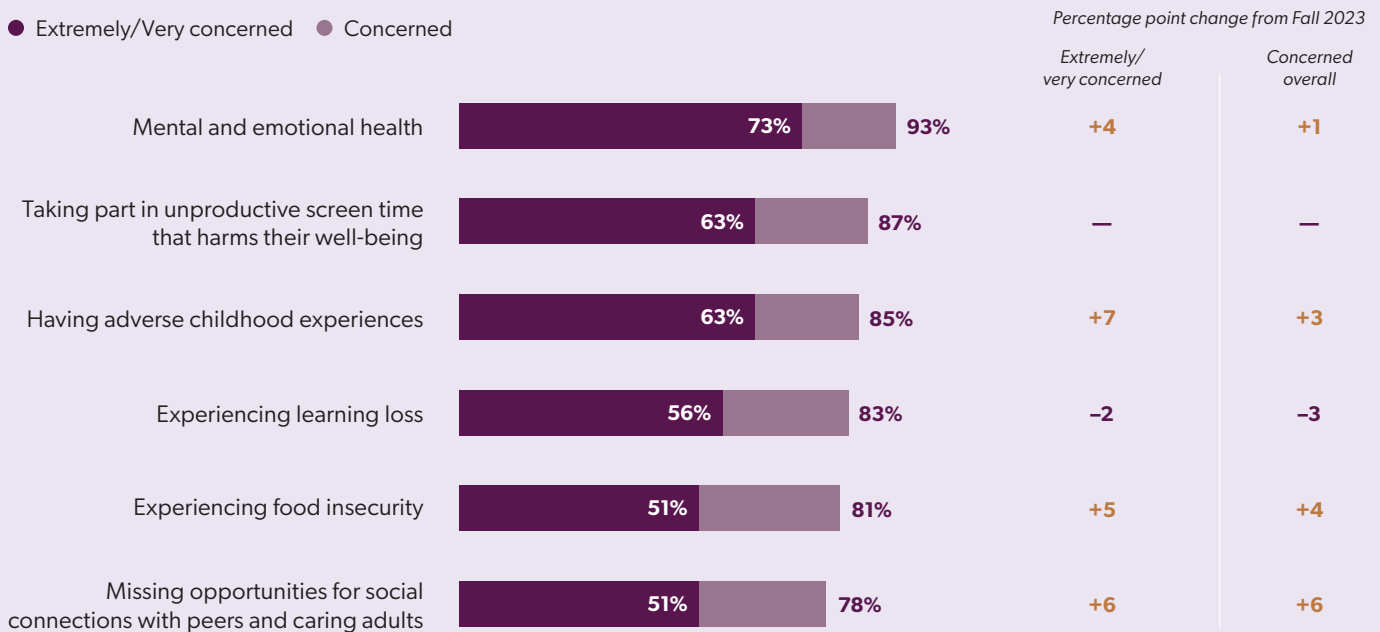


While program providers are increasingly concerned about students’ mental and emotional well-being, they also report that staffing and funding difficulties make providing the necessary support for all students a challenge. One provider notes, “Kids are experiencing more mental health, social/emotional needs than ever before in the history of our program... I am so worried for our kids, and we don’t have enough staff or resources to adequately help them.”



FIGURE 4: Afterschool program providers' level of concern about students' mental, emotional, and social well-being grows

Percentage of afterschool program providers reporting that they are concerned about their students:



While recent years have seen a downward trend in program providers' concerns about their students, the fall 2024 findings show notable increases. Regardless of community type – rural, suburban, or urban – overwhelming majorities of program providers report that they are concerned about their students' mental and emotional well-being (95%, 92%, and 94%, respectively), adverse childhood experiences (90%, 80%, 87%, respectively), lack of opportunities for social connections (81%, 78%, and 79%, respectively), and unproductive screen time harming their well-being (91%, 89%, and 86%, respectively).

However, student well-being concerns are more pronounced for program providers serving students furthest from economic opportunity. Programs serving a large share of students from low-income families were significantly more likely than those serving a minority of low-income students to report being very or extremely concerned about students' mental and emotional well-being (82% vs. 64%) and about their students having adverse childhood experiences (74% vs. 47%). Correspondingly, programs serving a large share of low-income students, including

those funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative, are more likely than programs overall to report providing services and activities aimed at supporting students' well-being, including opportunities to talk with staff about their emotions, mindfulness exercises, and specialized mental health support. For example, 80% of 21st CCLC program providers report providing time for their students to talk with their peers or staff members about their feelings or emotions, compared to 67% of programs without 21st CCLC funding.



It's not always easy, but we're determined to adapt and thrive. Our students, families, and staff deserve nothing less."

– Fall 2024 program provider survey respondent

What's Next

After 11 waves of surveying afterschool and summer program providers, it is clear that at any given point in time, the field experiences highs and lows, sharing in both opportunities and challenges. The findings from this survey show the resilient nature of the afterschool field to continue to be a steady source of support for children, families, and communities. Every day, afterschool and summer programs are balancing the needs of their students and families, the needs of their staff, and the needs of the program itself to provide a safe and supportive space that is accessible to all young people, regardless of economic circumstance or ZIP code.

One respondent to the fall 2024 survey summarizes this balance perfectly, writing:

“

You know, this school year has brought its fair share of challenges for our program. Funding is a big uncertainty right now, with grant renewals and government funding up in the air. That's making it tough to plan for the long term.

Our staff is also feeling the strain. The increased workload and COVID-19-related stress are taking a toll on their well-being. And, of course, there are the technological disparities that make it hard for some families to engage with our virtual programs.

But despite these challenges, we're seeing some real opportunities. We're building stronger partnerships with local organizations, which is helping us provide more resources and services to families. We're also getting creative with our programming, making it more flexible and accessible.

And, surprisingly, our virtual platforms have actually increased family engagement. Parents are more involved than ever. Plus, we're investing in staff training on trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, and cultural competency.

So, we're tackling these challenges head-on. We're diversifying our funding sources, prioritizing staff well-being, improving tech access, expanding mental health support, and nurturing those community partnerships.

It's not always easy, but we're determined to adapt and thrive. Our students, families, and staff deserve nothing less.”

