



# America After 3PM for Children with Special Needs or Disabilities



More than 45 years ago, Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure equitable access to public education for students with special needs or disabilities. During the 2019-20 school year, approximately 6.2 million students, or 12 percent of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade public school students, received special education services.<sup>1</sup> Students receiving special education services are those who have been identified as a “child with a disability” under one of the 13 disability categories outlined within IDEA,\* such as autism, other health impairment, specific learning disability, or developmental delay.<sup>2</sup>

Based on 2020 America After 3PM data, among families with a child in an afterschool program, 1 in 5 (19 percent) report that their child has been identified as a student with special needs or diagnosed with a specific physical, emotional, or learning disability.<sup>†</sup> Although children with special needs or disabilities represent a higher percentage of afterschool program participants in comparison to public school students, the number of students with special needs or disabilities taking part in afterschool programs is a fraction of the community of public school students who receive services under IDEA. For the first time, an analysis of America After 3PM data examines the experience of children with special needs and disabilities in afterschool programs, reporting on the opportunities available to children in programs, qualities their parents care most about in afterschool programs, and areas of growth for the afterschool field to reach all young people with special needs or disabilities.

## AFTERSCHOOL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES BY THE NUMBERS

19%

Parents with a child in an afterschool program who report that their child has special needs or disabilities

91%

Parents of a child with special needs or disabilities satisfied with their child’s afterschool program

3.5

Average days attending per week

\$107

Average cost per week

\* Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a “child with a disability” is defined as, “a child evaluated in accordance with §§300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.” Additionally, the disability must have an impact on educational performance, with Section 300.8(a)(2)(ii) stating, “Subject to paragraph (a)(2)(ii) of this section, if it is determined, through an appropriate evaluation under §§300.304 through 300.311, that a child has one of the disabilities identified in paragraph (a)(1) of this section, but only needs a related service and not special education, the child is not a child with a disability under this part.” For example, in Section 300.8(c)(3), it states, “Deafness means a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”

† In America After 3PM, parents or guardians were asked if their child, “has been identified as a student with special needs, or diagnosed with a specific physical, emotional or learning disability.” For the purposes of this brief, a child or children with “special needs or disabilities” is used for parents who answered the question in the affirmative.

## An overall positive afterschool experience for children with special needs or disabilities

The 2020 America After 3PM study finds that parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program are pleased with their child's experience. Nine in ten parents with a child with special needs or disabilities report being satisfied with their child's afterschool program as a whole (91 percent), and when asked about their level of satisfaction with their afterschool program "address[ing] the special needs of [their] child," they are much more likely than parents overall to say that they are satisfied (77 percent vs. 57 percent). While the afterschool experience for children with special needs or disabilities is similar to that of the experience of children nationally in many respects, there are a few notable differences.

### Access to a broad set of activities, oftentimes more so than the national average

Based on parents surveyed, afterschool programs serving children with special needs or disabilities provide a myriad of activities. In many aspects, more so than programs overall, according to parent responses. While academic enrichment, including homework or academic help and time for reading or writing, is similar to that of the national average, parents with a child with special needs or disabilities are more likely to report that their child's afterschool program offers activities such as service learning or community service, cultural programming, and family engagement (*Figure 1*). Transportation and before-school programming are supports that parents of children with special needs or disabilities are much more likely to report that their afterschool program offers compared to parents overall.

Parents with a child with special needs or disabilities also report that they are satisfied with the supports and offerings that are of extreme importance to them, which include a safe environment, knowledgeable and caring staff, program convenience, and opportunities for their child to build life skills (*Figure 2*).

**FIGURE 1. Parents of children with special needs or disabilities are more likely to report that their child's afterschool program offers supports including transportation, family activities, and opportunities to build life skills**

*Percentage of parents of children with special needs or disabilities who report that their child's afterschool program offers the following:*

	CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS OR DISABILITIES	NATIONAL AVERAGE	PERCENTAGE POINT DIFFERENCE
Transportation	45%	33%	+12
Before-school programs	48%	37%	+11
Service learning or community service	45%	36%	+9
Cultural programming	40%	32%	+8
Parent/family activities	50%	43%	+7
Build life skills	75%	68%	+7
STEM	79%	73%	+5
Snacks/meals including healthy options	75%	70%	+5
Homework or academic help	76%	73%	+3
Reading or writing time	72%	69%	+3
Experience the outdoors	70%	68%	+2
Learn responsible decision-making	74%	73%	+1
Build confidence	81%	82%	-1
Physical activity	82%	85%	-3
Time to interact with peers and build social skills	87%	90%	-3

\*TOTALS MAY NOT ADD UP DUE TO ROUNDING

**FIGURE 2. Parents with a child with special needs or disabilities are satisfied with afterschool program supports and offerings important to them**

*Percentage of parents with a child with special needs or disabilities reporting the following items are of extreme importance and that they are satisfied with them*

	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	SATISFIED
Safety of environment	74%	90%
Knowledgeable and caring staff	73%	86%
The hours meet my needs	65%	89%
Program convenience	64%	82%
Opportunities to build life skills	62%	85%
Homework or academic help	59%	78%
Opportunities for reading or writing	52%	78%
Physical activity opportunities	52%	82%
Program costs	51%	80%
Snacks/meals including healthy options	47%	77%
Opportunities to experience the outdoors	44%	76%
STEM learning opportunities	39%	64%
Music or arts	31%	64%

## Differences in where and when children with special needs or disabilities attend afterschool programs

While afterschool program activities and supports for children with special needs or disabilities look similar to children overall, when examining where students with special needs or disabilities attend afterschool programs and the amount of time they spend in programs, distinct differences arise. For instance, parents with a child with special needs or disabilities are more likely than parents overall to say that their afterschool program is run by a Boys & Girls Club (17 percent vs. 14 percent), YMCA (14 percent vs. 10 percent), religious organization (12 percent vs. 8 percent), child care center (11 percent vs. 8 percent), 4-H (9 percent vs. 4 percent), museum or science center (8 percent vs. 5 percent), or a YWCA (7 percent vs. 4 percent). They are also significantly less likely than parents overall to report that their child attends an afterschool program run by a public school (42 percent vs. 50 percent).

Children with special needs or disabilities spend roughly the same number of hours per day and days per week in an afterschool program compared to the time students overall spend in a program. Children with special needs or disabilities spend an average of 5.3 hours and 3.5 days per week in afterschool programs, while the national average is 5.6 hours and 3.7 days per week. However, a closer review of the data reveals that students with special needs or disabilities are more likely than children overall to attend their afterschool program one day per week (10 percent vs. 6 percent), as well as less likely to attend programs 5 days a week (36 percent vs. 40 percent).

## Helping build connections with peers and increasing confidence

Most parents of children with special needs or disabilities report that their child's afterschool program provides opportunities for their child to interact with their peers and build social skills (87 percent) and develop life skills (75 percent). More than 8 in 10 parents (81 percent) say that their afterschool program helps their child build confidence (*Figure 1*).

When asked about supports afterschool programs provide to children in general, parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program were more likely than parents overall to agree that afterschool programs help children build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (87 percent vs. 77 percent), become more excited about learning and interested in school (84 percent vs. 74 percent), and have the opportunity to learn life skills, such as the ability to communicate and work in teams (88 percent vs. 82 percent).



# Afterschool Spotlight

## Covington Partners, *Kenton County, Kentucky*

During the 2021 summer, Kimberly, an elementary schooler, attended Camp Covington where she engaged in project-based learning, building knowledge in subject areas such as math, reading, and science in new and fun ways while socializing with her peers. Kimberly, who is autistic, was one of the more than 1,000 K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who took part in summer learning opportunities through Covington Partners, which operates 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center programs after school and during the summer in seven schools that comprise the Covington Independent Public School district.

To best serve students of all abilities, the program meets students where they are. For Kimberly, Covington Partners sat down with her mother, Amy, to discuss Kimberly's specific needs and address the concerns that Amy had. Although Amy had hesitations due to Kimberly's needs at the start of the experience, observing the change in her daughter through the summer, Amy thanked the teachers at Camp Covington for "being so nice and helping my daughter so much." The gratitude for the experience was mutual, with Covington Partners writing, "At the end of the six weeks, Camp Covington staff learned just as much from Kimberly as she learned from them. Her positive attitude and resilience left everyone with smiles."



## Providing support to families

In addition to the activities and supports that students with special needs or disabilities have access to in afterschool programs, parents report that there are services that they, as parents of afterschool participants, are able to take advantage of as well. Nearly 3 in 4 parents with a child with special needs or disabilities (73 percent) say that their afterschool program helps them build skills through classes or workshops and 2 in 3 report that their program connects them to community resources (Figure 3). Moreover, 77 percent of parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program agree that programs build connections to their child's school day education. This is 13 percentage points higher than parents overall (64 percent).

Parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program are also in agreement that programs help working families. Most parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program agree that their child's afterschool program helped them to keep their job or work more hours (81 percent). When asked if afterschool programs keep children safe and out of trouble and give working parents peace of mind, 9 in 10 parents were in agreement with each statement.

**FIGURE 3. Afterschool programs are offering classes and connecting parents with a child with special needs or disabilities to community resources**

*Percentage of parents with a child with special needs or disabilities agreeing with the following statements:*

My child's afterschool program allows me to keep my job or work more hours	<b>81%</b>
Afterschool programs build connections to my child's school day education	<b>77%</b>
My child's afterschool program allows me to build skills through classes and/or workshops	<b>73%</b>
My child's afterschool program allows me to connect with community resources	<b>66%</b>

The intensity of agreement that afterschool programs provide a range of supports to families is greater among parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program compared to afterschool parents overall. They are more likely to completely agree that programs allow them to keep their job or work more hours (56 percent vs. 51 percent), build skills through classes or workshops (48 percent vs. 43 percent), and connect with community resources (37 percent vs. 32 percent).

## Challenges families with children with special needs or disabilities face

While the America After 3PM data reveals clear benefits to families with children with special needs or disabilities, there are areas for improvement regarding increasing access to afterschool programs for those families.

### Higher than average cost

The cost of out-of-school time activities is greater for parents with a child with special needs or disabilities than parents overall. Parents with a child with special needs or disabilities spend an average of \$107 per week on their afterschool program, higher than the national average of \$99 per week. Parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program also report spending an average of \$2,141 during the school year on other activities, not including the cost of afterschool programs, greater than the national average of \$1,499. The higher out-of-school time costs parents with a child with special needs or disabilities report align with their level of agreement with the statement, "It is difficult to afford afterschool programs." Nearly 2 in 3 parents with a child with special needs or disabilities (64 percent) agree that afterschool programs are difficult to afford, six percentage points higher than parents overall (58 percent).

The higher costs of afterschool programming for parents with a child with special needs or disabilities may help explain the America After 3PM finding that parents with a child with special needs are twice as likely as parents overall to report receiving governmental assistance with the cost of their child's afterschool program, 38 percent compared to 15 percent. The average amount of assistance is also higher than the national average, \$106 per week versus \$97.

### Difficulty finding an appropriate program

Finding an afterschool program that meets the needs of parents with a child with special needs or disabilities is a second area where parents report running into challenges. Although parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program are much more likely than parents overall to agree that information on afterschool programs is readily available in their community (75 percent vs. 60 percent), more than half (56 percent) agree that it was difficult to find an appropriate afterschool program for their child. This is 9 percentage points higher than parents overall (47 percent).

America After 3PM also included questions for parents who did not have a child enrolled in an afterschool program to understand existing barriers to participation. Reviewing the reasons parents provided for not enrolling their child in an afterschool program, 38 percent of parents report that afterschool programs not addressing the special needs of their child was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program. However, the America After 3PM data does not provide a clear picture of whether these parents have a child with special needs or disabilities.



## Conclusion

Afterschool programs provide an informal and flexible learning environment for young people of all abilities to discover new interests, build new skills, and make new friends. Moreover, parents of children with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program appreciate the benefits afterschool programs afford their children and are fully supportive of increasing access to afterschool and summer programs. Approximately 9 in 10 parents of children with special needs or disabilities (91 percent) agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs, with 74

percent strongly agreeing. Additionally, more than 9 in 10 parents with a child with special needs or disabilities in an afterschool program are in favor of public funding for afterschool opportunities for students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth (93 percent) or public funding for summer learning opportunities (92 percent). For students with special needs or disabilities who are able to participate in afterschool programs, the experience is a positive one; however, findings from America After 3PM demonstrate that there is more work that needs to be done to increase access to afterschool programs for this group of young people.

## RESOURCES

### Inclusion Tool Kit for After School Programs:

Published by the Special Needs Inclusion Project (SNIP), a part of the organization, Support for Families of Children with Disabilities, this toolkit includes standards for high quality special needs inclusion programming and strategies for implementing recommendations. Additionally, this toolkit provides sample mission statements, policies, curricula, parent surveys, and examples of ways in which to adapt and modify activities to promote inclusion.

### Together Beyond the School Day: Including Youth with Disabilities in Out-of-School Time Programs:

Created by the Maryland Disability Law Center, this guidebook provides tips for parents and guardians in selecting an out-of-school time program, recommendations for programs to create an inclusive environment, and an overview of laws related to the rights of children with disabilities.

### Kids Included Together:

Focused on creating inclusive learning environments for all students, Kids Included Together (KIT) provides training and consulting services to help organizations develop and implement inclusive policies and practices. You can also find on KIT's website, white papers, reports, and articles to learn more about how to create a welcoming space for children and youth of all abilities.

### Supporting Youth with Special Needs in Out-of-School Time:

In this 2012 *Afterschool Matters* journal article, authors discuss findings from their research that link professional development and experience working with children with special needs with a positive attitude toward inclusion and working with students with special needs. The article includes a series of recommendations to support a more inclusive program, such as greater access to professional development opportunities and increased collaboration between school-day teachers, afterschool and summer programs, parents, and special education staff.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2020). Number of children and students served under IDEA, Part B, by age group and state: 2019-20. [Data set]. EDFacts Data Warehouse: IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments Collection.

<sup>2</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. Part B. § 300.8 (2017).

For more information about the national and state-specific America After 3PM survey findings, visit: <http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/>

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).