

Where Did All the Afterschool Staff Go?

A special brief on afterschool staffing challenges from the fall 2021 *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19* survey



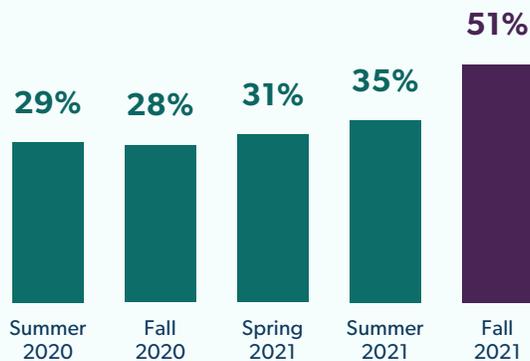
Stories of staff shortages in sectors from healthcare to hospitality, and industries from the airlines to trucking, have made news headlines over the past months.¹ According to a recent survey by the Afterschool Alliance, afterschool programs have not been spared and providers say staffing is the most pressing challenge. One survey respondent asked, “Where did all the [out-of-school time] staff go,” noting that “It’s been near impossible to find, and retain, new staff...and current staff have started expressing burnout.”

In the new *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19* survey, conducted by Edge Research between Nov. 1 and Dec. 13, 2021, prior to the Omicron variant sweeping across the United States, the top two concerns among afterschool providers are: finding staff to hire or staffing shortages, and maintaining staff levels through health concerns and safety protocols. And while staffing challenges are not a new issue for the afterschool field, this survey confirms that now, more than ever, staffing is impacting the ability of providers to meet the needs of the children and families they serve.*

“ Covid-19 has **put stress on an already stressed programming system**. I feel like this has put a spotlight on the need for our programs and the staffing issue. I am hopeful that good things will come in the future.”

- Fall 2021 survey respondent

Providers extremely concerned about finding staff or staffing shortages grew by 20 percentage points between spring and fall 2021



Approximately half of respondents (51 percent) report that they are extremely concerned about finding staff to hire or staffing shortages, and 31 percent are extremely concerned about maintaining adequate staff through health concerns and new procedures, a 20- and 7-percentage-point increase, respectively, from a similar survey conducted in the spring of 2021. The number grows to 87 percent when including providers who report that they are at least somewhat concerned about finding staff or staffing shortages. Eighty-three percent of providers are at least somewhat concerned about their ability to maintain staff through health concerns.

Regardless of where they are located, providers are concerned about the ability to find staff or staffing shortages. Roughly half of program providers located in the Northeast (53 percent), Midwest (52 percent), South (50 percent), and West (49 percent) report that they are extremely concerned about finding staff to hire or staffing shortages. By community type, suburban program providers are most likely to report being extremely concerned with staffing issues (62 percent), followed by urban (50 percent) and rural program providers (48 percent).

**Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19* survey data are based on online surveys of afterschool and summer providers, conducted by Edge Research on behalf of the Afterschool Alliance. The fall 2021 survey (Wave 6) was conducted Nov.1-Dec. 13, 2021, surveying 1,048 program providers; the summer 2021 survey (Wave 5) was conducted June 2-28, 2021, surveying 937 program providers; the spring 2021 survey (Wave 4) was conducted Feb. 19-Mar. 15, 2021, surveying 1,235 program providers; the fall 2020 survey (Wave 3) was conducted Sept. 28-Oct. 27, 2020, surveying 1,445 program providers; the summer 2020 (Wave 2) survey was conducted July 20-Aug. 31, 2020, surveying 1,047 program providers; and the spring 2020 (Wave 1) survey was conducted May 28-June 30, 2020, surveying 914 program providers.

The cost of staffing issues: waitlists, staff burnout, and increased program expenses

While 71 percent of respondents report their program has taken steps to attract staff, retain staff, or both, 74 percent report it has been difficult hiring and/or retaining staff, including close to half (47 percent) who report it has been very difficult. Moreover, when asked about the challenges or opportunities their program is experiencing as a result of COVID-19, many providers link staffing challenges to their inability to serve more students, additional staff stress and burnout, and concerns about program costs, which were reinforced in various responses throughout the survey.

For instance, although not specifically tied to inadequate staffing levels, the survey found that 54 percent of programs that are physically open say that they have a waitlist, an increase from 37 percent in spring 2021.

Addressing staff burnout and supporting staff well-being is front of mind for program providers. Providers indicated that it would be helpful to receive advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged, with more than half of providers (52 percent) selecting this option, a 10-percentage-point increase from the spring 2021 survey. The second most common answer, advice on funding streams and securing foundation funds, was 18 percentage points lower (34 percent).

Regarding program costs, nearly half of respondents (47 percent) report their program's cost-per-child increased for in-person services during the fall, with most providers citing staffing costs as the reason for the increase. Among respondents who report an increase in costs, more than 8 in 10 (83 percent) say that staffing costs contributed to their program's higher weekly cost-per-child. Secondary reasons include supplies (55 percent) and cleaning protocols (55 percent).



Nearly half of program providers report that it has been **very difficult** for their program to hire and/or retain staff



My program lost about two-thirds of the students in the fall of 2020. **This year we could be at the number we were, but I cannot find staffing to care for the children.** I currently have 20 children on the waitlist. Our biggest obstacle is finding and retaining staff."

"Combatting staff burnout is a priority for us. We are doing as much as we can to be supportive, both financially and by providing emotional support for staff. Keeping full-time staff engaged and encouraged has been a challenge. Keeping good part-time staff engaged and focused has proven even more difficult."

"Our biggest challenge at this time is staffing. **Most of our staff work within our school building and they are very tired, emotionally and physically...Pre-COVID we had no problem hiring school day staff to work...Now it is almost impossible.** On top of this it has been very difficult to have a full staff...due to staff themselves or their family members being sick and quarantined. We have a couple of students on our waitlist...we are waiting because adding students is only beneficial if we have the appropriate number of staff needed to optimally provide after school services with integrity."

Afterschool programs taking action to attract and keep staff

To address staffing issues, an overwhelming majority of respondents (71 percent) report that their program has undertaken at least one course of action to attract staff, retain staff, or both. The most common measure respondents report taking is increasing salaries (53 percent). Other efforts include providing additional professional development opportunities (32 percent), free childcare for staff (18 percent), sign-on bonuses (15 percent), additional paid time off (10 percent), and increased benefits (5 percent). Program providers also are employing creative strategies to attract and retain staff, including referral and retention bonuses, and providing employee wellness opportunities. Creating flexible work hours was another approach program providers shared (e.g., allowing some staff to transition to part-time work, creating job sharing options for interested staff members, and increasing hours for those requesting additional work hours).

The survey also indicates that COVID relief funding is helping programs with their staff recruitment and retention efforts. Programs that report receiving COVID relief funding are much more likely than programs without to take steps to attract or retain staff, such as increasing salaries, providing additional professional development opportunities, and providing free child care for staff. Additionally, programs with COVID relief funding are less likely than programs without to report that they have not taken new steps to attract or retain staff.

Allocating new funding toward staff recruitment efforts is also taking precedence among afterschool program providers. Among respondents who report that their program received new funding for fall 2021 programming, close to half say the new funding helped support staff recruitment efforts (47 percent), while roughly 4 in 10 say the new funds helped them hire more staff (43 percent), serve more students (40 percent), or expand program offerings (40 percent). It is worth noting that in the open-ended responses, a number of providers state that the new funding was necessary to maintain their current programming.



We need to celebrate and support our staff. **Our programs are absolutely for our students or we wouldn't be here, but our staff need support more than ever.** We need to tell our stories and reignite our passion...Most of us don't even consider what we do 'work.' It's our passion. It's in our blood. But we are exhausted. None of us knows how to function anymore. We need each other more than ever."

- Fall 2021 survey respondent

Programs with COVID relief funds more likely to report taking action to help address staffing challenges

	COVID relief funding <i>n=194</i>	No COVID relief funding <i>n=854</i>	Percentage point difference
Increased salaries	69%	49%	+20
Additional PD opportunities	46%	28%	+18
Free child care for staff	29%	16%	+13
Sign-on bonuses	23%	13%	+10
Additional paid time off	15%	9%	+6
Additional/new health benefits	8%	5%	+3
My program has not done anything new to attract or retain staff	11%	33%	-22

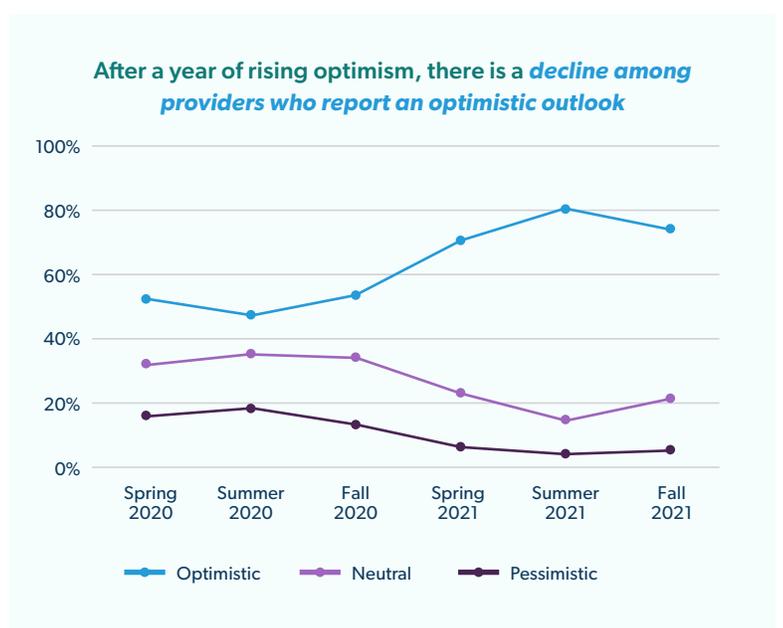
An uncertain future

Most providers continue to worry about long-term funding and the future outlook for programs. Although concerns about long-term funding and the future is down from the spring of 2020, more than 3 in 4 providers are still concerned (88 percent vs. 77 percent). Moreover, for the first time since summer 2020, the survey found a decrease in providers reporting optimism about the future.

While most providers (74 percent) report being optimistic about the future of their afterschool program, this is a drop from those reporting optimism during the summer of 2021 (80 percent). Interestingly, the decrease in optimism does not correspond with an increase in pessimism. Rather, the survey finds an increase that providers feel both sides equally or are neutral (15 percent vs. 21 percent). This tension is expressed through many of the open-ended responses from providers, including one respondent who shares, "I'm very proud of how well we have been able to run our programs despite COVID-19. However, we are definitely part of the staffing shortage/crisis. As we hope to help more families who need outside-of-school care, we need more staff!"

Conclusion

Although COVID relief dollars are helping program providers address their current staffing struggles, the future outlook remains uncertain without sustained increased investments that will enable afterschool and summer learning programs to provide all staff a wage and benefits that make staying in their jobs a viable option. To ensure that all young people, in particular those in underserved communities, have access to quality afterschool and summer programs, there is a need for greater investment in the field to attract and retain a qualified, caring, and stable workforce.



¹ Dean, G. (2021). "A Tennessee burrito restaurant closed down its kitchen due to labor shortages, inflation, and the pandemic." Business Insider. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/labor-shortage-inflation-covid-delta-tennessee-johnson-restaurant-closed-kitchen-2021-12>; Kaplan, A., Springer, S., & Nguyen, V. (2021). The latest worker shortage may affect your health: Pharmacies don't have enough staff to keep up with prescriptions." NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/latest-worker-shortage-may-affect-health-pharmacies-dont-enough-staff-rcna8737>; CNN Newsource. (2021). The 3 reasons travel ground to a halt this Christmas." Retrieved from <https://krdo.com/money/cnn-business-consumer/2021/12/27/the-3-reasons-travel-ground-to-a-halt-this-christmas/>; Dodson, J. (2021). "Trucking on: How truckers are battling historic labor shortage." Virginia Business. Retrieved from <https://www.virginiabusiness.com/article/trucking-on-how-truckers-are-battling-historic-labor-shortage/>.



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