



**NEWS RELEASE**  
May 19, 2021

**CONTACT:** [Lisa Lederer](#)  
202/421-5825

## **New Survey: Even Before Pandemic, Summer Programs Were Out of Reach For Nearly 14 Million Children, Most from Families with Low Incomes**

*'We Have to Do Better This Summer,' Grant Says*

WASHINGTON, DC – The summer of 2021 will be one of the most important ever, as students and families struggle to recover from the dislocation, isolation, trauma, and learning loss the pandemic caused. Yet a study released today that looks in-depth at summer learning in 2019 and 2020 finds that student participation in programs remains low, despite some recent growth and soaring parent satisfaction. For every child in a summer learning program in 2019, another was waiting to get in, according to [Time for a Game-Changing Summer. With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth](#), a household survey released today.

Commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance and conducted by Edge Research, the new study finds that 47% of families report at least one of their children participated in a summer program in 2019, up from 33% in 2013 and 25% in 2008. A total of 12.6 million students – or 22% of the country's K-12 children – participated in a structured summer experience in 2019. But the parents of another 13.9 million children were unable to enroll their children in the summer programs they hoped to find. Children in lower-income families are most likely to have been left behind.

Then in 2020, participation in summer programs dropped further, as the pandemic upended education and family and work life. Just 34% of families enrolled a child in a structured summer experience last year. Many kids who did enroll in 2020 participated virtually. A structured summer experience is defined in the study to include a summer learning program, sports program, summer camp, summer school, or summer job or internship, but is different from child care.

“These numbers were concerning before the pandemic, but the stakes are even higher now. Following a year of isolation and trauma, many of our kids urgently need academic help, social/emotional support, and opportunities to engage with peers and caring adults, be physically active, and more,” said Afterschool Alliance Executive Director Jodi Grant. “We must do better this summer by providing all students with access to summer learning programs where they can have fun, be kids, and accelerate their learning through enriching hands-on activities. Cost must not remain a barrier to participation, and the inequities must not continue. Every student needs an opportunity to engage, heal, learn and grow this summer.”

In both 2019 and 2020, large majorities of parents expressed satisfaction with the structured summer experience their child attended and said they support public funding for these programs.

*Time for a Game-Changing Summer* is based on responses from more than 29,500 U.S. families and builds on household surveys conducted in 2004, 2009 and 2014. It includes national-level findings from smaller surveys of parents and program providers conducted in summer and fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. It offers a snapshot of how children and youth spent their summers before and during the pandemic and has significant implications for our post-pandemic world. Core findings from the new study:

- **Unmet demand for summer experiences is high.** Nearly 14 million children whose parents wanted to enroll them were not in summer programs in 2019. Unmet demand among families who did not have a child in a summer program ranged from lows of 39% of Wyoming parents and 40% of Vermont parents who were unable to enroll their children in summer learning programs to highs of 67% of Texas parents and 70% of District of Columbia parents who were unable to do so. More than half of families without a child in a summer program report that, during the summer of 2020, they would have liked to have had a summer program available to them.
- **There are troubling inequities in access to summer programs.** While 27% of children in higher-income families participated in a structured summer experience in 2019, just 14% of students in families with low incomes did. Approximately three in four children in a structured summer experience (74%) are from higher-income families, compared to only one in four children (26%) from lower-income families. There were also vast disparities by state; 62% of families in the District of Columbia and 58% in New York had a child who participated in summer programs, compared to just 31% in Alaska, South Dakota and West Virginia.
- **Cost is a barrier to participation.** Two in five parents who did not have a child in a structured summer experience (39%) did not enroll their child because programs were too expensive. Among children not enrolled in a summer program, 35% of children in households with low incomes would have been enrolled in a summer program in 2019 if one were available, compared to 28% of children in higher-income households. Students in families with low incomes are 13 percentage points less likely to take part in more expensive summer activities, including STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) camps. The average cost reported by families who pay for activities ranges from around \$758 for voluntary summer programs to more than \$900 for STEM camps.
- **About four in five programs (79%) that offered summer learning in the past plan to do so again this year.**
- **Parents prioritize life skills for summer learning and want it to be different than the school year.** Three in four parents (75%) prioritize keeping their child from losing academic ground in choosing their summer activity, but nine in ten report that opportunities to build life skills (94%), be physically active (92%), and experience a variety of activities (90%) are important factors in selecting their child's summer activities. Parents prioritize life skills, physical activity, and a variety of activities much more highly in selecting summer programs for their children than in selecting afterschool programs.
- **Priorities vary by family income and race.** Black, Latinx, and Native American families are much more likely than White and Asian American parents to say that a variety of activities, snacks and/or meals, physical activity, building life skills, and academic enrichment (including keeping their child from losing academic ground and STEM learning opportunities) are extremely important when selecting their child's summer activities. Low-income parents place a greater emphasis on reducing risky behaviors (23 percentage point difference) and snacks and meals (21 percentage point difference) than families with higher incomes.
- **Parents give high marks to summer programming.** In 2019, an extraordinary 95% of parents were satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended and 65% were extremely satisfied. Ninety-six percent of parents with a child in a STEM camp, 96% of parents with a child in a non-STEM camp or program, and 95% of parents with a child in a voluntary summer program report satisfaction with the experience.

- **Eighty-eight percent of parents favor public funding for summer learning opportunities** for students in communities with few opportunities for children and youth – an increase from 85% in 2014 and 83% in 2009. Support crosses demographic and political lines, with 92% of parents who identify as Democratic, 88% of those who identify as Independent, and 86% of parents who identify as Republican in favor of public funding for summer learning. Support reaches 90% in urban, Latinx, and two-earner households.

“High-quality summer learning programs that provide academic support and enrichment have always been important to student achievement, but never more so than this year. We have a tremendous opportunity to address the educational inequities that the pandemic exposed, and help meet the full spectrum of children’s needs,” said Gigi Antoni, director of learning and enrichment at The Wallace Foundation. “Children from low-income families are at particular risk, so it is especially important that we find ways to increase access to programs and close the gap this study identifies. We need to act with urgency and do all we can to engage children as soon as possible, starting this summer and moving into next year. There’s no time to waste.”

“Quality afterschool and summer programs are essential to student success in school and life,” Grant added. “Lawmakers recognized that by including significant one-time funding for afterschool and summer learning programs in the American Rescue Plan. States must ensure that funding is well-used. If we want to emerge from this pandemic strong, all our children and youth must have ready access to enrichment and academic opportunities this summer and during the coming school year. This study shows unacceptable levels of unmet need, especially for low-income families. This summer we have a responsibility to meet the need – and when we do, children and youth, families, communities, and our country will be stronger.”

In the study, low- and higher-income family designations are based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program guidelines. Families in the America After 3PM survey who are at or below 185% of the federal poverty line qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and are defined as low-income.

Findings from *Time for a Game-Changing Summer* are based on a nationally representative survey of randomly selected adults who live in the United States and are the parent or guardian of a school-age child who lives in their household. A total of 29,595 households, including 53,287 children, were surveyed in English or Spanish and answered questions regarding the summer of 2019. Data from interviews is weighted on race and income within states and by state population. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent. The survey included at least 200 interviews in every state and the District of Columbia. Data was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020, by Edge Research.

Edge Research also conducted two nationally representative online surveys, one fielded August 4-18, 2020 of 1,071 parents of school-aged children and the other October 12-29, 2020 of 1,202 parents of school-aged children; and three online program provider surveys: one survey of 1,047 afterschool and summer learning program providers, conducted July 20-August 31, 2020; another survey of 1,445 program providers, conducted from September 28-October 27, 2020; and a survey of 1,235 program providers, conducted February 19-March 15, 2021.

This 2021 America After 3PM special report, *Time for a Game-Changing Summer*, is based on research commissioned and funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its mission to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people, and in the arts for everyone by supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices. Data from this special report is based on the [America After 3PM](#) survey results, which was made possible with support from the New York Life Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Altria Group, and the Walton Family Foundation, as well as the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

# # # #

*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).*