

To: House Committees on Education and Human Services  
From: Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool  
Date: February 7, 2024  
Re: Universal Afterschool

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Good morning. My name is Nicole Miller, and I am the Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool. We are a statewide nonprofit dedicated to strengthening programs, empowering youth, and expanding access to afterschool and summer programs so that all Vermont youth are active, engaged, connected, and heard. Our role is to support all programs that operate during out-of-school hours, those run by schools and those not. From my role at Vermont Afterschool, I have a broad view of the afterschool and summer field – a tapestry of unique programs and providers across the state, all dedicated to supporting children, youth, families, and communities in Vermont.

I'd like to take a moment to remind us to place youth at the center of the conversation. In the summer of 2022, we convened a group of young people to provide their recommendations as Vermont builds a universal afterschool and summer system. In the report, *Youth Recommendations for the Future of Afterschool*, youth highlighted more and varied opportunities and a need for more funding to support these spaces. They also felt strongly about seeing youth voice and leadership at every level of program design.<sup>1</sup> In 2023, we conducted youth focus groups in collaboration with the United Way of Northwestern Vermont, asking those youth what would make the most impact on reducing youth substance use. The resounding message from the groups was that youth need more activities to be involved in after school, community spaces to feel belonging, and the opportunity to experiment with and explore potential interests comfortably. They also indicated that different youth feel welcome in different spaces.

We've heard a lot of different viewpoints this morning from people around the state with good intentions to ensure that youth are well cared for, have opportunities to explore their interests, experience belonging, and get what they need as individuals. Vermont Afterschool wants that, too. For years, we've been dreaming and working with many of you toward a universal system that works for youth and their families, and the programs and professionals, regardless of their funding or entity type, ready to support them in every community. Finally, with the addition of flexible state funding, it seems that this universal system might be possible to address any gaps that federal funding cannot support. As I look ahead to the next few years, it does really seem possible to ensure that every young person in Vermont has access to affordable out-of-school time opportunities.

Vermont Afterschool believes that a Special Fund is important to achieve these goals. We are seeing all kinds of collaborations across the state, which is exciting and inspiring. We are also seeing a commitment from the State of Vermont to create a system that demands high-quality, affordable programs. Our understanding is that the creation of a special fund will ensure that the funds can be flexible to meet the needs across the state, both now and in the future. And that flexibility is what will allow for all sorts of creative partnerships to happen.

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<sup>1</sup> SYAG on Universal Afterschool and Summer Report: Youth Recommendations for the Future of Afterschool. [https://vermontafterschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SYAG-on-Universal-Afterschool-Report\\_2022.pdf](https://vermontafterschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SYAG-on-Universal-Afterschool-Report_2022.pdf)



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We're in this moment where everyone is working together - in the field across many programs, communities, and schools. For the last several years, the Legislature and the Administration have been in partnership, positively impacting young people in Vermont. I'm hopeful we'll continue this trend and allow all dedicated to afterschool, summer, and youth work to apply directly for the funds to get youth what they need.

Vermont is a nationally recognized leader in the country, earning accolades from our peers from the National Afterschool Association, the 50 State Afterschool Network, and the Afterschool Alliance. Other states have reached out to Vermont to learn more about our mixed delivery system, our focus on individualized community solutions, and cross-sector collaborations in which we take a comprehensive view of what's best for all youth – involving the work of nearly every level of government.

I hope you will support the continuation of the flexible, mixed delivery system through the creation of a special fund. Vermont Afterschool stands ready to work with you if you have additional proposals or goals that you will be working on during the rest of the legislative session or beyond. Thank you again for your consideration and the time you set aside today to hear all of the testimony.