

Good morning, My name is Cassie Willner, and I am the communications coordinator at Vermont Afterschool, a statewide nonprofit. I really appreciate you holding this hearing and making the effort to hear from so many different voices.

As our state leaders, I know you have to address many difficult issues facing Vermonters and make difficult funding decisions. While access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs won't solve all our problems, research tells us that without adequately addressing what is happening with our children and youth outside the school day and when they are not at home—what we at Vermont Afterschool call “the third space for learning”—we won't be able to make meaningful progress on some of our most critical issues affecting Vermont's young people and families. Here's a few key points:

1. **Working families.** Afterschool and summer learning programs allow working families to hold jobs and be at work. In fact, here in Vermont 77% of kids age 6-17 have both parents in the workforce and thus these programs are absolutely essential to parents.
2. **Food.** These programs provide important access to healthy snacks and meals and especially matter during the long weeks of summer when school is out.
3. **Academic outcomes.** They engage students, offer help and remediation where needed, prevent summer learning loss, and are recognized as an essential strategy in addressing the academic achievement gap.
4. **Keeping kids safe.** Lastly, these programs are an effective prevention strategy. Studies have shown that children and youth who participate on a regular basis are less likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs, get into trouble, or engage in other risky behaviors.

I want to share a short story of a summer program I visited a few years at Peoples Academy in Morrisville. This was a summer program for middle schoolers, and the director told me about a field trip they had taken to Lake Champlain, and when they got to North Beach, one of the kids exclaimed “Wow look at the ocean! I never seen the ocean before!!!” Then they decided, let's do it. Let's go to the ocean. So the following summer, they took the kids on a bus to the ocean in NH.

For me, this story exemplifies the opportunity gap that exists here in Vermont. In fact, trends over the last 15 years show a widening gap between families of means and low-income families when it comes to spending on and participation in afterschool and summer enrichment activities.

Not all kids are getting the same opportunities and supports in this third space for learning. For some kids, the third space is pretty darn cool. They get to travel, take music classes, horseback ride, and learn how to edit digital photos. For others, whether it's those who can't afford it or those in rural areas without the same types of community resources, it's a different picture of how they spend their time when not at home or in school. To me, that's just not fair.

The good news is that last year, the legislature recognized that young people need engaging opportunities in the third space to grow into happy and healthy Vermonters. Thus, you invested \$600,000 from recent tobacco settlement funding in order to increase access to afterschool and third space programs over the course of the next three years. Thank you. We know that we need \$2.5 million annually to reach all kids, but this is a great first step and any more that can be allocated would be a great help.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope that you will join me and my organization in recognizing that young people make a better Vermont.