

Report on Vermont's School-age Childcare Hubs Initiative

Respectfully submitted to

Senate Health and Welfare Committee, House Human Services Committee,
and House Health Care Committee

By

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for testimony on

January 14, 2021

OVERVIEW

Vermont's School-age Childcare Hubs Initiative was a rapid response effort starting in late summer/early fall 2020 to help address childcare needs for working families, especially around remote learning days, and to provide additional days of in-person care and support for school-age children (grades k-6).

Through this initiative, the Department for Children and Families (DCF), Child Development Division (CDD) in partnership with Vermont Afterschool established 44 school-age childcare hubs running programs for children at 102 different locations. Approximately 6,000 children were served through the hubs with most children attending on multiple days each week. All programs adhered to COVID health and safety guidance issued by the Vermont Department of Health.

The money set aside for the school-age hubs covered start-up/expansion costs and the first month's operating costs; ongoing tuition for children was not included as an allowable grant expense. In order to be eligible for funding, hubs also had to be located in areas where school re-opening schedules included remote learning days. Approximately \$6.9 million was allocated for the hub grants through DCF/CDD. Vermont Afterschool received \$116,812 in grant funding to help support the hub initiative.

In addition to establishing school-age childcare hubs, Vermont Afterschool ran a statewide hiring campaign to help support staff recruitment efforts, created an online mapping tool, conducted ongoing gap analysis, offered a full series of professional development workshops for staff, and provided coaching and technical assistance to hub directors and site leaders.

This was truly a collaborative effort with on-going and close communication between DCF/CDD and Vermont Afterschool, as well as among a number of other relevant state agency departments and partners. This expansion supported thousands of children and youth in grades K-6 who needed a safe place to be during remote school learning days and made it possible for working parents and families to return to work.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What Worked Well

- Building off the existing system of afterschool providers and youth-serving organizations helped the hub initiative to ramp up quickly and to have lasting benefits.
- The hub initiative benefited from strong leadership at DCF/CDD; a full-team effort at Vermont Afterschool; high profile attention and support from the AHS Secretary's office and the Governor; and cross agency coordination.
- Hubs were supported with a statewide hiring campaign, clear health and safety guidelines, frequent communication to the field, training for new staff, and on-going technical assistance.

Where Gaps Remain

- Many afterschool providers have been running significantly extended hours, even in areas without remote learning days. However, not all of these providers were able to participate in the hubs initiative despite the increase in program hours.
- Participation fees can be a heavy burden on families. While some hubs offered services for free, others charged families \$60 or more per child per day.
- Middle school youth need access to afterschool programs and safe spaces to be on remote learning days as well. Many families with middle school youth and young adolescents were seeking safe and supportive places for their children.
- Funding for the hub initiative was not able to be used to establish new hub locations in late fall/early winter or to help communities after December 2020. This timing particularly affected communities that were considering remote learning days following Thanksgiving weekend and/or the winter holiday break.
- The demand for more afterschool and summer program options is high across the state with more than 26,000 children and youth who would be in programs today if more were available, affordable, and accessible (America After 3PM Report, December 2020). In December 2020, 84 organizations submitted applications for funding through a second round of the Afterschool for All grant program, also run by DCF/CDD in partnership with Vermont Afterschool, with requests totaling over \$900,000.

Lessons Learned

- Where there was close collaboration between the school leadership team and the afterschool program (or hub provider) the services and support for families tended to be better coordinated and often more affordable.
- Significant differences in remote learning materials from schools (even among children in the same grade at the same school) often made it challenging for hub staff to coordinate program schedules for students.
- The timing for when hubs and expanded program options are made available and communicated to families is critical. Without enough advanced notice, families often have to

find their own alternatives for childcare and may not be able to take advantage of the added programming.

- Not all schools and not many employers wanted to run childcare programs. Even where a school or employer was extremely interested in having a remote learning hub in their community, they often were looking for a community partner or outside provider to staff and run the program.
- There is great diversity from one community to the next in Vermont with regards to how afterschool programming is being offered and paid for (e.g., schools, community organizations, recreation departments, private programs, etc.). For most initiatives, one size does not fit all, and flexibility is key. In some cases, providing low-cost programming through one provider may even threaten the viability of another.

Recommendations

- When considering the childcare needs of Vermont's working families keep the full age range from birth through 8th grade in mind. Provide parity for afterschool programs and staff in line with supports for early childhood providers. Also, include afterschool staff in COVID testing and vaccination schedules in line with school day teachers and other childcare providers.
- The increased need for childcare due to remote learning days and modified school schedules, as well as additional time for remediation and enrichment learning opportunities, should be supported through state and federal recovery dollars and not fall to parents and families.
- As essential partners in providing additional time, supports, and resources for students, afterschool and summer learning programs should be incorporated into local COVID recovery plans with schools in 2021-2022 to address learning loss, young people's need for connection, and social-emotional learning.
 - Winter/Spring 2021: Provide funding to existing afterschool providers and youth-serving organizations to continue to offer expanded program hours in line with modified school schedules including remote learning days and shortened school days.
 - Summer 2021: Encourage the Universal Afterschool Task Force to include summer programming in their analysis and recommendations. Either extend the role of the Task Force into a standing state committee or establish a state level council on Afterschool & Summer Learning. Start planning now for 6-8 week summer enrichment programs for students of all ages. Summer planning teams should include school day teachers, school guidance counselors, afterschool program directors, and community partners. Summer programs should address learning loss and also include a wide range programming, such as STEM, arts, youth voice, outdoor adventure, physical activity, leadership development, team-building, emotions coaching, and more.
 - 2021-2022 School Year: Supports for learning loss will need to continue into the fall and winter of 2021-2022. Afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations will be key partners in helping to also support youth resilience and engagement. Summer 2022 will be another important summer for Vermont's students. A statewide committee on Afterschool & Summer Learning could help ensure that equitable access to programs exists across the state.

FULL REPORT

Hub Identification Process

The hub identification process was run as an open application with Vermont Afterschool helping to get the word out about the opportunity, fielding questions, and working with communities to develop “proposed hub profiles.”

Vermont Afterschool created an online survey to collect information from entities interested in potentially becoming a hub site. We also created a survey to collect information from businesses or organizations that had potential space to offer and another survey for organizations that wanted to provide enrichment programming in a hub but did not want to open a hub themselves. Vermont Afterschool received over 170 entries through these surveys and organized the information around location, child capacity, costs, underlying school schedules, feasibility, and need.

Vermont Afterschool also worked with Let's Grow Kids to explore potential expansion in early childhood centers (serving children ages 0-5) that might be willing to add capacity for school-age children. Approximately, 10 early childhood centers participated in the hub identification process.

Vermont Afterschool staff made individual calls to every entity that filled out the survey. Where entities wanted to move forward with the process, we conducted a thorough interview and created a detailed profile of the plans for each hub (e.g., schools children would come from, how many children could be served, physical locations, staffing needs, estimated budgets, and other challenges). Where more than one entity in a community expressed interest in becoming a hub, Vermont Afterschool organized and hosted partner discussions to see if a joint plan and profile might be possible. Once completed, Vermont Afterschool passed the profiled onto DCF/CDD for further vetting and eventually the creation of grant agreements with the selected hubs.

Vermont Afterschool created an interactive, online map for the hub project. The map portrays the underlying school schedule for remote learning days for every school in the state and overlay the location of the school-age hubs and their associated site locations as they came on board. The map provides information on location, contact person, and grades served. The map can be viewed at: <http://www.vermontafterschool.org/hubs-map/>

Once information from the first round of hubs was collected, Vermont Afterschool worked with DCF/CDD and the regional childcare referral specialists to identify where additional capacity was needed. In areas where there were gaps, we helped to identify community or business partners that might be willing to step into this space and consider opening a hub.

We also provided ongoing technical assistance to help communities address any potential barriers or challenges to them serving in this capacity as a local hub provider. In most cases, the main barrier was the lack of an existing afterschool program or provider able to take on establishing a hub.

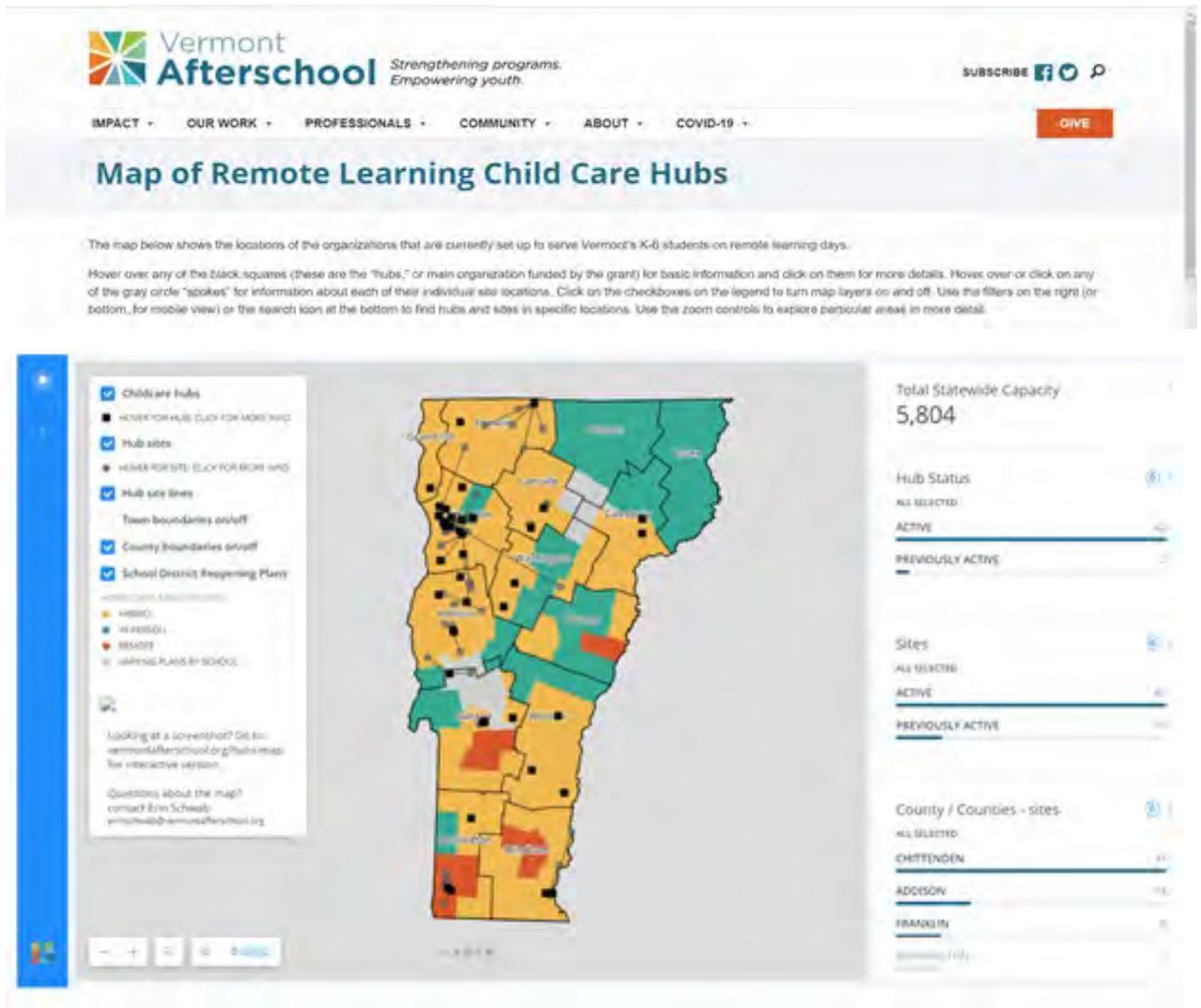
In areas where there were gaps and no apparent potential hub partner, we worked closely with community members and DCF/CDD to help find solutions. Sometimes these efforts were successful (e.g., Manchester, Swanton, St. Johnsbury, etc.) and in other locations it proved too difficult for a community to move forward given existing resources and the timing constraints of the grant (e.g., Randolph).

As we moved later into the fall, Vermont Afterschool reached out through school leaders to assess their expected need for hubs following the Thanksgiving Holiday and as COVID levels rose in their communities. We worked with the Vermont Principals Association to include information on the hub grants in their weekly newsletter and in open calls with school principals as a way to promote the project and gauge interest. In addition, we sent emails to every superintendent in Vermont about the hub initiative. For any that responded, we followed up with a phone call or virtual meeting to answer their questions and explain more about the project.

Vermont Afterschool's Online Mapping Tool for the Hubs

URL: <http://www.vermontafterschool.org/hubs-map/>

Image below is from mid-fall



Statewide Staff Hiring Campaign

Working with the directors at each of the local hubs to determine their staff needs around recruitment and training, Vermont Afterschool designed a comprehensive statewide staffing campaign to recruit new people to the field and to help fill hiring gaps at the hubs.

The staffing campaign utilized a wide variety of outreach mechanisms, including: Vermont community boards (such as Front Porch Forum); job postings on Seven Days Jobs, Idealist, and Indeed; print and digital advertisements in local and regional newspapers; radio advertisements; and social media outlets (Facebook, Instagram, Google Search Ads, Twitter, and YouTube). We also participated in virtual job fairs hosted by the Vermont Department of Labor.

Through the social media part of the campaign, we created 15-sec and 30-sec video advertisements aimed at 18-26 year old's. The video clips were posted on YouTube and other platforms and showed other young adults working with children and youth at active hub locations.

Vermont Afterschool ran two full rounds of the staffing campaign: one early in the fall and a second one later to accommodate additional hub locations and changing staff needs.

In all, 103 applications were received through our recruitment portal. All of these were passed on to local hub providers. The hiring initiative directly resulted in 68 new staff hires by the hubs.



Providing Technical Assistance to Hub Providers

Throughout the implementation process, Vermont Afterschool helped to connect potential hub partners to school leadership teams promoting close collaboration with schools, particularly around schedules, coordinating cohorts of children from the school day, etc.

We also provided technical assistance for sites around start-up and expansion needs, including staff oversight and development, program structure, curriculum, social emotional learning, trauma informed practices, and connecting with parents and families.

Each hub was assigned a point person as coach from the Vermont Afterschool team. The coach reached out regularly to the director at the hub to provide technical assistance and problem-solve any issues.

Throughout the course of the project, we conducted regular surveys and outreach to the hubs to assess challenges, developments, enrollment numbers, changes in schedules, health and safety needs, etc. The resulting data and information data were shared with our state partners on a regular basis.

Professional Development Opportunities for Hub Staff

Vermont Afterschool offered a full series of virtual training options for hub staff to get up and running quickly. Workshops had a total of 90 participants with 39 unique individuals participating. (NOTE: Staff could participate in more than one offering.) The workshops offered by Vermont Afterschool included:

- **Child Development K-5:** An overview of child development for grades K-5, this workshop provides background information on development ages and stages of the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual domains. Tips, activities, and resources for how to plan and implement afterschool activities that are developmentally appropriate are reviewed.
- **Active Learning and Incorporating Youth Voice:** Active learning and youth voice involve much more than giving out some materials and listening respectively. This workshop covers active learning by explaining the role it plays in the experiential learning cycle and helping participants create more powerful learning opportunities for youth. It also supports youth voice practices by building an understanding of what youth voice can be and showing how staff can infuse it into every aspect of their program and every level of their organization.
- **Building Relationships with Families:** This workshop gives participants the opportunity to explore their opinions about parenting and family diversity and learn about the stages of parenting. Participants have time to discuss/role play how to handle a variety of scenarios related to interactions with families accessing a youth program. Attendees leave with a draft of a yearly plan that can increase family engagement in their program.
- **Vital Connections for Social Emotional Learning (SEL):** Relationship is the foundation for all we do with children. It is via our connection that we can nurture children in their development over time and care for them today. Just as we support children's intellectual and physical growth, children also need support for their social and emotional growth. This workshop describes the vital relationship at the center of childcare and the most essential daily SEL support.
- **Professionalism/Building Your IPDP:** This workshop highlights the importance of being professional in a school age childcare setting. Participants learn tips on maintaining professional boundaries, as well as master how to create a professional Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP).
- **Basic Specialized Care:** Basic Specialized Care (BSC) is a 6-hour training designed for childcare professionals working in regulated child care programs or schools, with children who are at risk or have special needs, and their families.



In addition, program staff at the hubs were required by DCF/CDD to participate in training on mandated reporting, as well as First Aid and CPR.

Quotes from Hub Directors and Staff

“The afterschool staff was initially nervous about how the program was going to work with children split between their public school and our program. However, things have gone really well, and the children were excited to start building more structure and routine into their time with us after the summer. This opportunity has also encouraged us to develop more academically focused goals during outdoor play which has really met the children's interests and needs.”

“I had tears of relief. From the first day of school and continuing, the kitchen staff at the school are coming in saying how they are so appreciative that we are doing this, that they would not have been able to return to work without us. In addition, they are telling us that their child looks forward to coming to [the hub] and can't wait for their full day.”

“The staff prospects we have based on your staff search initiative are INCREDIBLE. I am working on placements now and will give you some specific numbers as that becomes clear. Experienced, passionate, high-energy, and ready to work. Just some initial feedback that this has been successful so far in terms of producing highly-qualified prospects.”

“Our positive story is really a positive for our staff. Having this Hub that we are calling our Learning Center. With our lower enrollment rate [due to COVID health guidance], we have been having a hard time getting staff the hours they are used to and now they can reach fulltime hours and I see a more positive vibe in our space. They also really enjoyed creating a learning space for the students.”

“We have managed to hire three new staff to help our fulltime program staff have some time away. This allows them to recuperate away from the program and then come back fresh the next day.”

“Through the HUB process we have seen unexpected partnerships and seen the community really come together.”



Quotes from Parents and Families

“My son said to me the other night, ‘Mom, I like [the hub] better than I like going to school.’ He is excited to have the mobility and structured of a day program that feels like a club house, acts like a school, and provides structured social experiences that give him both challenge and joy. Learning how to play and deal with social challenges is the learning that I want my kiddo to do right now. After six months home fighting the endless screen battle knowing that my son is playing outside in the fresh air with other kids, off a screen is what I want a HUB to do for our community.”



“I want to express how thankful I am for the amazing work all of you do! When I picked [my child] up today from [the hub], she was happy, muddy, and exhausted! All signs of an amazing day. She was also calm and peaceful. For a child who has experienced trauma in her early years, this is a sure sign that not only are her needs being met, her soul is being nurtured. I am so grateful for each of you and what you are doing for her and all the children in your care.”

“I feel so at ease, everyone there loves my kids and I know they are safe. You have my kid's best interest at heart. Helps my son with the transition back to school. It puts me at ease knowing they are in a safe environment too! [The hub] is like a home away from home. When kids are not at school it is hard. Lots of temptations not to do their work and no structure at home. [The hub] provides that structure. As a single parent at home, I don't have to worry about my kids get into mischief.”

“A family had expressed their gratitude for being able to send their children to our center during their remote days. The family was very excited to be able to send their children to a place that knows their needs and is able to help their children work on their required school work. This family also expressed that in the beginning, they had many concerns about how and where their children would go while they (the parent) was at work. [Our Center] being a HUB took away some of their stress.”

“At the end of the day, we have kids crying because they don't want to go home. Parents come in and tell us that their child is so excited to come to [the hub]. They keep track of days because they like the full days because they have more time to play with their friends after they get their school work done.”



“Wow, I like this a LOT better than regular school!” --student

What Worked Well

Building off the existing system of afterschool providers and youth-serving organizations helped the hub initiative to ramp up quickly and have lasting benefits. Instead of expecting childcare hubs to start from nothing, the outreach for the hubs initiative focused first on existing afterschool programs and other youth-serving organizations. This resulted in a wide variety of providers stepping forward to fill the need based in their community. Sometimes it was a school-run afterschool program that ran the hub. Sometimes it was a town recreation department, a local community organization (e.g., YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, etc.), an early childcare provider, or a for-profit business that provides programming for youth (e.g., ski resort, gymnastics center, arts organization, private childcare business, etc.). The benefits of utilizing the existing network of youth-serving organizations were many:

- These providers were already connected to children, families, and schools in their area.
- Many had provided childcare for essential workers in the spring, ran summer programs under COVID restrictions, and were already familiar with relevant health and safety guidelines.
- Instead of creating temporary hubs that would draw staff and participants away from existing afterschool and childcare providers, the hub initiative worked to increase and strengthen Vermont's progress towards Universal Afterschool.
- As schools phased into more in-person classes, the hubs did not completely close up and go away. Almost all of them stayed open through the end of December. Many shifted back into providing afterschool programming and continuing to be open on remaining remote learning days or hybrid models.

The hub initiative benefited from strong leadership at DCF/CDD, in particular Miranda Grey as state project lead; the full team at Vermont Afterschool; high profile attention and support from the AHS Secretary's office and the Governor; and cross agency coordination, including:

- The Child Development Division and the Licensing Unit worked closely with hub applicants to provide ongoing support and to make sure that every proposed location is appropriate for the care of children.
- The Division of Fire Safety ensured that buildings are safe for children.
- The Agency of Natural Resources made sure that children have access to safe drinking water and that septic systems were able to manage the increased usage.
- The Department of Labor assisted with the staff recruitment process for hubs to be able to meet the increased childcare need.
- The Agency of Education and Hunger Free Vermont helped connect hubs to the appropriate food programs so that children could have access to healthy snacks and meals.
- The Department of Health provided detailed health and safety guidelines. They answered countless questions from hub providers about facial coverings, keeping children in pods and cohorts, and more.
- Let's Grow Kids and members of the Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance helped to make sure that the system we set up for the hubs did not do harm to the existing network of childcare providers.

Hubs were supported with a statewide hiring campaign, clear health and safety guidelines, frequent communication to the field, training for new staff, and on-going technical assistance.

Lessons Learned

Where there was close collaboration between the school leadership team and the afterschool program (or hub provider) the services and support for families tended to be better coordinated and often more affordable.

Significant differences in remote learning materials from schools (even among children in the same grade at the same school) often made it challenging for hub staff to coordinate program schedules for students.

The timing for when hubs and expanded program options are made available and communicated to families is critical. Without enough advanced notice, families often have to find their own alternatives for childcare and may not be able to take advantage of the added programming.

Not all schools and not many employers want to run childcare programs. Even where a school or employer was extremely interested in having a remote learning hub in their community, they often were looking for a community partner or outside provider to staff and run the program.

There is great diversity from one community to the next in Vermont with regards to how afterschool programming is being offered and paid for (e.g., schools, community organizations, recreation departments, private programs, etc.). For most initiatives, one size does not fit all, and flexibility is key. In some cases, providing low-cost programming through one provider may even threaten the viability of another.

Unaddressed Gaps

Many afterschool providers have been running significantly extended hours, even in areas without remote learning days. The Hubs Initiative only focused on areas where school schedules incorporated remote learning days. In some communities, schools were successful in bringing elementary children back in person five days a week. However, often those in-person days were shortened and ended at 11am or 1pm creating a significant childcare gap for families. A number of afterschool programs and youth-serving providers in these areas extended their hours and ran programming from the early school dismissal through to 5-6pm every day. These programs provided an important childcare resource for working families and yet were not able to apply for a hub grant.

Participation fees can be a heavy burden on families. If the hub grants had been structured to cover participation fees on remote learning days, more families would have been able to participate. While DCF/CDD required hubs to cap participant fees at no more than \$200/child/week, daily fees ranged from \$0 to \$100/day. In hubs with participant fees, adding six to thirty additional hours of childcare per week can be cost prohibitive for many families, not all of whom qualify for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). In some cases, parents were literally bringing their child to the same school building where their child normally attends school but now had to pay for them to be there and receive care and support for remote learning during what were regular school hours.

Middle school youth need access to afterschool programs and safe spaces to be on remote learning days as well. The hubs initiative was established for children in grades K-6. However, many families with

middle school youth and young adolescents were also seeking safe and supportive places for their children to be on remote learning days.

Funding for the hub initiative was not able to be used to establish new hub locations in late fall/early winter or to help communities after December 2020. Communities where the need for remote learning days did not arise until late in the fall did not have enough time given the tight grant parameters to apply and set up hubs through this initiative. This timing particularly affected communities that were considering remote learning days following Thanksgiving weekend and the winter holiday break.

The demand for more afterschool and summer program options is high across the state with more than 26,000 children and youth who would be in programs today if more were available, affordable, and accessible. The 2020 America After 3PM report found that 39%, or over 26,000 Vermont children and youth, who are not currently participating in afterschool programs if they could (December 2020). Furthermore, communities are ready to offer this extended care and programming. In December 2020, with \$110,000 in funds to award, Vermont's Afterschool for All grant competition received 84 proposals from communities across the state with requests totaling over \$900,000. In the first round of grants with \$600,000 to award in 2018, over 100 submissions were collected with 2-year requests totaling close to \$5.5 million.

Recommendations

- 1) When considering the childcare needs of Vermont's working families keep the full age range from birth through 8th grade in mind. Provide parity for afterschool programs and staff in line with supports for early childhood providers. Also, include afterschool staff in COVID testing and vaccination schedules in line with school day teachers and childcare providers.
- 2) The increased need for childcare due to remote learning days and modified school schedules, as well as additional time for remediation and enrichment learning opportunities, should be supported through state and federal recovery dollars and not fall to parents and families. Potential funding sources include the following:

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II)

Source: https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/01/Final_ESSERII_Methodology_Table_1.5.21.pdf

Total for VT: \$126,973,363

90% for districts: \$114,276,027

9.5% flexible: \$12,697,336

0.5% admin: \$634,867

Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021

Source: <https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/covid-relief-stimulus-child-care-state-estimates>

Total for VT: \$12,764,140

Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER II)

Source: <https://oese.ed.gov/governors-emergency-education-relief-fund/>

Estimate of total for VT remaining funds once private school set aside removed: \$1,361,110

- 3) As essential partners in providing additional time, supports, and resources for students, afterschool and summer learning programs should be incorporated into schools' local COVID recovery plans in 2021-2022 to address learning loss, young people's need for connection, and social-emotional learning.

Winter/Spring 2021:

- Provide funding to existing afterschool providers and youth-serving organizations to continue to offer expanded program hours in line with modified school schedules including remote learning days and shortened school days.

Summer 2021:

- Encourage the Universal Afterschool Task Force to include summer programming in their analysis and recommendations. Either extend the role of the Task Force into a standing state committee or establish a state level council on Afterschool & Summer Learning.
- Start planning now for 6-8 week summer enrichment programs for students of all ages. Summer planning teams should include school day teachers, school guidance counselors, afterschool program directors, and community partners.
- Summer programs should address learning loss and also include a wide range programming, such as STEM, arts, youth voice, outdoor adventure, physical activity, leadership development, team-building, emotions coaching, and more.

2021-2022 School Year:

- Supports for learning loss will need to continue into the fall and winter of 2021-2022. Afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations will be key partners in helping to also support youth resilience and engagement.
- Summer 2022 will be another important summer for Vermont's students. A statewide committee on Afterschool & Summer Learning could help ensure that equitable access to programs exists across the state.

