

Afterschool and Youth-Serving Organizations in the COVID-19 Landscape

Respectfully submitted to

Senate Health & Welfare Committee

By

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The afterschool field is an essential part of Vermont's response to the coronavirus pandemic. We are working around-the-clock to support youth, families, and staff. Programs are focused on improving children's safety and well-being, helping essential personnel continue to do their jobs, maintaining touch points with families, creating engaging learning opportunities for young people, and providing food and other supports for families in need. We are also working to protect and retain afterschool program staff.

Our crisis-response model is inclusive: We are rooted in community-driven solutions, and programs are partnering with school districts, local businesses, community organizations, healthcare systems, and others. Here are a few examples of how Vermont's afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations have stepped in to help children, youth, and families during the COVID pandemic:

- **Childcare and Learning.** Afterschool programs have been on the front lines providing childcare for essential workers, running summer programs under COVID health and safety guidelines, operating remote learning hubs, and extending hours to adjust to reduced in-person school day schedules.
- **Resources for Families.** Programs are staying in touch with families and are organizing and sharing resources to help them access food assistance, unemployment, healthcare and more. For example, some programs developed remote check-ins with their students and families to ensure they have the resources they need during this crisis. In these check-ins, afterschool staff provide advice and guidance for parents, such as mental health resources, tools and info on how to apply for unemployment insurance, access healthcare and treatment, and more.
- **Expanded Hours.** Programs are expanding hours to meet the needs of working families. Parents overwhelmingly support afterschool programs. Eighty-two percent of Vermont parents agree that afterschool programs give them peace of mind while they are at work. That's one reason

why COVID-19 has been devastating for working parents. The virus has created disruptions to families' routines in ways that feel unstable and stressful for working parents and their children. Before COVID, families across America reported that the gap between work and school schedules can be up to 25 hours per week. Now, with modified school schedules and remote learning, the gap is much greater, leaving working families with the impossible challenge of working at their jobs and caring for their children simultaneously.

- **Access to Food.** Throughout the COVID crisis, many afterschool providers transitioned into new roles within their schools and communities to help, such as organizing the delivery of meals or riding the buses to get the food to children and families. Children across Vermont rely on free or low-cost meals provided by schools and afterschool programs as their primary -- or sole -- source of nutrition. The pandemic has caused even more parents to lose jobs and income, causing them to struggle to pay for food. This makes these meals even more critical for preventing hunger and promoting kids' health.
- **Virtual Programming.** Where afterschool programs cannot operate as usual, providers are innovating to support kids in new ways to help keep them engaged in fun, enriching activities and to stay connected with young people during this time. For example, afterschool programs have been offering things like:
 - Virtual programming to stay connected with youth and keep kids engaged and learning while they're home via Zoom calls, FaceTime, or Google Hangouts.
 - "Grab and go" activities, such as "STEM in-a-bag" kits or art projects tailored for best practices that can be done alone or in small groups.
 - Virtual creative writing projects to help students process their feelings about the pandemic.
- **Social-Emotional Needs.** Afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to help kids learn and grow -- and that includes helping them manage stressful, traumatic experiences.
 - Afterschool provides a safe place where trained professionals connect with kids, engage them in hands-on learning, help them navigate challenges, and talk about how to make good decisions.
 - Staff are trained to focus on the whole child and offer enriching activities that encourage young people to try new things, build confidence, and develop social skills.

Before the pandemic, afterschool and summer learning programs were helping students reach their full potential. Students in programs earned better grades, were more engaged in school, and more likely to graduate. During the crisis, afterschool providers have been innovating to keep youth engaged, active, and connected with remote support and in-person programming, including help with school work and hands-on activities that complement school lessons. As we move ahead, whether virtually or in-person, students will need even more robust support from afterschool and summer learning providers to catch up and keep up. And programs will need to expand their offerings to cover more hours, to meet adjusted school hours and schedules.

We are concerned for our kids and what they are missing. Students who struggle in school get the extra help they need in their afterschool program. Or the child who struggles to fit in comes to afterschool and has a place to belong and thrive. In afterschool, kids get time with friends and mentors, hands-on

learning, creative enrichment and expression, a chance to lead, explore and create without stress. Under COVID, access to those afterschool spaces has been diminished. We fear that the opportunity gap we were helping to close is widening.

Our state will emerge from this pandemic a different place. The losses are real, the stability and economic security of families has been undermined, and many of our children -- our most precious resource -- have been shaken or traumatized. Our No. 1 priority as we emerge from this crisis must be to build or rebuild their resilience and hope for the future.

That begins with the realization that afterschool and summer learning programs have long been key to students' success and will be even more so in the months ahead. They also are key to economic recovery. As towns, cities, and states seek to restart local economies, many parents will be unable to go back to work if their kids are still home and without supervision during afterschool hours.

We are confident we will get through this crisis together and, when we do, the afterschool field will be ready. Youth will need critical and expanded support to emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, and hopeful - and we'll be there to help them do so.

What We've Learned Since March 2020

Strong Network of Providers. When schools had to close their doors in spring 2020, and when many schools were not comfortable opening their buildings in summer, it was afterschool providers and youth-serving organizations who stepped in to provide in-person care and programs for learning, enrichment, activity, and connection.

School and Community Partnerships. Where there has been close collaboration between school leadership teams and the afterschool programs, the services and support for families tended to be better coordinated and often more affordable.

Timing and Communication. The timing for when 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 learning support and may not be able to take advantage of the added programming.

Need for Existing Providers. Not all schools and not many employers have wanted to run childcare, summer, or afterschool programs. Unless there was already an existing afterschool program partner, even when a school or employer was extremely interested in having a summer program or a remote learning hub in their community, they often were looking for a community partner or outside provider to staff and run the program.

Funding and Flexibility for the Field. Including afterschool programs and providers in state efforts (such as the Remote Learning Childcare Hubs, hazard pay, program stabilization efforts, etc.) has been critical to helping to retain staff and try to sustain our network of programs. In addition, the state seeking flexibility in federal funding (such as through Vermont's waiver application for the 21st Century Community Learning Center grants) allowed those programs to adapt and expand hours of service in important ways.

Capacity has been Lowered. State and national data estimate that Vermont’s afterschool and summer programs operated at about 50% capacity over the summer. While afterschool programs have been finding ways to adapt and serve children and families throughout COVID and participation rates gradually increased in the fall, not all programs and providers have been able to return to in-person programming in all parts of the state.

Cross Agency Collaboration. Access to afterschool programs is a cross-cutting issue and cross-agency collaboration is essential. Multiple agencies and departments have been involved in supporting afterschool and summer programs throughout COVID, including: Department of Health; Department for Children and Families/ Child Development Division; Department of Mental Health; State Treasurer’s Office; Department of Libraries; Agency of Education; Division of Fire Safety; Department of Labor; Agency of Natural Resources; and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

Local Context. 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. Local context is important to the development and implementation of state solutions. For instance, 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. Vermont’s Childcare 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 have been running 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 supports, such as the hub grants, had been structured to cover participation fees on remote learning days, more families would be 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. 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) or attend afterschool programs funded by 21st Century Community Learning Center (21C) grants. This fall, some 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 normally 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 have also been seeking safe and supportive places for their children to be on remote learning days.

In addition to addressing learning loss, supports for children and youth in 2021-2022 will need to focus on mental health, resilience, youth voice, connection, and engagement. In an October 2020 survey administered through the Vermont Youth Project, Vermont youth report high levels of loneliness and increased concerns about their mental health and the mental health of those around them. Increased opportunities for connection, agency, and youth engagement will be critical in 2021-2022 and these are areas where afterschool programs are well-positioned to provide additional supports and resources.

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. Hold summer learning summits and emphasize the importance of summer learning in state messaging and initiatives.
- 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.