

To: Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
From: Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool
Date: February 6, 2024
Re: Out-of-School Programming in VT - Current Landscape and Universal Afterschool

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 programs that operate during out-of-school hours. 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'm here today to provide information about the afterschool field and the universal afterschool efforts supported by cannabis revenue.

Youth at the Center. Before I dive into details of Vermont's afterschool and summer landscape, 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.¹ 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.

Afterschool and Summer Programs. When we refer to the afterschool and summer, we are talking about programming that happens after school, over the summer, during school breaks, before school, and on the weekends – anytime children and youth are outside home and school. Decades of research show that afterschool programs help children learn, grow, and avoid risky behaviors². Through new learning experiences, young people discover what they love to do and gain the skills they need to land that first job. Afterschool and summer learning programs aim to complement but not replicate the school day. This may include opportunities for enrichment activities in the areas of STEM, physical health and wellness, art and music, career exploration, community service, opportunities to connect with peers, work independently or in groups, explore their leadership, agency, and voice, and much more.

Well-being and healthy development. Moreover, regular participation in afterschool programs has been shown to be critical in supporting youth's well-being and healthy development. Afterschool programs increase protective

¹ 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

² What does research say about afterschool?, Afterschool Alliance, November 2017. http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/What_Does_the_Research_Say_About_Afterschool.pdf

factors for youth by allowing them to improve their social-emotional learning experiences, build self-esteem and workforce development skills, and develop healthy relationships. Regular participation in quality afterschool and summer learning programs improves students' self-confidence, self-awareness, and positive social behaviors and decreases problem behaviors³. Afterschool and summer programs can impact youth mental health through a number of tiers, ranging from universal to intensive.⁴ Youth need safe and supportive places to be during the hours they are not at home or in school, where they can access well-trained staff who can help them build skills and competencies for their present and future selves, where they can practice taking positive risks, and cultivate their ideas through youth leadership, agency, and voice. They also offer access to food when youth are not in school, ensuring that youth have nutritious meals year-round. The impact of programs like these is clear.



On a typical day in afterschool, you may see any range of program themes and experiences. But what you may not see is the highly trained staff interacting with youth in different ways – one quietly helping a youth self-regulate, one encouraging youth to collaborate with their peers, or another watching a youth out of the corner of their eye to see if they need something – all based on what they know about those individuals. You also won't see the year-long staff training series about trauma-informed and healing-centric practices, diversity and inclusion, and supporting youth experiencing mental health challenges. This same scenario could play out in any number of programs across the state, regardless of their funding, or where their program is located, to ensure all youth are served. They do this inherently because that's what afterschool, summer, and youth development professionals do.

³ Smith, E.P., Witherspoon, D.P., & Osgood, W. (2017). Positive Youth Development Among Diverse Racial–Ethnic Children: Quality Afterschool Contexts as Developmental Assets. *Child Development*, Vol. 88, No. 4. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45046364>; D'Agostino, E.M., Frazier, S.L., Hansen, E., Patel, H.H., Ahmed, Z., et.al. (2019). Two-Year Changes in Neighborhood Juvenile Arrests After Implementation of a Park-Based Afterschool Mental Health Promotion Program in Miami–Dade County, Florida, 2015–2017. *American Journal of Public Health*, Supplement 3, Vol. 109. Retrieved from: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2530033323?pq-origsite=primo>

⁴ "Afterschool Supports Children's Well-Being and Healthy Development." Afterschool Alliance, May 2023.

<http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-Supports-Childrens-Well-Being-and-Healthy-Development-2023.pdf>

Many different program types and revenue streams fund the professionals who support our youth during out-of-school hours, including Title IV, Part B – Nita. M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21C), Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), CRRSAA (ESSER II) and ARP ESSER, local funds (originating from school budgets, municipalities, program participants/families, private grants and donations, and, other federal funds including Title funds, Medicaid, and many others. Several of these are incorporated into existing strategies in Vermont related to workforce, STEM and career exploration, full-service community schools, meeting the needs of families, and more.

There is often an overlap between program types and funding sources. For instance, a licensed afterschool program can also be a 21C program, or a nonprofit runs a licensed afterschool program and an exempt-from-licensure teen center. Both may receive private donations and municipal funds and partner with many other types of programs. Braiding funding streams allow afterschool and summer programs to develop financially strong, high-quality programs with fairly compensated staff and affordable opportunities for youth and their families.

However, even with all of these sources braided together, we still have areas of the state where there is not enough afterschool and summer programming to ensure every youth who wants to participate can do so. This is especially true for middle and high school programs, which, because of the age they serve (older than age 13), are not regulated programs and can't access those funds to reduce participant costs. These new state funds to expand or start afterschool and summer programs are meant to be flexible and fill the gap where federal funds are not invested.

Mixed Delivery Model. To date, there has been consensus that flexibility is a key design element for the system, as “every community in Vermont has a unique mix of resources, partners, strengths, and opportunities.”⁵ Limiting the applicant pool to LEAs only would limit opportunities for the growth of proven community-based models and put the responsibility for summer and afterschool solely onto our already overloaded schools. Vermont families value and seek out afterschool and summer opportunities from various community partners, including parks and recreation departments, libraries, trusted nonprofits, and family child care programs in their neighborhoods. It is essential to allow a variety of entities, to access these funds to ensure increased access, increased slots, geographic diversity, and programming to meet a wide variety of youth interests and family needs, especially for middle and high school aged youth, where there are fewer programs in place.

Changing the eligibility to allow only schools to access these funds directly would be a long-standing policy change. The Legislature has had a clear direction of a mixed delivery system for out-of-school programming since 2014. In June 2014, Vermont's Prekindergarten-16 Council created the Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) to review and evaluate issues of equity in and access to Vermont's Expanded Learning Opportunities, including afterschool and summer programs. The ELO Working Group also completed a comprehensive Return-on-Investment (ROI) study.

⁵ Report from Vermont's Universal Afterschool Task Force, May 2021. <https://education.vermont.gov/documents/edu-legislative-report-universal-afterschool-20210518>

The House Education Committee created the ELO Special Fund in the Miscellaneous Ed bill (H.480). It charged the ELO Working Group under the Prekindergarten-16 Council with developing recommendations for setting up and administering the fund. They recommended that the ELO Special Fund could accept both private and public dollars to increase opportunities. Regarding its structure, the Working Group recommended that a wide variety of entities could apply for the funds and that flexibility, allowing the state to meet the needs of Vermont communities in ways that current funding sources cannot, is essential. Their report also highlighted expanding access in parts of the state where few or no options are currently available and consider programs for older youth. Despite the efforts of many through 2016, 2017, and 2018, the ELO Special Fund remained unfunded.

In 2019, \$600,000 from the Tobacco Settlement was allocated to increase access to afterschool and summer learning programs in 2019. Those funds were administered through CDD via a grant to Vermont Afterschool, as the Afterschool for All grant, following the recommendations outlined in the ELO Working Group report, Closing the Gap. In the fall of 2020, the Vermont Community Foundation added \$50,000 to combine with any remaining Tobacco funds, running a second grant round.

In the meantime, Vermont Afterschool piloted the Vermont Youth Project, a combination of research-based practices from the Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM), youth voice practices in Finland, and initiatives already working well in Vermont. This effort is community-specific, bringing together multiple domains, including out-of-school time programs, family, community, and schools, to address the built environment for youth in communities. Key findings point to the need for third space activities, those happening outside of home and school, often at afterschool and summer programs.

In his 2020 State of the State Address, the Governor laid out a universal afterschool and summer target for 2025. That vision built upon the efforts by the Legislature, and outlined working with communities to support local input on types of programming –not reinventing the wheel if they already offered programming through their school via 21C, a licensed program, or other funds, but inviting other entities into the work to supplement and enhance existing efforts or to fill gaps where no options existed.

In 2020, the Legislature dedicated funds to start or expand afterschool and summer learning programs, especially in underserved areas of the State. However, the funds were not sent to a receiving Agency to run the grant program.

“17c. DEDICATED USE OF SALES AND USE TAX ON CANNABIS Notwithstanding 16 V.S.A. § 4025(b), revenue from the sales and use tax imposed by 32 V.S.A. chapter 233 on retail sales of cannabis or cannabis products in this State shall be used to fund a grant program to start or expand afterschool and summer learning programs, with a focus on increasing access to underserved areas of the State.” This language did not prescribe a delivery model or limit eligible grant recipients in any way; instead, it focused on increasing access in underserved areas of the state. The funds were not sent to a receiving Agency to run the grant program.

The Legislature created a Universal Afterschool Task Force to create a plan and recommendations to meet the 2025 target. Their report put forward a set of recommendations that also supported a mixed delivery model for this funding and certain standards private/non-profit providers should be asked to meet.

In the FY24 budget, the Legislature cleaned up the cannabis language from 2020, and the language prescribed:

- *Grants shall be used to support a mixed delivery system for afterschool and summer programming. Eligible recipients can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations.*
- *Grants may be used for technical assistance, program implementation, program expansion, program sustainability, and related costs.*
- *Grants may be used to directly target communities with low existing capacity to serve youth in afterschool and summer settings.*

The Afterschool and Summer Learning Program Grant opportunity is currently open for applications and builds upon the policy the Legislature has set forth since 2014. Using \$3.5m of the available cannabis revenue from FY24 and approved by the Legislature, the Agency of Education has launched a 3-year grant opportunity for public (schools) and community-based organizations. Applicants must meet **at least two** of the Absolute Priorities, which include partnerships between schools and communities (no preference on the lead organization), where no or limited program options are available in a community, and designs to improve access to and remove barriers to participation for youth from Historically Marginalized Groups.

- **Absolute Priority 1:** The Agency of Education will prioritize awards for applications that utilize school-community partnership model to deliver programming.
- **Absolute Priority 2:** The Agency of Education will prioritize awards for applications where there is evidence of no or limited afterschool program options currently available for children and youth in the applicant community(s).
- **Absolute Priority 3:** The Agency of Education will prioritize awards to applications designed to improve access and remove barriers to participation for students from Historically Marginalized Groups.
 - This grant is currently live and applications will be accepted until March 6th. More can be found, here: [Grant Announcement: Act 78 Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs | Agency of Education \(vermont.gov\)](#)

The strong emphasis on partnerships was also called out in the [Universal Afterschool Task Force](#) report, specifically between schools, communities, and families. In the report, the Task Force recognized, “it will take a wide variety of community partners, schools, and organizations working together to provide universal afterschool across Vermont.” This flexibility will allow community-specific needs related to staffing, transportation, supplies, and overall capacity, especially in our most rural communities.

Vermont has an existing infrastructure for afterschool and summer programs, inclusive of many types of providers, each having their own autonomy to directly apply for funding sources as needed. Disrupting this system to rebuild programs and oversight within school systems, especially in the already stretched LEAs, would create duplicative capacity and funding needed. Requiring community-based providers to apply for funds through a school district challenges the existing partnership those entities have already established. Additionally, by



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providing direct grants to non-LEAs, those directly running the programs have the clearest line of communication with the Agency of Education and access to technical assistance and resources.

Collectively, we've identified universal access to afterschool and summer programs as the goal for every youth in Vermont. As a Legislature, you all can continue the current policy trajectory from over the past decade, allowing communities and the individuals within them to make the best decisions based on the unique needs and strengths of that community and its infrastructure. These are important choices, and if we place youth at the center, recognizing that choice and multiple access points to programs is paramount, we can allow all youth to be active, engaged, connected, and heard.

Thank you for investing in Vermont's youth and, in turn, their families, our communities, and the state, and for allowing me to share my perspective with you all.