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Understanding the Role of Out of School Time (OST) Providers in Urban School Systems in a Post-COVID Context

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME (OST) PROVIDERS IN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN A POST-COVID CONTEXT

an ICRE, MERC, and BGCMR research and policy brief

Boys & Girls Clubs
OF METRO RICHMOND

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This research and policy brief is distributed by the **Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC)**, a research-practice partnership between the *School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University* and five school divisions in metropolitan Richmond: *Chesterfield*, *Goochland*, *Hanover*, *Henrico*, and *Richmond Public Schools*. Established in 1991, MERC conducts research studies on emerging and enduring issues in public education in partnership with its member school divisions. Its *guiding principles* are relationships, relevance, rigor, multiple perspectives, and impact. MERC is a part of ICRE.

Since 1953, the **Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Richmond** has committed to helping young people leave life-ready and empowered to use their talents and voices. BGCMR Clubs in Richmond and Petersburg offer innovative programs and a diverse, dedicated staff. We provide safe, welcoming, and educational spaces to help youth thrive, both in and out of school. BGCMR has commissioned ICRE and MERC to produce this research and policy brief as a part of a broader needs assessment about out-of-school time (OST) programming in metropolitan Richmond, VA.

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PODCAST

Click here to listen to a podcast episode summarizing findings and implications of this report with partners from Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Richmond and Richmond Public Schools.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME (OST) PROVIDERS IN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN A POST-COVID CONTEXT

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Out-of-school time (OST) providers are programs and organizations that offer enrichment opportunities for PK-12 aged youth during the hours that they are not in classes (e.g. before or after school as well as during spring and summer breaks and weekends).[1] They offer a variety of extracurricular (outside of the school day)[2] programming that often includes physical activities (e.g. athletics), social opportunities (e.g. clubs), academic supports (e.g. tutoring), artistic outlets, recreation, and other youth enrichment under adult supervision.[3] The programming that they offer often occurs in community-based facilities, but they may also be offered within school buildings outside of regular classes (e.g. before or after school).[4] Commonly, there is an emphasis on group-oriented activities.[5] Because youth will often spend a significant amount of time in OST settings, they offer a critical opportunity for providing enrichment that not only enhances what they learn in school, but also supports their social and emotional development.[6]

Similar to PK-12 schools across the country, OST providers experienced significant disruptions at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] Public health measures intended to curb the spread of the virus contributed to limited access to OST, and the impacts of that disruption were felt by the students and families that they typically serve. According to a 2022 report by the Afterschool Alliance, the pandemic led to limited OST availability, long waitlists for families searching for options while their child was engaging in remote schooling, and challenging economic conditions that made it more difficult for families to afford care. These impacts were felt most acutely by families who were low-income and from minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds. Still, OST providers worked to

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[1] Halverson et al. (2023); Osai et al. (2024)

[2] Heath et al. (2022)

[3] Bates & O'Quinn (2024)

[4] Heath et al. (2022)

[5] Sjogren et al. (2022)

[6] Culbertson, et al. (2022)

[7] Osai et al. (2024)

accommodate difficult circumstances during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to provide services to youth in their communities.

In Richmond, VA the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Richmond offered shelter and food service to individuals experiencing homelessness who were at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19, often in direct partnership with Richmond Public Schools (RPS). The City of Richmond partnered with the YMCA of Greater Richmond, Peter Paul Development Center, its own Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, and community organizations across the city to stand up emergency child care facilities to provide safe, supervised spaces for school-aged children to participate in virtual learning while their caregivers worked.[8] This was part of a $3 million CARES-funded, city-led "Emergency Child Care Initiative" that created virtual learning sites for children under the age of 12, both inside and outside of RPS facilities. NextUp RVA provided enrichment activities to city of Richmond youth in a virtual format during the acute months of the pandemic before returning to in-person programming at middle schools in Richmond Public Schools. Other OST providers in the area provided services running from emergency child care for school-aged youth, virtual enrichment programs, and providing food and shelter to families in need. Efforts like these were herculean, but also necessary during the most disruptive months of the pandemic. Now that the spread of the virus has curbed, and PK-12 schools have resumed pre-COVID operations, OST providers might also be able to get back to business-as-usual programming with the youth and families they serve.

However, while schools may be back in session, student outcomes are not the same. Chronic absenteeism (missing 10% or more of school) has roughly doubled since prior to the pandemic. Stress, anxiety, and depression among youth have accelerated, often to clinical levels. Drops in academic achievement (often referred to as "learning loss") have been pronounced across the country. The National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that Virginia students had a statistically significant drop in reading and math scores in the 4th and 8th grade between 2019 and 2022, with Virginia ranking last in the US in 4th grade reading score change with a 10 point drop compared to a three point drop nationally. With all of these significant challenges facing PK-12 students in a post-COVID context, what is the role of out-of-school time providers?

This research and policy brief will explore this question using peer reviewed literature, publicly available data, and relevant policies at the federal, state, and school division level, with a particular focus on urban school systems. We define "urban" using the US Census standard of at least 2,000 people per square mile. The brief will first offer an overview of OST providers and the role that they play in urban school contexts, followed by a summary of policies that guide OST programming at the federal, state, and school division level in the metropolitan Richmond region. It will then explore trends and outcomes in OST programming relative to the onset of COVID-19. Finally, it will describe what OST looks like in urban school settings in a post-COVID context before concluding with a series of key takeaways and recommendations.

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[8] This effort included the provision of grant opportunities for involved community providers.

WHAT ARE OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROVIDERS AND WHAT ROLE DO THEY PLAY IN URBAN SCHOOL CONTEXTS?

OST providers aim to enhance the overall well-being of youth by providing safe, developmentally-appropriate spaces and inclusive opportunities for different subgroups of students.[9] Research suggests that OST providers serve a number of purposes, including (but not limited to):

- nurturing **positive academic, social, and emotional developmental outcomes** for youth[10]
- supporting the **physical and emotional well-being** of youth[11]
- developing **leadership skills** and building **self-esteem**[12]
- helping youth **decrease behaviors that are maladaptive** for their social, emotional, and academic success[13]
- **supplementing the school curriculum** and promoting inclusion within informal learning environments[14]
- **increasing specific academic competencies** among youth (e.g. STEM[15]), particularly for youth who are underrepresented in related coursework and careers[16]
- **championing the needs of youth from minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as low-income communities** by implementing educational activities that fill gaps in learning, youth engagement and development[17]
- **creating a space for marginalized youth** to give voice to their experiences in academic environments where they do not always feel supported[18]
- **building protective factors against youth violence** to reduce the risk that youth either perpetrate or fall victim to violent acts[19]

Through the academic, social, and emotionally centered programming that they provide, OST programs foster communication, collaboration and real-world connections among youth, building on the concept of learning and acquiring 21st-century skills in meaningful ways.[20] Additionally, OST providers offer substantial contributions to regional and national

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[9] Kinfsend & Juvonen (2023); Sjogren et al. (2022)

[10] Rocha et al. (2022); Sjogren et al. (2022)

[11] Martins et al. (2021)

[12] Bates & O'Quinn (2024); Sjogren et al. (2022)

[13] Sjogren et al. (2022)

[14] Hsu et. al. (2022)

[15] Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

[16] Wade-Jaimes et al. (2022)

[17] Heath et al. (2022); Rowan et al. (2024)

[18] Call-Cummings et al. (2023)

[19] CDC (2020)

[20] Culbertson, et al. (2022)

economies, particularly through the summer camp industry which includes the participation of 7.7 million children nationwide.[21] However, the costs associated with OST programming can also sometimes be a barrier for families who cannot afford them and where assistance is not provided.[22]

What are the common terms used to describe OST providers?

Although there are no national standards to describe out of school time providers, several common terms have developed. This includes terms used in programs offered within school building settings and across various organizations:

- *Extracurricular* commonly refers to programming (academic or non-academic) offered outside of school time.[23]
- *Afterschool* is often used to describe OST providers because they typically occur outside of regular school hours (although programming may also occur before the school day begins).[24] This is also sometimes referred to as *expanded learning time*.
- *Makerspaces* are often provided in OST programming and offer physical locations and tools that allow youth to work individually or with their peers to create physical products (e.g., models or prototypes).[25] These may also be offered within school settings and during school hours.
- *Summer camps or programs* are common services offered by OST providers, giving students opportunities to engage in enrichment activities when school is not in session.[26] Such programs are also critically important for parents and caregivers who work full-time and are in need of high-quality programming for their children during the summer months.
- OST providers are also sometimes referred to as *extramural programs* where students' cultural wealth and self-efficacy are nurtured and strengthened.[27]
- OST programs serving youth under age 13 are also considered to be *child care providers* by the Commonwealth of Virginia for the purposes of licensing and subsidy administration.

What programs do OST providers typically offer?

OST leaders work to ensure that the programming they provide meets the developmental needs of the youth that they serve based on an understanding of not only their current capacity but also their potential for cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth.[28] Some common examples of programming that they offer include (but are not limited to):

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[21] Thurson et al. (2023)
[22] Suminski et al. (2023)
[23] Health et al. (2022)
[24] Sjogren et al. (2022)
[25] Hsu et. al. (2022)
[26] Hsu et. al. (2022)
[27] Rocha et al. (2022)
[28] Rowan et al. (2024)

- art education[29]
- sports or other forms of physical and team-building activities[30]
- STEM learning activities[31]
- social support groups[32]
- mentoring programs, particularly for students from minoritized racial and ethnic or low-income backgrounds[33]
- tutoring and academic skill-building interventions[34]
- leadership development[35]
- life and career readiness[36]
- outdoor sports (e.g. hiking or climbing) and the promotion of environmental stewardship[37]
- intentional exposure to new and different activities that youth may not have an opportunity to experience in school settings (e.g., trips to museums or other cultural and community resources)[38]

Often, OST providers seek to provide "wraparound" services for their youth, focusing on programming that supports not only present developmental needs but also postsecondary and career aspirations.[39]

What are the intended outcomes for students participating in OST programs?

The intended youth outcomes promoted by OST providers tend to vary depending on the type of programming offered and the context in which it is delivered (e.g., a school or community center). However, research does suggest that OST participation tends to be related to positive academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.[40] For example:

- *Pepic and colleagues (2022)* found that American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth (age range 5-12 years old) participating in an arts-based afterschool program that was responsive to their unique cultural backgrounds helped **reduce reported stress levels** over a 12 week period.
- *Beymer and colleagues (2023)* found that youth (age range 10-16 years old) participating in a summer STEM program reported **lower boredom and higher excitement with the subject matter** after participation.

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[29] Suminski et al. (2023)

[30] LaForge-MacKenzie et al. (2022)

[31] Beymer et al. (2023); Culbertson, et al. (2022); Rocha et al. (2022)

[32] Kennedy et al. (2022)

[33] Harper et al. (2021)

[34] Kennedy et al. (2022)

[35] Sjogren et al. (2022)

[36] Lewis et al. (2022)

[37] Ahl et al. (2022)

[38] Suminski et al. (2023)

[39] Lewis et al. (2022)

[40] Sjogren, Zumbrunn et al. (2022)

- *Culbertson and colleagues (2022)* examined longitudinal data from Texas middle and high school students participating in a summer STEM enrichment program in 2019 and found that youth demonstrated **increases in critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and STEM career orientation** through their participation, particularly for female and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority youth.
- *Hwang and colleagues (2022)* found that Black and Latina/o/x female students from third through the eighth grade participating in an afterschool program demonstrated **increased "cross-linguistic" connections** compared to their interactions in school.
- *Christensen (2021)* conducted a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of studies offering empirical evidence of the impacts of afterschool program participation and found that across 56 studies involving 128,538 youth (grades K-12), there was evidence that **afterschool program participation had small but significant positive impacts on behavioral and mental health outcomes in youth**.
- *Seitz and colleagues (2021)* examined data from the national evaluation of Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), which included 101,050 youth participants (grades K-12) in 2,741 BGCA centers across the country. They found that program participation was associated not only with **increasing positive perceptions of school, but also with gains in academic achievement.**

These are only a handful of examples of empirical studies capturing the impacts (and perceived impacts) of OST participation on multiple pertinent youth outcomes. However, despite evidence of their potential impacts, OST providers must often navigate several challenges to offer their services effectively.

What challenges have OST providers historically faced?

Historically, OST providers have faced many challenges that may directly impact student outcomes. Some common challenges and barriers include:

- limited access due to **cost and lack of affordability** for families and funding[41]
- the need to **build and sustain community partnerships**[42]
- **lack of awareness** about available programming by potential attendees[43]
- **unavailability of transportation or lack of providers** in close proximity to families[44]
- **challenges with communication** with families in low-income communities[45]
- **cultural differences between the leaders of OST programs and the families they intend to serve**, including a lack of diversity in OST program staff[46]

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[41] Heath et al. (2022); Suminski et al. (2023)

[42] Stern et al. (2022)

[43] Stern et al. (2022)

[44] Suminski et al. (2023)

[45] Suminski et al. (2023)

[46] Greer et al. (2024); Stern et al. (2022)

- **effectively communicating the breadth and impacts of OST services** to policymakers and potential funders[47]
- **costs associated with training and staffing** to ensure that OST programs offering "child care" according to Virginia code have proper licensing

What is the importance of OST providers in urban communities and school systems?

OST providers serve an important role in urban communities, especially those that are high-poverty or racially segregated. High-poverty schools typically serve student populations where more than 75% qualify for federal meal subsidies and often serve high percentages of Latina/o/x and Black students.[48] Although other school districts (particularly rural ones) also navigate challenges related to poverty, urban school districts often navigate compounding challenges related to racial segregation.[49] High-poverty and racially-segregated schools in urban settings also tend to experience challenges with a variety of academic achievement outcomes, including standardized test scores and on-time graduation.[50] Additionally, students in urban, high-poverty, racially segregated schools tend to experience disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions and expulsions), including in metropolitan Richmond. Considering the unique challenges experienced in urban school systems and communities, what is the role of OST providers?

- OST providers can **help disrupt the social isolation experienced by children in urban, high-poverty communities**, which can be detrimental to their social and emotional development.[51]
- OST providers in urban settings can **help provide this access to outdoor activities (e.g., hiking)** that may not always be available to local youth.[52]
- Youth from higher-SES families tend to be more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities through their schools, including academic enrichment, clubs, and sports.[53] OST providers in urban environments can provide intentional access to such opportunities for low-SES youth.
- Urban, high-poverty school settings have historically been underfunded by public dollars relative to the needs of the students who attend them. **OST providers can help supplement these funding deficits with high-quality enrichment that may not be available at their schools.**[54]
- Helping students get involved in sports may be particularly important in OST providers serving urban communities, as research suggests that **sports participation tends to predict higher academic achievement in low-income school settings**.[55]

[47] Halverson et al. (2023)
[48] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2023)
[49] Welsh & Swain (2020)
[50] NCES Condition of Education (2023)
[51] Heath et al. (2022)
[52] Stern et al. (2022)
[53] Martins et al. (2021)
[54] Greer et al. (2024)
[55] Heath et al. (2022)

- OST programming offered within urban school buildings can **help promote student engagement as well as nurture positive views of their schools.**[56]
- **STEM-focused OST programming can offer students an opportunity to engage with the curricula at a deeper level** than what they have access to in their schools.[57] For example, STEM related Advanced Placement courses tend to be less available to students in high-poverty, urban school environments.
- Consistent and high quality OST programming **allows caregivers to fully participate in the workforce**, which can help maintain family stability and build community wealth.[58]

WHAT POLICIES GUIDE OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING AT THE FEDERAL, STATE, AND DIVISION LEVEL?

A key component of understanding the operation of OST programming is exploring relevant policies at the federal, state, and school division levels. This section describes each of these policy contexts, with local school board policies focusing on the metropolitan Richmond region.[59]

Federal

At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the major legislation enacted to support afterschool activities. Specifically, in 2015 the ESSA reauthorized the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC), which provided "academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools." Federal funds directed at supporting these centers aim to help students meet academic standards at both the district and state levels, with a primary focus on core competencies (e.g., math, science, and reading) along with supplemental academic enrichment. The funds are distributed to each state in alignment with Title I funds for low-income students. 21st CCLC programs support:[60]

- academic enrichment activities that can help students meet state and local achievement standards.
- a broad array of additional enrichment services designed to reinforce and complement the regular academic program, such as: drug and violence prevention

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[56] Sjogren et al. (2022)
[57] Rocha et al. (2022)
[58] Stern et al. (2022)
[59] Chesterfield, Henrico, Petersburg, and Richmond Public Schools
[60] https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177

programs, career and technical programs, counseling programs, art, music programs, STEM programs, and physical activity and nutrition education programs.
- literacy and related educational development services to the families of children who are served in the program

The 21st CCLC program student outcomes include academic gains, improved learning engagement, and enhanced social and emotional skills and competencies that will help them in and out of school.[61]

Additional federal legislation provides further funding to support states and improve student representation in targeted educational programs. This funding approach demonstrates the federal government's goal to address the whole student needs. For example, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296) expanded meal reimbursement for "at-risk" afterschool programs and requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture to study ways of bringing in more sponsors for after-school supper programs. Similarly, America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018 seeks to address public health concerns for students by providing funding to tackle lead contamination in drinking water at schools and childcare programs.

Commonwealth of Virginia (State-Level)

There are few policies that pertain to OST programs in Virginia. Over the last 10 years, this has largely been related to budgetary allocation and fiscal support, expansion of some school zoning rules to community centers, and attempts to address pandemic-related truancy. Related state policy includes:

- **VA HB 7001:** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and as part of the Federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, a one-time dispensation of funds was distributed to several OST providers across the state.
- **VA HB 246**: Students who participate in a 4-H program will not be counted absent for days on which they attend such programs in lieu of class. Division school boards must determine policies and procedures that dictate the details of how students will make up missed work.
- **VA HB 682**: "Gang-Free School Zones" were broadened to include publicly operated community centers and afterschool programs.
- **§ 22.1-289.04**: The Virginia Board of Education shall establish an early childhood care and education advisory committee, which shall include one representative from a statewide nonprofit organization "whose membership includes both before-school and afterschool nonprofit child care providers."
- **§ 22.1-207.4:2**: This allows local districts with any public or elementary school (primary or secondary) with a student population qualifying for lunch subsidies at least 50% of the prior school year to be eligible to participate in the Afterschool Meal Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

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[61] Afterschool Alliance (2021)

- **§ 22.1-289.02.** Provides guidelines for early childhood care and education that indicates the licensing requirements for OST providers (and other programs) must follow in order to provide child care for youth under the age of 13.

Division (Metropolitan Richmond)

This section explores both school board policies and elements of division strategic plans that are related to OST programming.

School Board Policies

School board policies in metropolitan Richmond school divisions include guidance for OST programming, but only if it occurs on school grounds and is led by school staff and students. Some highlights include:

- providing examples of extracurricular activities that schools can provide, including Virginia High School League (VHSL) activities, co-curricular activities that extend learning related to the curriculum in the classroom in an after or before-school context, and non-curricular activities that include school-sponsored (e.g., student government) or student interest clubs[62]
- requiring that schools keep an accurate account of all expenditures related to extracurricular activities that they provide to their students
- offering supplemental pay for personnel who assist with coaching sports as well as leading other select extracurricular activities
- indicating that schools can suspend students from participation in school-sponsored extracurricular activities based on the code of conduct
- ensuring that students not be restricted from extracurricular program participation based on their background or identities (e.g., race, gender identity, or sexual orientation)
- restricting any student considered "over age"[63] from participation in extracurricular activities, as well as restricting participation only to students enrolled in the division
- restricting extracurricular activities from taking place on school grounds on days when schools are closed due to emergency or weather conditions
- encouraging schools that offer afterschool activities for students (particularly in high-poverty settings) to provide healthy snacks and water

While these division policies focus solely on extracurricular programming provided by PK-12 schools in the metropolitan Richmond area, they offer insights into the local context in which OST programs may provide their services, particularly if they are offered on school grounds.

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[62] All student interest clubs must be approved by the school principal, align with school rules and regulations, and have a staff monitor rather than an official "sponsor" since these clubs are not considered to be "school-sponsored"

[63] Typically over the age of 21 for the general student population or 22 for students with disabilities and English language learners

Strategic Plans

Using a broader approach, division strategic plans can provide insight into the goals and motivations of districts related to OST programming. The strategic plans from this section include Richmond Public Schools as well as Norfolk City Public Schools and Newport News City Public Schools, each of which have a student population that is between 50-60% Black and between 60-70% economically disadvantaged. Some highlights include:

- **Richmond Public Schools (RPS)**: collaborating with the City of Richmond to increase out-of-school time (OST) opportunities for RPS students
- **Norfolk City Public Schools (NPS)**: (1) increasing access and opportunities to diverse learning experiences and (2) improving partnerships with external organizations to meet the needs of each student
- **Newport News Public Schools (NNPS)**: (1) providing opportunities for students to grow through extracurricular activities and (2) fostering active partnerships with external organizations that support the success and well-being of students

Municipal Funding

The City of Richmond's annual general fund budget allocates significant funding towards OST programming. For example, the proposed FY2025 budget includes a $17 million increase for schools in the city and the allocation of general funds towards OST providers that focus on gun violence prevention.[64] The budget also lists universal access to "high-quality, full-service out-of-school time opportunities, including after-school and summer learning experiences, for all Richmond Public Schools elementary and middle school students" as one of its "major objectives" within priority area 1 (adult and youth education).

HOW HAVE TRENDS AND OUTCOMES RELATED TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING CHANGED RELATIVE TO THE ONSET OF COVID-19?

This section summarizes relevant pre-pandemic data before exploring post-pandemic trends to understand how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has potentially impacted OST participation.

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[64] VPM (2024)

What are pre-pandemic trends in OST participation?

The following table depicts trends in extracurricular activity participation based on US Census data between 1998 and 2020[65] for youth aged 6-17.

Youth participation in sports, clubs, and lessons 1998-2020

Year	Sports	Clubs	Lessons[66]
1998	31.6%	31.2%	25.5%
2020	32.9%	22.1%	27.3%
Change	+1.3%	-9.1%	+1.8%

While participation in sports and lessons increased slightly, club participation decreased by nearly a third over this period. Across all categories, **students living below the poverty level were 11.6 percentage points lower in extracurricular participation than students living above the poverty level, a gap that grew to 13.1 percentage points in 2020**.

The Afterschool Alliance (AA) is a national organization with the stated vision of "working to ensure that all children, regardless of income or geographic area, have access to quality afterschool programs." Part of that effort includes systematic data collection, and AA routinely conducts a national survey called "America After 3PM" intended to assess how participation in out-of-school programming aligns with the needs of students and their families as well as the availability of providers. Researchers conduct the survey via phone interviews with the goal of connecting with at least 200 people in each state. Their 2020 report features data collected between January 27th and March 17th, 2020 and includes 31,055 households that answered questions about how their children participate in afterschool programs, with 14,391 offering follow-up responses about the barriers they encounter related to out-of-school time providers. AA provides the results in an online data dashboard, including national findings as well as state by state comparisons. While this data was collected directly at the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, it is also the most recent that is publicly available from AA.

According to the dashboard, **Virginia had more than 602,000 children[67] in 2020 who would participate in an afterschool program if it was available to them**, an all-time high at the time of the data collection. The 162,235 students participating in OST programming in 2020 represented 12% of PK-12-aged youth across the state that year, a decrease from 14% in 2014 and below the national average of 14% in 2020. The strongest disparity by grade

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[65] Data collection has not continued after 2020
[66] This is the term provided by US Census, and could include tutoring or other academic programming
[67] An estimate generated from survey respondents

level was for students in grades K-5, of which only 14% participated in afterschool programs in Virginia compared to 18% nationally. AA estimates that **in Virginia in 2020, for every student participating in an afterschool program there were four waiting to get into one, exceeding the national ratio of three to one**. In 2020, AA estimated that there were 263,063 Virginia students who would have participated in a summer program if it was available to them. Nationally, there were an estimated 25 million children who weren't able to access afterschool programs that year.

Some common barriers to access reported by families included afterschool programs being too expensive, which 60% of Virginia respondents reported as an issue in 2020 (up from 41% in 2014). This was slightly above the national average of 57%. Virginia families also reported that there was not an afterschool program available in their community (43% in 2020 compared to 25% in 2014), and that their children did not have a safe way to get to and come home from programs (47% in 2020 compared to 38% in 2014). They were also more likely to report that the hours of operation of afterschool programs did not meet their needs in 2020 (46%) than in 2014 (26%).[68]

However, satisfaction in afterschool programs was also high in 2020, with 93% of families reporting feeling satisfied with their child's out-of-school time provider, 74% agreeing that the afterschool program kept their child safe and out of trouble, and 82% indicating that the program helped develop useful life skills. While these data offer insights into trends in OST program availability and participation prior to COVID-19, pandemic-related disruptions support the need to better understand how things have changed in recent years.

What are post-pandemic trends in OST participation?

Post-COVID participation data in OST programming is noticeably scant, which is consistent with widespread disruptions to collecting reliable and consistent data in the wake of the pandemic. With the documented disruptions to OST during COVID,[69] particularly for low-income and racial and ethnic minority students, it is reasonable to expect that challenges associated with participation (including disparities in who has reliable access to OST programming) have likely exacerbated.

In the wake of COVID-19, AA repeatedly surveyed OST providers to produce their Afterschool COVID-19 Reports. Researchers conducted surveys online in the Spring, Summer, and Fall of 2020 and 2021, as well as in the Spring and Fall of 2022 and Spring of 2023, offering results across nine "waves" spanning from the spring of 2020, when schools originally shut down (Wave 1) to the spring of 2023 when there were no mask mandates and vaccine boosters were encouraged but not universally received or mandated (Wave 9). Responses were collected from 914 or more providers nationwide, many of whom represented multiple OST program sites. The survey asked OST providers to report on the

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[68] Note that this data is only available at the state level, and there could be variability in perceived access to OST programming based on locality.

[69] Osai et al. (2024)

state of their program and their concerns about students, staff, and the future of their programs.

OST provider concerns

In order to understand the concerns OST providers had about students, the Afterschool COVID-19 Reports asked respondents to describe how concerned they were about a variety of pertinent student outcomes. The following table depicts how concerns about students' social connections and mental health changed over time.

Table 2. OST provider concerns about social connections and mental health 2020-2023

	% of OST providers "extremely" or "very" concerned		
	Spring 2020	*Spring 2023*	*% Difference*
Social connections	74%	40%	–34%
Student mental health	89%	69%	–20%

While concern for both of these outcomes decreased over the past three years since the onset of COVID-19, student mental health concerns decreased less sharply, with the majority (69%) of providers still expressing being "extremely" or "very" concerned in 2023. The following table depicts similar comparisons related to concerns about learning loss. Over this period, only 49% of OST providers were open to in-person services in the summer of 2020, while 91% were fully open in the spring of 2023. Relatedly, OST provider concerns about losing touch with students in need dropped from 78% in the spring of 2020 to 31% in the spring of 2023. The following table depicts provider concerns related to student learning loss and access to technology.

Table 3. OST provider concerns about learning loss and technology access 2020-2023

	% of OST providers "extremely" or "very" concerned		
	Spring 2020	*Spring 2023*	*% Difference*
Learning loss	86%	61%	–25%
Access to technology	58%	23%	–25%

In Fall 2020, only 12% of school districts nationwide were operating on a fully in-person basis, with the majority of school districts operating on a fully virtual or hybrid schedule. As both OST providers and school districts returned to more in-person learning, concern around student access to technology dropped sharply. However, while concerns about academic progression dropped at a similar rate during that time, the majority of OST providers (61%) still expressed concerns about learning loss in the spring of 2023.

These data suggest that while some of the concerns that OST providers have expressed about the academic, social, and emotional well-being of their students have decreased over the past three years, the majority are still concerned about mental health and learning loss. Furthermore, pre-pandemic data indicated that access to OST programming was already below the level of need, both nationally and in Virginia. It will be important for organizations like the US Census and Afterschool Alliance to return to this data collection and make their results publicly available to illuminate current OST needs, including how previous access and participation disparities for low-SES and racial and ethnic minority students have potentially exacerbated.

WHAT DOES OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING LOOK LIKE IN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN A POST-COVID CONTEXT?

Considering the historical purposes of OST programming as well as how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their programming, this section will explore research illuminating what OST looks like in a post-COVID context, particularly in urban school systems. It will first describe the current needs of students, followed by an exploration in how OST services have changed. It will then discuss the unique challenges that they currently face, and will conclude with a discussion of the future of OST programming in urban school and community contexts.[70]

What are the current needs of students participating in OST programs?

Post-COVID-19, the needs of OST participants have changed.[71] Afterschool program proponents and providers agree that the expansion of high-quality programs offers a host of behavioral, academic, and social-emotional benefits that are essential for many students who, in their opinion, are still coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.[72] Some considerations for OST students include the following:

- **There is a heavier focus on civic capacity and social change activities**.[73] Consequently, marginalized youth in OST are often encouraged to examine systems and plan actions to support change through a social justice approach. [74]
- **Technology plays a bigger role in programming**, but parents have advocated for a balance in OST, incorporating technology while also moving away from screen time and developing healthy habits.[75]

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[70] Some additional resources to consider to understand OST programming in a post-COVID context include the National League of Cities and the Children's Funding Project.
[71] Greer et al. (2024)
[72] Greer et al. (2024)
[73] Greer et al. (2024)
[74] Osai et al. (2024)
[75] Suminski et al. (2023)

- **Resources for mental health are more urgently needed**. The pandemic exacerbated an already serious youth mental health issue and altered the functioning of certain after-school programs to accommodate this need.[76] This is consistent with lingering OST provider concerns about the mental health of the students they serve.
- **Developing students' social and emotional competencies is increasingly a priority**.[77] OST, now more than ever, acknowledges the advantages of transformative socioemotional learning (SEL) and helping students in urban school environments navigate trauma related to pandemic recovery, racism, and other challenges that they endure.[78]

How have their services changed?

When the coronavirus pandemic struck in the early spring of 2020, students' were suddenly unable to attend classes in person, much less sign up for after-school programs, due to the measures taken to stop the spread of the virus.[79] Post-COVID-19, leaders have voiced concerns about the OST program's sustainability, **citing staffing and long-term funding issues as the demand for OST programs keeps rising**. [80] While youth access to afterschool programs has decreased overall, **young people from low-income households are the ones most impacted**.[81] Additionally, new challenges in OST spaces have changed how services are offered.[82] Concerns related to students' learning loss when they resumed after-school activities following COVID-19 have led to pressure on OST programs to concentrate on academics to address perceived losses during the pandemic,[83] and this remains a concern for OST providers. However, research indicates that it is important for OST programs to continue to focus on supporting students holistically in their social and emotional development, particularly considering the demonstrated connections with academic achievement. Some recommendations from recent research on OST programming include:

- **providing students with real-time opportunities to use their voices**, explore interests, and have new experiences[84]
- increasing focus on programming that **helps students develop key life skills** such as interpersonal communication, personal discipline, and leadership[85]
- offering students **opportunities to explore social justice issues** that came to light during the pandemic and are directly related to their own lived experiences[86]

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[76] Thurson et al. (2023)
[77] National After School Association (2023)
[78] Greer et al. (2024)
[79] EdWeek Research Center
[80] Greer et al. (2024)
[81] America After 3 PM Alliance
[82] Greer et al. (2024)
[83] Osai et al. (2024)
[84] Osai et al. (2024)
[85] Berdychevsky et al. (2022)
[86] Greer et al. (2024)

- consider **moving away from rigid academic-driven programming** that does not also attend to the social and emotional needs of participating students[87]

What unique challenges do they face relative to the pandemic?

When schools closed due to the pandemic and students became largely disconnected from the school-based networks and social support they provide, many community-based programs adapted and continued to offer programming to meet the needs of schools, families, and communities.[88] The pandemic further exacerbated the already blurred lines between in-school and OST, educational inequities, access to resources, and increased difficulty balancing virtual customer service with providing actual youth programming.[89] It also gave rise to new and evolving challenges, including prevailing education narratives focusing on learning loss[90] that often do not attend to the unique approaches that OST providers take to holistically supporting student learning.[91] Public health misinformation compounded challenges with OST providers reopening their doors, even after mitigation efforts like vaccines became available.[92] Additionally, some youth development staff have reported higher levels of stress during and after the pandemic, while other staff have reported greater levels of satisfaction in their job despite higher levels of stress.[93] Some recommendations from recent research for navigating these challenges include:

- **centering youth voices** in the development of new OST policies and programming[94]
- **developing and/or revisiting strategies on immunization policy management** and procedures and communication management[95]
- **considering mental health resources** to support youth and OST staff[96]
- **unique funding challenges** based on navigating reductions in funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (2021) alongside record inflation[97]
- **turnover in schools and districts** can make it difficult to have reliable points of contact for OST providers within PK-12 partner institutions[98]
- **inconsistent access to reliable transportation** to help youth get between home, school, and OST programming[99]

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[87] Greer et al. (2024)

[88] Osai et al. (2024)

[89] Thurson et al. (2023)

[90] Thurson et al. (2023)

[91] Greer et al. (2024)

[92] Thurson et al. (2023)

[93] Woodberry-Shaw et al. (2022)

[94] Osai et al., 2024

[95] Thurson et al. (2023)

[96] Thurson et al. (2023)

[97] Based on communication with local OST providers in the Richmond region

[98] Based on communication with local OST providers in the Richmond region

[99] Based on communication with local OST providers in the Richmond region

What is the future of out-of-school time programming in urban contexts?

Recent research on OST programming has illuminated potential future directions that providers should consider, particularly in urban school and community contexts.

- **Review and reduce any barriers that may be preventing youth from participating in the program, which could include (but are not limited to)** financial costs or language requirements for participation.[100]
- **Prioritize outreach to parents and caregivers** to ensure that they are aware of the availability of local OST programming (as well as financial support) and to help establish a sense of buy-in for the importance of OST enrichment opportunities.[101] These efforts may be supported by partnering with schools with more direct access to the youth and families that OST providers intend to serve.
- **Help students from low-SES and minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds engage in collective action** on social justice issues that matter to them.[102] This can help build social connections and also cultivate hope in communities that were particularly impacted by the pandemic as well as enduring racism.
- **Provide "maker spaces" for youth** to create and co-create products and artifacts that stimulate their creativity and promote STEM learning.[103]
- **Encourage youth to co-develop OST programming** to ensure that it engages their interests and preferred modes of communication.[104] Furthermore, OST programming that centers youth voices should attend to the different identities and developmental needs of participants without fear of judgment by adults.[105]
- **Consider incorporating Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) into OST programming**, which allows students the opportunity to collect and reflect on data that enriches their understanding of issues that are important to them in their schools, communities, and society at large.[106]
- **Continue to offer STEM programming**, particularly considering how evolving technologies (like artificial intelligence) will impact not only students current experiences but also their future career trajectories.[107] These programs should be hands-on, interactive, and relevant to students' different cultural identities and backgrounds.[108]
- **Encourage youth civic engagement through OST programming** to help participating students recognize the power they have to be change agents in their communities.[109]

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[100] Bates & O'Quinn (2024)
[101] Suminski et al. (2023)
[102] Greer et al. (2024)
[103] Hsu et. al. (2022)
[104] Greer et al. (2024)
[105] Osai et al. (2024)
[106] Rowan et al. (2024)
[107] Hite & Taylor (2021)
[108] Garcia et al. (2023)
[109] Greer et al. (2024)

- **Promote equity in OST programming**, not only in terms of access for low-income youth but also in ensuring that youth and staff from minoritized communities feel a sense of belonging and dignity within OST spaces.[110]

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1

OST providers should continue to be upheld as key partners for PK-12 schools

OST programming goals align with PK-12 schools by focusing on supporting the social, emotional, and academic needs of youth. While they typically do not serve entire student populations within a school, they are able to offer supplemental enrichment programming that may not always be feasible to offer during school hours when there are competing demands related to mandated curricula or testing requirements. Furthermore, OST programs are adaptive, positioning them to evolve with the changing needs and priorities of school systems and the students and families that they collectively serve. Additionally, they are spaces where students are able to develop key life skills like the "five C's"[111] identified in the Virginia profile of a high school graduate from the Virginia Department of Education. Because of the symbiotic relationship between OST providers and their PK-12 counterparts, it is crucial to continue to support sustainable partnerships between them in the form of aligned school board policies and explicit statements of support in school division strategic plans.

2

While OST programs are helpful for all families, they serve a uniquely important role in urban school and community settings in a post-COVID context

While OST programming offers enrichment that benefits all families, they were particularly important in urban school and community settings prior to the pandemic. Research and data trends support the fact that urban school systems, particularly in high-poverty community contexts, experienced particularly adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including enduring trauma stemming from pandemic-related stressors as well as prolonged school closures and remote instruction. Because of this, the need for OST programming in these settings has never been more important, particularly as students recover from challenges related to mental health and learning loss that have stemmed from the pandemic. Policymaking and funding decisions in these contexts should prioritize ensuring access to high-quality OST enrichment opportunities that help ameliorate these challenges in the communities most impacted by them.

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[110] Wallace Foundation (2023)
[111] Critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation, and citizenship

3 **Ensure that OST providers are able to meet the needs of the students and families in their communities requires the intentional removal of barriers**

Data trends suggest that there were more students and families in need than were being served through OST programming prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and those disparities have likely exacerbated (although data in recent years is limited). Because of this, it is important for OST providers to identify and reduce any barriers that may exist in the communities they serve for youth and families to access their programming. This could include issues related to financial cost, proximity, or awareness of available services. Furthermore, barrier reduction may require additional resources from state, non-profit, and corporate funders to expand access to OST programming, particularly for families in high-poverty urban communities who may not have access to OST providers nearby, or may not be able to afford the services that they provide.

4 **Amplifying youth voice is more relevant now than ever in OST programming**

Research exploring the role of OST providers in a post-COVID context, including where they might go in the future, repeatedly emphasized the importance of amplifying youth voice in these settings. This includes the promotion of civic engagement, the exploration of social justice issues that are relevant to students' lives, and the utilization of youth participatory action research (YPAR) to help students collect and reflect on data on issues that are important to them. Additionally, OST providers should consider the perspectives of the youth that they serve when creating policies or developing programming to meet their needs. Considering the mission of OST providers to help support youth social and emotional development while nurturing their potential as leaders in their communities, helping them to elevate their voices could prove to be an essential component of OST programming moving forward.

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