

Recognizing the Role of Afterschool and Summer Programs and Systems in Reopening and Rebuilding

Research suggests that all people—children, youth, and adults—thrive in safe, supportive environments that are developmentally rich and identity-safe, characterized by positive relationships and relevant opportunities to learn and grow.¹ The need for safety, support, and trusting, reciprocal relationships becomes even more important now as we work to rebuild and return stronger than before COVID-19.

Afterschool and summer programs play an essential role in our country's efforts to reopen and rebuild in partnership with youth, families, and the community because they:

- ✓ Provide safe, developmentally rich settings for learning and development.
- ✓ Are seen as trusted partners by families and communities.
- ✓ Have connections to other supports and services that schools and families need.

Afterschool and summer programs provide safe, developmentally rich settings for learning and development. Relationship-rich environments are key to supporting learning and development and are powerful assets as young people confront and **respond to trauma**.² In addition, afterschool and summer programs are situated in communities and are designed to offer high-quality experiences that reflect the **culture, assets, and resources of the community**.³ When we create positive conditions for learning, we create [conditions for realizing robust equity](#).⁴ This is critically important because we need to acknowledge and address the inequity and trauma of this current pandemic crisis before we can expect learning to resume as usual.

Afterschool and summer programs offer **engaging opportunities for enrichment, exploration of interests, creativity, and fun**. Across the country, [All Stars programs have gone virtual](#) with weekly improv hangouts and talent show performances. Many afterschool and summer programs foster social and emotional learning (SEL),⁵ and some programs provide opportunities for **youth employment**.⁶ Opportunities such as these keep youth connected to and engaged with school.⁷ For older youth in particular, adolescence is a time of exploration and identity development. The closing of schools and programs makes this an even more challenging time in which to maintain adolescent engagement, especially for those young people who were already disengaged.⁸

Afterschool and summer programs are seen as trusted partners by families and communities.⁹ We have the paramount task of understanding and supporting the well-being of children, youth, and their families in the months ahead. The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood set up 26 childcare programs across the state (one program for each hospital in Connecticut) to support the children of essential workers. Because the [Connecticut After School Network](#) is an established partner in communities across the state, the Network was identified to support this effort. As families continue or return to work, schools will likely operate with altered schedules and with spacing constraints. Afterschool and summer programs will continue to offer safe, supportive places for children to grow and develop when they are not in school and while family members are at work.

Afterschool and summer programs and systems have connections to other supports and services that schools and families need. Schools and afterschool and summer programs cannot meet all needs of all children and their families independently. Together, they must create a network of partners to address the primary and mental health, employment, and nutrition needs of children and families. In California, for example, [LA Unified School District and LA's BEST afterschool programs are now part of the LA City food distribution system](#) and the [California AfterSchool Network](#) partnered with the University of California Davis Center for Regional Change to build an [interactive map](#) that included community programs and their proximity to hospitals and other essential services. Because afterschool and summer programs are often networked in their local communities, they can partner with and provide referrals to local primary and mental health providers and other essential supports.

HOW ARE YOU DOING?

“The brain is malleable.

A brain under stress is shut down. It can't focus and concentrate, has little working memory, and is easily triggered by emotions.

And the way our brains are wired—it is our emotions that drive our cognitive and learning skills.

It is our emotions that engage us or shut us down.

So today—in the time of COVID-19—we have NO choice.

The path to a calm classroom is a calm brain.

The path to learning is a calm brain.

And the path to both depends on prioritizing activities that build strong relationships, establish predictable and integrated routines and experiences, and develop the skills for resilience.”

— Dr. Pamela Cantor
Turnaround for Children

As we look ahead, the future is unclear; but we know there will be significant changes to summer activities and the start of the new school year in the fall. As schools and community programs reopen, our efforts will be strengthened by partnerships and collaboration.

We must **work together** to ensure that youth, families, schools, and communities have what they need in terms of basic services (nutrition, primary health, employment services), supports for well-being (mental health services), and engaging academic instruction. Here are strategies that afterschool and summer programs and systems and school leaders can follow immediately and going forward.

Afterschool and summer programs and systems can:

1. **Read the reopening guidance** (see the resources from [CCSSO](#), [the Aspen Institute](#), [the American Enterprise Institute](#), [the American Federation of Teachers](#), [Chiefs for Change](#), the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning—CASEL](#), or [our summary of whole child terms used in reopening guidance](#)) to identify the ways in which your program or system can become involved. These frameworks emphasize fostering connections, building relationships, creating positive conditions for learning, and SEL—areas in which afterschool and summer programs have demonstrated expertise.¹⁰
2. Make sure you **understand whether and how staff fit into your state’s definition of the essential worker role** and are prepared to **use local, state, and federal guidance** for reopening programs.¹¹
3. **Double down efforts to engage families.** Connect with your local PTA or parent group, create new ways to hear from families, and work to amplify their voices.
4. **Connect with local schools in your area to understand their reopening plans and goals.** Work with principals, family liaisons, and [young people](#) to understand and meet their needs.
5. **Forge or deepen partnerships in your community.** For example, how can you work with primary and mental health providers, local employment offices, and libraries?
6. **Continue to use established intermediary systems** (e.g., the [National AfterSchool Association](#), [State Afterschool Network](#), [Every Hour Counts Intermediaries](#)) to engage staff and education professionals in training and other professional learning. These intermediary systems are designed to support adult professional learning on science- and asset-based strategies related to trauma-informed practices and SEL, which could be valuable assets for K–12 educators. Intermediary systems also are connected to other settings in which youth engage (e.g., justice, service, sports).

School leaders can:

1. **Offer community partners (such as afterschool and summer programs) a seat at the table** when planning.
2. Collaborate with partners to **understand youth, family, and community assets, needs, and goals.** Create an asset map, conduct a needs assessment, or find other creative ways to ensure that reopening reflects your community’s needs.
3. **Map local community resources (e.g., afterschool and summer programs) for families.** Provide access to these resources and work to identify potential barriers to access so you can take steps to remove them whenever possible.
4. **Braid funding streams** with community partners to expand the reach of school resources by leveraging time, staff, funding, volunteers, and locations.
5. **Explore whether and how you can leverage the federal CARES Act** and other pandemic-related funding sources to support partnerships with community-based organizations.

Together with schools and other child- and family-serving systems, we need to collectively determine how children, youth, and families are doing so we can respond accordingly.

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