



Adjusting to a New Normal

Lessons Learned From After School Matters Summer 2021 Programs

Executive Summary

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AFTER SCHOOL **matters**[®]



After School Matters provides teens with opportunities to discover their potential and find their future. To learn more about After School Matters, visit www.afterschoolmatters.org.

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About After School Matters

After School Matters is a nonprofit organization that provides afterschool and summer opportunities to Chicago public high school teens to explore their passions and develop their talents, while gaining critical skills for work, college, and beyond. After School Matters programs provide a pathway to progress in skills development and independence through project-based programs led by industry experts. Teens earn a stipend while participating in programs in the arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Over the span of nearly 3 decades, After School Matters has served more than 350,000 teens throughout the city of Chicago.

The COVID-19 pandemic and increased public attention on systemic racism have changed people's daily lives. Schools and afterschool and summer programs have both fundamentally changed. The pandemic transformed how organizations coordinate and support programs, how adult staff design and implement programs, and how young people and their families participate in and experience those programs.

Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, After School Matters adapted its program structure to continue providing teens with safe opportunities for summer engagement. For the first time ever, After School Matters moved in-person summer programs online. In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, and the city of Chicago saw community-wide reopening strategies amid public vaccination efforts. After School Matters continued to prioritize providing teens with safe summer opportunities, while also considering teen and instructor comfort levels with reengaging in person. In summer 2021, After School Matters reenvisioned summer programming once again to offer multiple program format options. **Over 10,000 Chicago teens** participated in **more than 650 programs** through in-person and remote learning options in summer 2021.

Learning From After School Matters' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

After School Matters partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) for a second year to better contextualize and understand summer programming amid the pandemic in three key topics: (1) teen experiences, (2) instructor experiences, and (3) program quality. AIR also explored how summer 2021 compared with previous summers and what this means for future programming. After School Matters provided AIR with 4 years of summer session datasets (2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021), including information on program and teen characteristics, teen and instructor survey responses, and [Youth Program Quality Assessment](#) (YPQA) scores. Where applicable, AIR used five methods to analyze data:

1. Descriptive analysis (averages, counts, and percentages)
2. Correlational analysis (how two items relate to one another)
3. Analysis of variance (ANOVA; whether group averages are different from each other)
4. Geographic analysis (whether items relate to where teens live)
5. Qualitative analysis (whether open-ended responses from teens and instructors have common themes)

In this brief, we share key findings from these analyses.

What Did We Learn About Teen Experiences?

After School Matters served 10,219 teens in the summer 2021 program session. A third of teens ($n = 4,164$, 33%) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences.

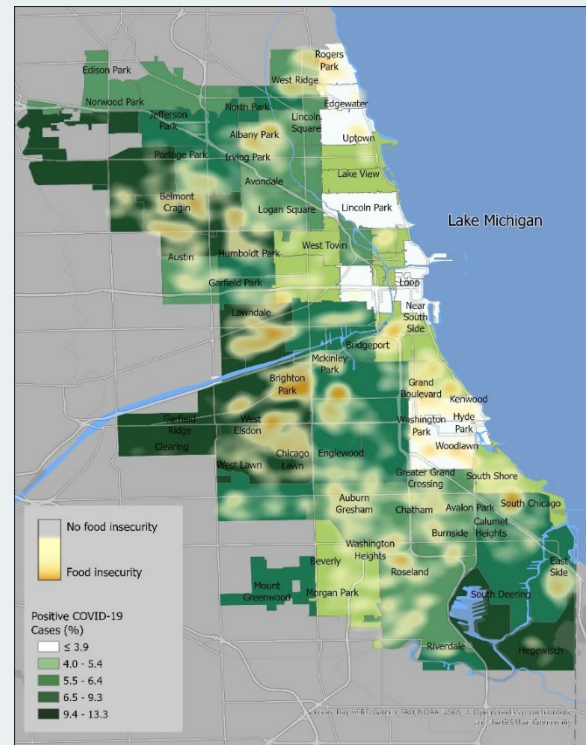
As in the past summer, teens experienced stressors related to the pandemic, including food insecurity.

Despite these challenges, they also reported positive well-being and hope for their future. They shared their strategies for alleviating stress and also described additional mental health supports they would like After School Matters to provide. Teens urged adults to acknowledge their stress, mental health, and other challenges as they adjust to a new normal, and asked that adults lead with patience and compassion.

With regard to programming, most teens reported making significant skills gains, having positive relationships with instructors and peers, and feeling a strong sense of belonging in their program.

Teens' sense of belonging in their After School Matters program and the support they received from their instructors were positively correlated with their reports of well-being and hope for the future. In other words, teens who felt they belonged in their program or reported feeling more supported by their instructors were also more likely to report more positive well-being and feeling more hopeful about their future. **This finding emphasizes the importance of relationships with instructors and peers as a way to buffer stress and improve well-being.**

Figure 1. Rates of Food Insecurity Were Greater in Community Areas With More COVID Cases



“What made me feel more hopeful was how I have widened my career choices in the art world and I could possibly have a place to feel like I belong even after I left the program.”

After School Matters 2021 Teen

Teen experiences did not significantly differ based on the mode of program delivery (in person versus remote), with the exception of average daily attendance (ADA) rates and feelings of belonging (both of which were higher for remote programs). There are several factors that might contribute to higher ADA rates for remote programs. For example, remote programs remove the barrier of transportation to the program site. Teens were also readjusting to in-person interaction in schools and program spaces, and likely faced challenges related to various COVID protocols in those spaces. Possible explanations for teens in remote programs experiencing

higher feelings of belonging may include increased opportunity for connection with peers (such as using the private chat feature and not being restricted by social distancing). Few significant differences emerged based on the mode of program delivery, indicating that the remote model continues to provide positive experiences for teens.

Comparing Summer 2021 With Previous Summers: *Teen Experiences*

Overall, teens' experiences did not vary significantly from 2020 to 2021. AIR only observed differences when comparing 2021 to the pre-pandemic summers of 2018 and 2019. These findings suggest that the introduction of intentionally planned remote programs and supports for instructors amid the pandemic enhanced teens' relationships with instructors and enabled them to continue building important skills during a global crisis. Conversely, 2021 revealed lower feelings of safety as compared to before the pandemic. A possible explanation for this is less control over the program environment.

The ADA rate for summer 2021 was significantly lower than previous summer sessions. Though After School Matters provided both remote and in-person programs, most programs remained remote. Both teens and instructors reported that teens are feeling fatigued after a year of online learning. This fatigue may have contributed to lower attendance rates. At the same time, 85% is still a relatively high ADA rate, and indicates that despite feelings of screen fatigue, teens are still participating at high rates in the After School Matters programs. After School Matters provides teens with a stipend to participate in programs, which is likely a contributor to the high ADA rates, as it removes potential barriers and incentivizes participation.

What Did We Learn About Instructor Experiences?

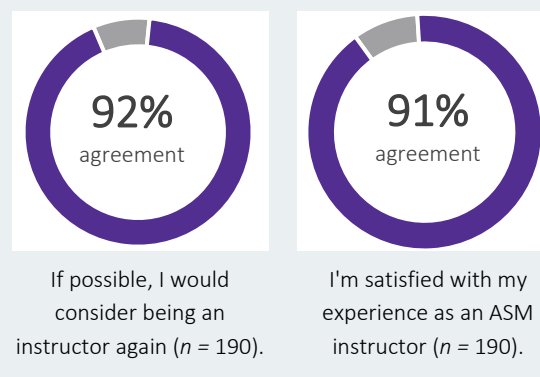
After School Matters worked with 729 instructors in the summer 2021 program session. A third of instructors ($n = 247$, 34%) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences.

Instructors reported significantly lower levels of food insecurity, perceived stress, and financial hardship in summer 2021 compared to summer 2020. That said, one in five instructors still screened positive for food insecurity and one in three instructors reported they did not have access to mental health supports to manage their stress, anxiety, or other concerns. AIR also found that instructors' perceived stress was positively correlated with screening positively for food insecurity and access to mental health supports.

Instructors reported positive experiences in their programs this summer (Figure 2). They reported being inspired by 1) teens' eagerness and enthusiastic participation in summer programming, 2) collaboration or relationships among teens, 3) teens' learning and growth during summer programming, 4) teens' motivation or perseverance, 5) teens' ideas and creations, and 6) the strong relationships they developed with teens.

Instructors valued the professional development opportunities they were able to access. They reported high rates of satisfaction with the quality of training and facilitators, and shared that the content was useful for their work and helped them increase their own skills. Instructors also reported that they valued their interactions with other instructors and the information they received in professional development trainings on program guidelines and program modes of delivery. Looking ahead to the future, instructors requested more professional development opportunities, such as additional trainings on teen engagement, trauma-related topics, mental health resources, and self-care and community care.

Figure 2. Instructor Agreement About Their Program Experiences



“The most valuable [professional development opportunity] was to hear some guidance on how to interact with teens, how to be myself, and how to just make the program as enjoyable to the teens as it would be for me. Things go both ways.”

After School Matters 2021 Instructor

Instructors also felt supported by their program specialists in multiple ways. The most common sources of support were through program specialists having a sense of the activities, goals, or intended outcomes of the programs and responding to emails or phone calls in a timely manner. Instructors also reported that After School Matters helped them to practice their use of technology and remote-access platforms and to provide training supports necessary to successfully implement their program. Further, instructors who reported they had the training supports they needed for program implementation also reported lower levels of perceived stress.

Comparing Summer 2021 With Previous Summers: *Instructor Experiences*

Instructors reported significantly lower levels of food insecurity, perceived stress, and financial hardship in summer 2021 compared to summer 2020.

Overall, instructors’ feedback on their program experiences was comparable across pandemic summers (2021 to 2020), and even higher in some instances when compared to summer 2019. In particular, this summer a significantly higher proportion of instructors were satisfied with their experience and felt supported by their program specialist when it came to resolving problems and responding to emails and phone calls.

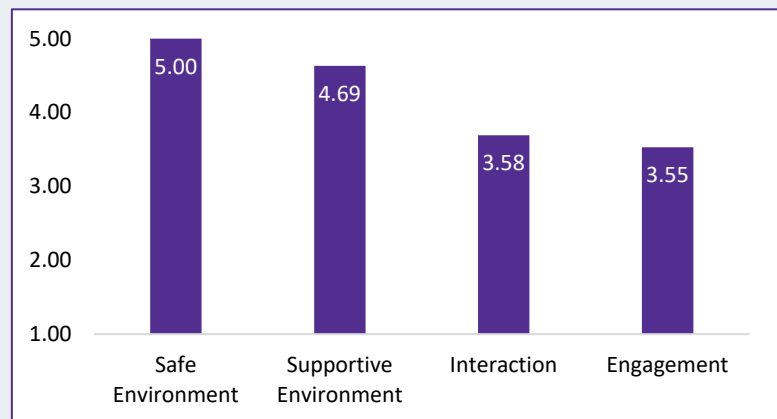
Program Quality

After School Matters uses the YPQA as part of the organization’s continuous quality improvement process. In both summer 2020 and 2021, After School Matters used a modified version of the YPQA to better assess the remote learning environment by removing traditional YPQA items not relevant to online learning.

Remote programs continue to demonstrate high program quality

across each of the four YPQA domains: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement (Figure 3). AIR found that average scores for each of the four domains were consistently high across the different program content areas (arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM). This further supports findings from summer 2020—that high quality is possible in remote learning programs, regardless of content area.

Figure 3. Programs Demonstrated High Quality Across Domains



Note. $n = 94$ programs

Comparing Summer 2021 With Previous Summers: *Program Quality*

Program quality in 2021 was comparable with previous remote and in-person summer sessions based on the adapted YPQA domain scores for Safe Environment and Engagement, but varied for the Supportive Environment and Interaction domains. The scores for summer 2021 were significantly higher for Supportive Environment and significantly lower for Interaction when compared to scores from the pre-pandemic summers of 2018 and 2019, which reflect entirely in-person programming.

AIR found that the average scores for Active Engagement and Encouragement, both within Supportive Environment, were significantly higher in 2021 when compared to 2019 (Active Engagement, Encouragement) and 2018 (Encouragement). Conversely, average scores for Belonging, Collaboration, and Adult Partners were significantly lower than in other summer sessions. A possible explanation for differing scores on these scales is the structure of programming and how it translates to traditional measures of quality. It is important to note that the YPQA is a tool historically used for assessing in-person programs. Interpreting results across differing instructional formats should be done with caution.



Where Do We Go From Here?

Findings from AIR's analysis of After School Matters data revealed that **teens in both remote and in-person formats had a positive learning experience** in summer 2021. **Instructors reported both positive experiences and challenges** and shared how to best support themselves and teens moving forward into the school year. Additionally, After School Matters programs **maintained a high level of quality**.

AIR recommends the following next steps based on the lessons learned from the summer 2021 program:

- Expand mental and emotional health supports for both instructors and teens.
- Continue offering a variety of programming formats.
- Continue focusing on teen sense of belonging.
- Expand food support for teens.
- Continue to provide relevant professional development and support for instructors.

Findings from these data also have broader implications for the education and out-of-school time fields. First, these findings underscore **the importance of authentic relationship building for both youth and adult participants**. This year, among the challenges of the pandemic and increased public attention to racial inequities, we faced more community-wide stressors than ever before. Both teens and instructors felt challenged this year, but were inspired, empowered, and motivated by their relationships and connections with one another. Teen and instructor relationships can significantly contribute to teens' sense of well-being and hopefulness. For important context, creating intentional opportunities for belonging has always been an essential component of After School Matters' program model, and in recent years, it has also been a key focus of their professional development offerings and continuous quality improvement processes. Overall, these positive results from After School Matters' summer programming underscore how important it is for the field to continue providing authentic opportunities for teens and instructors to form meaningful relationships.

Second, **as teens adapt to their changing learning environments, it is important that the adults in their lives practice patience and understanding with them**. The entirety of most teens' adolescence has been encapsulated by the pandemic. Teens are staying home more often, taking on more responsibilities, missing out on common teen experiences, and seeing their friends and family less—all while navigating frequent changes to their learning environment. Consistency is important for positive youth development, yet difficult to achieve in the current times. Teens elevated that more empathy, patience, and understanding from the adults in their lives can help them as they continually learn to readjust to their ever-changing environments.

Finally, as the pandemic enters its third year, **education programs continue to pivot to meet the needs of youth and instructors**. As we seek to identify the "new normal," we find there is no one right answer. Youth and instructors have varied comfort levels in returning to in-person activities. Some would prefer to learn in person, while others would prefer to stay online. AIR did not find widespread statistical differences between remote and in-person instruction, suggesting that either option could be viable for future program efforts. Educational environments may consider offering a variety of program formats, if feasible, so that youth and adults can continue to learn and develop in whatever environment best fits their own personal "new normal."

