

# Harnessing the Power of Afterschool and Summer Programs to Support Recovery and Reengagement



## Research Brief

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Fall is here, and with it, a return for many to in-person learning after more than a year of disruption and uncertainty. Over the past 6 months, the current administration has prioritized strategies that accelerate learning, from comprehensive summer programming to enriched afterschool programming this fall. This influx of funding is exciting and—[as we have written elsewhere](#)—represents an opportunity to draw young people (and hopefully a lot of them!) to engaging and creative learning experiences during the hours they would usually be out of school. In light of these priorities, it may also be useful to (a) unpack what we know about [how afterschool and summer programs support learning and development](#) and (b) offer a few key questions to make sure programs are ready.

## What do we know about the impact of afterschool and summer learning?

A growing evidence base suggests that afterschool and summer learning programs can have a positive influence on young people under the right conditions. Studies of afterschool and summer programs have demonstrated a number of positive outcomes: increased engagement in school, improved school-day attendance, fewer unexcused absences, fewer disciplinary referrals, improved academic performance, fewer behavior problems, and improved social and emotional competencies ([read these guides](#) for a recent research synthesis).

Of all these outcomes, social and emotional development may be more important than ever. Decades of research across many fields, including psychology, social science, and brain science, demonstrates how social and emotional competence enables youth to succeed in many aspects of their lives—in school [academically](#) and out of school in their personal lives and at work. Moreover, social and emotional learning (SEL, the process of developing social and emotional competencies) has the potential to support young people (and educators) during particularly challenging times—like a global pandemic—by building core competencies and creating safe and supportive learning environments that strengthen the relationships, resilience, and empathy that are key to buffering and [responding to trauma](#).

## How do afterschool and summer programs promote learning and development?

We offer a potential pathway to understanding how learning and development happen in quality afterschool and summer programs. In this pathway, we emphasize three key competencies—relationship skills, a sense of agency (an individual’s ability to think and act independently), and identity development—that research suggests can facilitate learning and development in other areas, including academic content areas like reading and mathematics.

**Relationships and relationship skills.** Perhaps one of the most important ways that afterschool and summer programs support youth learning and development is through the power of relationships. Quality programs are designed to create safe and supportive spaces for learning, to foster a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and collective flow.<sup>1-2</sup> Building relationships can support broader school engagement (or, in our current time, re-engagement) and social and emotional well-being, which can translate into young people wanting to come to school more and being more engaged in learning activities during the school day.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, these competencies can also support greater academic achievement.

**Sense of agency.** Many afterschool and summer programs are also designed to provide opportunities for youth to experience a sense of agency by encouraging autonomy during programming.<sup>4,5,6</sup> In studies we have conducted, findings suggest that, when programs provide youth with opportunities to experience a sense of agency, this significantly predicts stronger levels of youth engagement and better performance on youth development outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

A young person’s sense of agency is particularly important because it enables youth to use emerging cognitive skills (e.g., higher order reasoning, greater executive control of their thought processes) to solve problems effectively or to take steps to achieve goals that they are pursuing.<sup>8</sup> When young people receive feedback about what they can accomplish (either verbally or by experiencing success, such as solving problems or overcoming challenges), it enhances their underlying sense of self-efficacy and competence.

**Identity development.** Afterschool and summer programs also have the potential to help young people develop their sense of identity by developing their interests. When young people can experience new things—a hallmark of quality afterschool and summer programs—this helps them make sense of themselves and the world around them, and they also begin to develop new interests in content areas, such as STEM or the arts. Interest development is a critical part of growing up and has been linked to motivation and learning by improving goal-directed behavior, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and achievement value.<sup>9</sup> Pursuing new interests can also serve to strengthen new relationships with peers and adult mentors.<sup>10</sup> In essence, youth with sustained involvement in afterschool and summer programs may be more apt to find their “tribe” by continuing to pursue in- and out-of-school learning opportunities aligned with their interests and aspirations.

## Where do we go from here?

Ultimately, as we rebuild, the need to develop social, emotional, and academic skills is paramount, and afterschool and summer programs afford young people the opportunity to do that. What youth have experienced during the last 18 months warrants support for whole-child development—attention to their social, emotional, physical, spiritual, *and* academic needs—not just an emphasis on interventions that seek to promote short-term gains in reading and mathematics. Programs that are focused on skill-building should link out-of-school program activities and learning to in-school content and activities and ensure that teachers leading these activities have the experience and training needed to support youth learning and development and that programming is informed by youth data.<sup>11</sup> This will help to make certain that academic content (as well as opportunities for SEL) is aligned with youth needs and reflects their school day experiences and curricula while also affording scaffolded opportunities to practice new skills. In fact, emerging research suggests that the coupling of academic content-specific practices with SEL practices may be especially effective in promoting learning and development in key areas like literacy.<sup>12</sup>

No matter what, [we need to recognize and elevate the critical role that afterschool and summer programs play in supporting youth learning, development, and reengagement](#). Historically, these programs have taken a whole-child approach, [putting the science of learning and development into practice](#) to foster social, emotional, and academic learning. These are the practices that programs must employ now, rather than focusing only on short-term gains in assessment scores in reading and mathematics. Afterschool and summer programs work because 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. **This is the power of afterschool.** Our field has the opportunity to support all young people, to ensure that they thrive and reengage across learning settings.

If you are launching or already deep in your afterschool programs or planning for next summer, that is great! *Are you ready?* [Our field is built on a history of quality research](#), and there are many resources that are research- and/or evidence-based and field-informed. **Make use of them.** Connect with your state afterschool network, affiliate with professional learning organizations, and use the research and evidence-based guidance that is available to ensure that programs are well designed and well implemented.

On the next page, we offer five questions and resources that are essential to consider when planning a well-rounded program experience. Together, we can leverage this historic opportunity to “build back better” in support of youth, families, and communities.



## What do young people and families want and need, and have you considered barriers to access?

This will be a balancing act but it's an important one: How will you seek out the opinions of educators, families, youth, and members of your community? How can you identify and mitigate barriers so that everyone has the opportunity to participate in programming? [Beyond the Bell](#) is a free online toolkit that includes an entire section on program design, including tools for asset mapping and needs assessment, and the [Summer Learning Toolkit](#) offers tools and resources that support well-designed summer programs.



## What community partnerships have the potential to support learning and development?

How do [schools and afterschool or summer programs work together](#) to provide a well-rounded education? Are there community-based organizations, service providers, or businesses in your community that bring something to the table? Partnerships within communities can strengthen the network of supports for young people and their families.



## What supports are available to adult educators who have navigated the past year with flexibility, creativity, and resilience?

In the face of adversity, program staff have pivoted and pivoted again, learning new approaches to working with youth while also managing their own mental and physical health needs. What is in place to ensure that their health and well-being are a priority? The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's [Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Roadmap for Reopening School](#) offers guidance about how to "create equitable learning environments where all young people and adults process, heal, and thrive."



## How will you create a safe and supportive space for learning and development where all young people thrive?

Research highlights the importance of creating identity safe spaces that are filled with positive developmental relationships, where all people—youth and adults—feel a sense of belonging. Intentional planning is key to ensuring that programs are places where young people *want* to be. Learn more about research-based practices in the new [Design Principles for Community-Based Settings](#) playbook, which offers a framework for thinking about the science of learning and development within a "community space." In addition, there is guidance related to implementing programs with quality, such as the [Youth Program Quality Assessment](#), the [ASQ: A Guide to Afterschool Quality](#), and the National AfterSchool Association's [Core Knowledge and Competencies](#), and [SEL to the Core](#).



## What activities will you offer that balance academics and enrichment to provide a well-rounded educational experience for youth?

What are your plans for making all activities hands-on, fun, and engaging? The Wallace Foundation and its partners shared two evidence reviews—one for [afterschool](#) and one for [summer](#)—that may be useful in identifying evidence-based programs. These programs can be helpful when implemented in conjunction with planning tools (like those in [Beyond the Bell](#)) and quality practice tools.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Wentzel, K. R., Donlan, A., & Morrison, D. (2012). Peer relationships and social motivational processes. In A. M. Ryan & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school* (pp. 79–105). IAP Information Age Publishing.
- <sup>4</sup> Schmidt, J. A., Rosenberg, J. M., & Beymer, P. N. (2018). A person-in-context approach to student engagement in science: Examining learning activities and choice. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 55*(1), 19–43.
- <sup>5</sup> Larson, R. W., & Angus, R. M. (2011). Adolescents' development of skills for agency in youth programs: Learning to think strategically. *Child Development, 82*(1), 277–294.
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- <sup>7</sup> Naftzger, N., Sniegowski, S., Smith, C., & Riley, A. (2018). Exploring the relationship between afterschool program quality and youth development outcomes: Findings from the Washington quality to youth outcomes study (pp. 1–47). American Institutes for Research.
- <sup>8</sup> Larson, R. W., & Dawes, N. P. (2015). Cultivating adolescents' motivation. In S. Joseph (Ed.), *Positive psychology in practice: Promoting human flourishing in work, health, education, and everyday life* (pp. 313–326). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- <sup>9</sup> Renninger, K. A., & Hidi, S. (2011). Revisiting the conceptualization, measurement, and generation of interest. *Educational psychologist, 46*(3), 168–184.
- <sup>10</sup> Bronk, K. C. (2012). A grounded theory of the development of noble youth purpose. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 27*(1), 78–109.
- <sup>11</sup> American Institutes for Research. (2014). *Beyond the Bell: A toolkit for creating effective afterschool and expanded learning programs*. American Institutes for Research.
- <sup>12</sup> Naftzger, N. Hall, G., Wheeler, K., & Mitrano, S. (forthcoming). *Findings From the quality to youth outcomes study: Connecting afterschool program quality to social and emotional and school-related outcomes*. American Institutes for Research.



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