



# *America After 3PM* Special Report: **The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities**

March 2016



Afterschool Alliance





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*Photo courtesy of Altoona Campus Kids Klub*





# INTRODUCTION

Rural America can bring to mind images of open roads and tractors working in fields that stretch out as far as the eye can see—an idyllic picture of an agrarian America frozen in time. It can also bring to mind small towns with mom-and-pop stores lining Main Street. The truth is, neither picture fully captures what rural communities look like today. Rural America encompasses 72 percent of the country, and all 50 states have rural communities.<sup>i</sup> There is Tripp, South Dakota, a rural town surrounded by farms; Morgan County, Kentucky, located in Appalachia; Paton, Iowa, a small town located close to Iowa’s center with a population of less than 250; and Humboldt, California, situated next to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>ii</sup> Yet, as incredibly diverse as rural communities in America are, they are united by common strengths and struggles.

The positives to living in a rural community are many: strong social networks, a solid sense of community, and flourishing partnerships are just a few. However, rural communities also face a host of challenges. Although the percentage of rural individuals living in poverty decreased slightly from 2013 to 2014, the poverty rate remains higher in rural communities than the national average, with 16.5 percent of people in rural communities living below the poverty line, compared to 14.8 percent nationally.<sup>iii</sup> Persistent poverty is also an issue in rural communities. In 2014, more than 8 in 10 counties defined as “persistently poor”—counties with at least 20 percent of the population living in poverty over the past 30 years—were rural.<sup>1</sup>



## What’s rural?

For the purposes of *America After 3PM*, survey respondents designated as those living in rural communities are those that meet the two following criteria:

1. Selected “rural community” as the community type that they live in and
2. Must not live in a zip code that the Census Bureau has designated as not having any rural areas.

The Economic Research Service looks at non-metro counties when analyzing conditions of rural areas. Non-metro counties are those that are “not part of larger labor market area” and are some combination of, “1) open countryside, 2) rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and 3) urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999”.\*

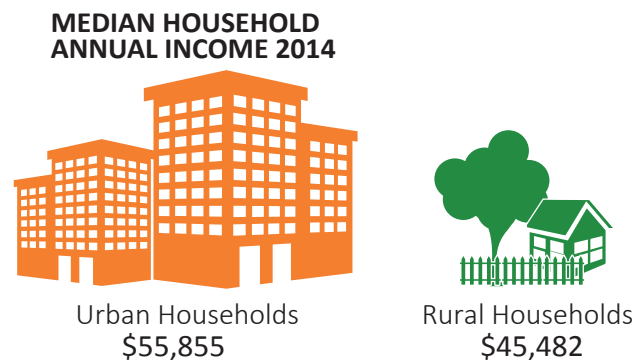
The definition of “non-rural communities” in *America After 3PM* includes parents who select “urban” or “suburban” as their community type. For *America After 3PM* findings, this report uses “non-rural communities”, “non-rural areas” and “areas outside of rural communities” interchangeably.

*\*United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Rural Classifications.*

<sup>1</sup> Of the 353 counties defined as persistently poor, 301 were non-metro counties.



A number of factors contribute to the problem. The Census Bureau reports that individuals working in rural communities earn less than workers in urban areas. The median income in 2014 for rural households was approximately \$10,000 less than the median income for households in metropolitan areas.<sup>iv</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture finds that high school is more likely to be rural residents' highest level of educational attainment, with less than 1 in 5 adults living in rural communities earning a bachelor's degree or higher (19 percent) compared to nearly 1 in 3 adults living in urban communities (32 percent).<sup>v</sup> Some researchers posit that institutions of higher education should do more to respond to the needs of students from rural communities and increase rural students' post-secondary attainment levels.<sup>vi</sup>



Unfortunately, the children living in rural communities are even more likely to experience the impact of poverty than the rural population overall. In 2014, 1 in 4 rural children were poor (25 percent), which is a higher percentage than for children living in urban areas (21 percent).<sup>vii</sup> Despite the small overall decrease in poverty for those living in rural communities from 2013 to 2014, childhood poverty in rural areas has remained high over the years<sup>2</sup>, and children in rural communities are more likely to be poor

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**More than 8 in 10  
persistently poor  
communities are rural**

than any other age group in rural communities.<sup>viii</sup> Rural children are also more likely to live in “deep poverty”—what the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) defines as a family of four living on approximately \$1,000 a month—than children living in urban areas.<sup>ix</sup> In all age brackets—under 6 years of age, 6 to 11 years of age and 12 to 17 years of age—children in rural areas in 2014 were more likely to live in deep poverty.<sup>x</sup>

Children living in rural areas also face health and wellness concerns. Food insecurity—the limited or uncertain access to an adequate amount of food in a household—is one issue for rural children, and obesity—which can be an effect of poverty and food insecurity through a lack of access to healthy foods, greater availability of cheaper and less nutritious food, and overeating when food is available<sup>xi</sup>—is another. While rural counties comprise just 43 percent of all U.S. counties, they comprise 62 percent of counties with the highest child food-insecurity rates.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, a meta-analysis of differences in childhood obesity between rural and urban areas in the United States found that children living in rural areas have “26 percent greater odds of obesity, compared to urban children.”<sup>xiii</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The childhood poverty rate in rural areas was 26 percent from 2011-2013, 24 percent in 2009 and 22 percent in 2007.



## The Role Of Afterschool Programs

As rural children and families grapple with issues such as poverty, lower wages and educational attainment levels, food deserts and obesity, the need for additional supports in rural communities is undeniable. Afterschool and summer learning programs hold enormous potential to fill the gaps in rural communities while also helping these communities prosper. Afterschool and summer learning programs are providing new learning opportunities for children—helping them to discover newfound interests, explore a variety of topic areas, and learn about different cultures and communities beyond their own zip code. Across the nation, afterschool programs are stepping up their efforts to provide more than a safe place for children to go when they get out of school. The role of afterschool programs is growing, and research shows that quality programs are helping their students make academic gains, activating a greater interest in learning, providing supportive mentors, and helping kids stay healthy and active with exercise and healthy foods.<sup>xiv</sup>

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**1 out of 4**  
**rural children**  
**live in poverty**

The 2014 report *America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand*, found that a strong majority of parents of children participating in an afterschool program report that their child’s program offers a variety of supports, from homework help to opportunities for physical activity, and from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programming to nutritious snacks and meals.<sup>xv</sup> The national picture of afterschool programs shows that they are an integral component in the system of support that

families need, helping children from Alabama to Wyoming learn, grow and thrive.

This special *America After 3PM* report, *The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities*, takes a closer look at the afterschool experience for children living in rural communities. Earlier *America After 3PM* reports examined how children spend the hours after school, documenting the participation in afterschool programs, the unmet demand for programs, program offerings and barriers to participation at a national level. This special report focuses on the hours after school for children and families living in rural communities, and how they compare to children and families outside of rural communities.

This report also serves to examine the ways programs are increasing opportunity in these often-underserved and overlooked communities, and what more can be done to make certain that all children, regardless of geographic location, are given the array of supports they need to achieve their full potential.





## KEY FINDINGS

### The Current Landscape for Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs in Rural Communities

**The number of rural children who are taking part in afterschool and summer learning programs continues to grow.** Three iterations of the *America After 3PM* study, conducted over the course of a decade, demonstrate that more children than ever are taking part in an afterschool program. While rural communities mirror the national trend toward a growing number of children taking part in afterschool and summer learning programs, rural participation remains below the national average.

- In 2014, 13 percent of children in rural communities—approximately 1.2 million children—participated in an afterschool program, an increase from 11 percent in 2009.
- The percentage of rural families with a child enrolled in a summer learning program in 2013 was 28 percent, compared to 20 percent in 2008.

**However, a large number of rural children are still unable to participate in afterschool and summer learning programs.** The percentage of rural children who would be enrolled in an afterschool program if one were available held steady over the past five years, remaining close to the national average, but leaving many interested students and families without access.

- The percentage of rural children not currently in an afterschool program, who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them remained stable—39 percent in 2009 and 39 percent in 2014, slightly below the national average of 41 percent. Although the percentage has remained steady, there are still 3.1 million children in rural communities who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled if a program were available.
- In regard to summer learning, close to half of rural parents (45 percent) report that they wanted their child to take part in a summer learning program in 2014, but only 28 percent had a child enrolled in a summer program in 2013.

*A detailed description of America After 3PM's survey methodology can be found in America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand, available at: [http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/AA3PM\\_National\\_Report.pdf](http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/AA3PM_National_Report.pdf). Projections for rural child-level data are based on the percentage of school-age children residing in rural areas as reported in the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health by the Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*



**In rural communities, the overall demand for afterschool programs among minority and low-income families is particularly strong, and as a result, both participation in and unmet demand for afterschool programs is high.**

- Twenty-four percent of Hispanic children and 18 percent of African-American children in rural communities take part in an afterschool program, compared to 9 percent of rural White children.
- More than half of rural Hispanic children (51 percent) and close to half of rural African-American children (45 percent) who are not in a program would be enrolled if a program were available to them, 14 and 8 percentage points higher than rural White children (37 percent).
- Among rural children in low-income families, 14 percent participate in an afterschool program, and 44 percent who are not in a program would be enrolled in one if a program were available to them, compared to 12 percent and 34 percent of rural children in higher-income families.

## **What Drives Afterschool Program Participation and Demand in Rural Communities?**

The *America After 3PM* survey asked parents in rural communities a series of questions about their views on afterschool programs to better understand their perceptions, as well as expectations, of programs.

**Parents in rural communities value the role that afterschool plays for both children and families.**

Rural parents not only consider afterschool programs a support system for children's academic growth, social development, and overall health and wellness, but also regard programs as a critical resource for working families.

- Close to 3 out of 4 parents living in rural communities (73 percent) agree that afterschool programs can help children with their homework assignments, and 62 percent agree that afterschool programs can help children gain STEM skills.
- Rural parents also view afterschool programs as a place where the social and emotional growth of their child is supported. For instance, a strong majority of rural parents agree that programs help children develop social skills through interaction with their peers (77 percent), reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in risky behaviors (72 percent) and help children gain workforce skills including teamwork, leadership and critical thinking (65 percent).

- Rural parents look to afterschool programs to deliver a nutritious meal or snack during the hours after school, as well as serve as a place where children can be physically active. More than 7 in 10 rural parents (72 percent) agree that afterschool programs should provide children healthy foods, and more than 6 in 10 rural parents agree that programs offer healthy foods (61 percent) now. Close to 3 in 4 rural parents (73 percent) agree that afterschool programs keep kids physically active.
- Rural parents also agree that afterschool programs benefit the family unit. More than 7 in 10 rural parents agree that afterschool programs help give working parents peace of mind about their children when they are at work (73 percent) and help working parents keep their jobs (72 percent).

## What Does the Afterschool Experience Look Like for Rural Children and Families?

A close look at the responses of rural parents reveals that, as with parents nationally, most rural parents are happy with their child's afterschool program overall and report that their child is taking part in a wide range of learning opportunities.

**Afterschool programs are helping rural children reach their full potential.** Rural parents with a child in an afterschool program paint an encouraging picture of the programs that serve rural communities.

- An overwhelming majority of rural parents report that they are satisfied with their child's afterschool program overall (85 percent), as well as with the safety of the afterschool program's environment (89 percent), quality of care (89 percent), the knowledge and training of program staff (89 percent) and the variety of activities offered (84 percent).
- Rural children are also taking part in an assortment of academically enriching activities in their afterschool program, with most parents reporting that the program helps their child with his or her homework (77 percent), offers opportunities for reading or writing (75 percent) and provides STEM learning (66 percent). The level of parent satisfaction with the academic enrichment provided by afterschool programs is also high, reflecting satisfaction with the homework assistance provided (82 percent), opportunities for reading or writing (73 percent) and STEM learning opportunities (68 percent).
- Supporting their students' health and wellness is another way rural afterschool programs are improving the welfare of children in their community. More than 8 in 10 rural parents (82 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity, and 77 percent report that the program offers beverages, snacks or meals. Among parents whose child's afterschool program provides food, 83 percent describe the snacks served as healthy. The level of satisfaction with the physical activity and healthy foods provided by the afterschool program is also



high among rural parents. Most rural parents are satisfied with the variety of physical activity offered (85 percent), the amount of physical activity offered (81 percent) and the healthfulness of the program's beverages, snacks and/or meals (79 percent).

- Rural students are also immersed in a well-rounded afterschool learning experience, ranging from exposure to music and the arts to developing teamwork and communication skills. Nearly 6 in 10 rural parents (58 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for music or art, and 7 in 10 parents (69 percent) are satisfied with those opportunities. When asked about the opportunities for workforce skills development, more than 4 in 10 parents (43 percent) say that the afterschool program helps their child build teamwork, leadership and critical thinking skills and 7 in 10 parents (69 percent) are satisfied with the support to build workforce skills provided by the afterschool program. In addition, 9 in 10 are satisfied with their child's opportunities to interact with peers in the program.

**Afterschool programs serving rural communities excel in a few key areas.** While overall, the activities and offerings of rural afterschool program providers are similar to those reported by parents living outside of rural communities, a few areas, including family activities and healthy snacks, appear to be areas of particular strength for rural afterschool programs.

- More than half of rural parents (54 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers parent and family activities, 11 percentage points higher than non-rural parents (43 percent). Rural parents are also more satisfied than non-rural parents with the parent and family activities provided by their afterschool program (69 percent versus 61 percent).
- Parents living in rural communities are more likely than parents living outside of rural communities to report that the snacks at their child's afterschool program are healthy, 83 percent versus 70 percent.



*Photos courtesy of Altoona Campus Kids Club*

**Areas of growth also exist for afterschool programs serving rural communities.** Although the overall afterschool program experience reported by rural parents is very positive, certain program elements are not as prevalent in rural afterschool programs compared to programs outside of rural areas, in particular activities associated with technology.

- Nationally, opportunities for students to engage with technology in afterschool programs is not high, with just 3 in 10 parents reporting that their child’s afterschool program offers technology and engineering learning opportunities. Parents living in rural communities are even less likely to report that their child’s afterschool program offers these activities. Only 21 percent of rural parents report that technology and engineering learning opportunities are offered, 9 percentage points below the national average.
- The difference is even more stark when comparing rural parents’ responses specifically to those of urban parents. Approximately 4 in 10 parents living in urban communities (38 percent) report that their child’s afterschool program offers technology and engineering learning opportunities, a 17 percentage point difference compared to rural parents.
- The data also reveal a significant difference between rural and urban parents’ answers regarding STEM programming, with 77 percent of parents living in urban communities reporting that their child has STEM learning opportunities in his or her afterschool program, 11 percentage points higher than rural parents (66 percent).

## The Barriers to Afterschool Program Participation in Rural Communities

**Rural communities have made gains toward expanding access to afterschool programs, but challenges remain.** While this *America After 3PM* report finds that a growing number of children living in rural communities participate in afterschool programs, it also finds that there remain 3.1 million children who are unable to participate in a program even though their parents would like to enroll them. Examining the barriers rural families face when contemplating the decision to enroll their child in an afterschool program, challenges including the affordability, availability, accessibility and lack of knowledge of afterschool programs emerge as the primary obstacles preventing parents from enrolling their child in a program.

- **Affordability:** The cost of afterschool programs is a challenge for rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, as well as a deterrent for parents who might wish to enroll their child in a program.

<sup>3</sup> The average weekly cost of afterschool programs in 2009 was adjusted for 2014 dollars.



- Among rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, 6 in 10 (59 percent) agree that current economic conditions have made it difficult to afford placing their child in a program. The average weekly cost of afterschool programs for rural parents in 2014 was almost double what was reported in 2009, increasing from \$51.86<sup>3</sup> to \$95.80.
- Although down from 46 percent in 2009, in 2014, 4 in 10 rural parents without a child in an afterschool program said that a program being too expensive was an important reason why they did not enroll their child in a program.
- **Availability:** Finding an available afterschool program is another significant challenge families living in rural communities face.
  - For rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, approximately 1 in 3 parents (32 percent) report that a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program is that no other afterschool programs were available, higher than what rural parents reported in 2009 (24 percent). Additionally, approximately 2 in 3 rural parents (67 percent) with a child in an afterschool program agreed that it was challenging to find an enriching environment for their child in the hours after school, 7 percentage points higher than parents living outside of rural areas (60 percent).
  - The lack of available afterschool programs also plays a part in preventing children living in rural communities from participating in a program, although less so compared to five years ago. In 2014, close to 1 in 3 rural parents (29 percent) reported that the lack of available afterschool programs was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program, much lower than the 40 percent of rural parents who reported the same in 2009.
- **Accessibility:** In 2009, issues related to accessibility, including transportation and finding a program that was conveniently located, challenged parents living in rural communities, and this report finds that the same issues continue to challenge rural families.
  - For instance, among rural parents who do not have a child in an afterschool program, but would enroll him or her if a program were available, close to half (46 percent) report that they opted not to select an afterschool program because of the lack of a safe way for their child to get to and come home from the program, and 42 percent said that inconvenient program locations factored into their decision.



- Accessibility is also top of mind for parents who have enrolled their child in an afterschool program, with more than 8 in 10 rural parents (84 percent) reporting that the location of an afterschool program is very important in the decision of where to enroll their child. In 2014, rural parents with a child in an afterschool program were also much more likely to say that transportation to and from the program was important in their choice of a program (51 percent) than were in 2009 (38 percent). Rural parents were also more likely than parents living in non-rural areas to report that transportation was important to them (51 percent versus 42 percent).
- **Knowledge of afterschool programs:** A review of the responses by rural parents with children not enrolled in afterschool programs reveals a lack of information about afterschool programs in their community, particularly when compared to parents living in cities and suburbs.
  - For example, only 42 percent of parents in rural communities agree that information about afterschool programs is readily available to them, 10 percentage points lower than parents living outside of rural communities (52 percent).
  - Rural parents without a child in an afterschool program were also more likely than parents outside of rural areas to answer that they did not know enough about specific characteristics of programs to make a decision about enrolling their child in a program.

### **Barriers to afterschool program participation is higher for specific groups within rural communities.**

Looking more closely at the responses of African-American, Hispanic and low-income families in rural communities, it is apparent that issues of affordability, availability and accessibility of programs are even greater concerns for these specific groups within rural communities.





- Cost emerges as major concern when examining the reason behind parents' selection of an afterschool program: more than 3 in 4 low-income parents in rural communities (77 percent) report that cost was a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program, with more than half reporting it was extremely important (52 percent). More than 7 in 10 African-American parents (75 percent) and Hispanic parents (72 percent) in rural communities report that cost was a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program, with more than half reporting it was extremely important (61 percent and 59 percent, respectively).
- Rural low-income parents, African-American parents and Hispanic parents with and without children in a program were even more likely to report the lack of available afterschool programs than rural parents overall. Among rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, 42 percent of African-American parents and 47 percent of Hispanic parents report "no other programs are available" as a very important factor in their selection of a program, compared to 34 percent of rural parents overall. Among rural parents without a child in an afterschool program, the lack of available afterschool programs was more likely to be cited by African-American (38 percent), Hispanic (36 percent) and low-income parents (33 percent) as a reason why they did not enroll their child in a program, than it was among rural parents overall (29 percent).
- The accessibility of afterschool programs was another challenge for these groups of parents in rural communities. Among low-income parents (61 percent), African-American parents (64 percent) and Hispanic parents (57 percent) living in rural areas, transportation was more important in their selection of a program than among rural parents overall (51 percent). Among parents without a child in an afterschool program, African-American parents (47 percent), Hispanic parents (42 percent) and low-income parents (41 percent) in rural communities were more likely to report that the lack of a safe way to and from the program was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in afterschool, compared to 36 percent of rural parents overall.

## Recommendations

Although parents in rural communities are increasingly turning to afterschool and summer learning programs for their children, a review of the data finds that more can be done to help rural communities catch up with the rest of the nation. The following recommendations can help ensure that all children in rural communities have the ability to take part in quality afterschool programs that can help them succeed in and out of school.

### **Ensure information about afterschool programs is more readily available to parents in rural communities.**

With just 13 percent of children in rural communities enrolled in an afterschool program, and less than half of rural parents agreeing that information about afterschool programs is readily available, it is clear that much more can be done to educate families about local afterschool program opportunities that can keep children safe, inspire them to learn and prepare them for the challenges of a constantly evolving world. Providing rural parents with information about the activities and opportunities participating in an afterschool program offers their child, as well as up-to-date resources to help parents locate afterschool programs that meet their child's needs, can help to make sure that all rural children and families are able to benefit from the supports that afterschool programs have to offer.

### **Raise national attention around the important role rural afterschool programs play in their communities.**

*America After 3PM* finds that afterschool programs in rural communities are providing a host of supports for their students and families, and parents with a child in an afterschool program are overwhelmingly satisfied with the program. However, due to funding and resource challenges, rural afterschool programs providers often report struggles maintaining the quality and variety of their services. Raising the profile of the supports rural afterschool programs provide their community, as well as the unique challenges facing rural afterschool programs, has the potential to expand the types of partnerships and supports programs can garner from inside and outside of their community.

- **Hosting a National Summit on Rural Afterschool** can serve as a call to action, rallying the private and public sectors around the need for increased supports for afterschool programs in rural communities.
- **Holding an award competition to recognize exemplary rural afterschool programs** will help to raise awareness of the important ways afterschool programs in rural areas are supporting the children and families in their community, as well as highlight promising and innovative practices taking place in rural afterschool programs.

### **Provide opportunities to support and enhance the sharing of promising practices and resources.**

A summer 2015 Afterschool Alliance survey of rural afterschool program providers found that a limited pool of resources, such as the number of businesses and organizations available for partnerships, was a common challenge rural programs faced. Developing easily accessible and affordable resources and tools for rural afterschool program providers can give much needed support to providers struggling to keep their doors open.





Photos courtesy of BGCA



- **Holding mini-conferences or symposia** that provide expert advice, program support, and resources geared toward afterschool programs serving rural communities can help ensure that rural afterschool programs have access to strategies, experts and resources that best meet their needs.
- **Creating an online afterschool resource center or hub geared toward rural communities** can provide a central platform where rural afterschool program providers can access information uniquely suited to rural providers, such as funding resources, evaluation tools or potential partners. This online tool could serve as a forum for rural program providers to share and leverage the resources of the rural program community.

### **Increase STEM programming in rural afterschool programs.**

STEM programming, and in particular, technology learning opportunities, is an area in which the *America After 3PM* data indicate rural afterschool programs struggle. Equipping children and youth with STEM skills today—including rural children and youth—can help ready them for tomorrow’s challenges, preparing them for the growing STEM workforce and giving them the critical thinking skills they will need to better understand complex issues. Given that 1) rural parents are less likely than urban parents to report that their child’s afterschool program offers STEM programming as a whole, 2) rural parents are much less likely to report that the program offers technology and engineering activities or digital media opportunities, and 3) rural students are less likely to have access to STEM resources in their community, it is evident that more supports are needed to increase quality STEM afterschool programming in rural communities.

### **Increase investment in afterschool programs serving rural communities.**

Rural afterschool programs provide an integral system of support for the children and families in these communities, creating a safe and supportive environment while nourishing children’s minds and bodies by offering academic enrichment and nutritious foods. However, in addition to the 3.1 million rural children who are not in an afterschool program, but who would be enrolled if a program were available to them, many rural afterschool program providers struggle to secure the funding necessary to keep their doors open. With more than 8 in 10 rural parents in favor of public funding for afterschool (84 percent) and summer learning programs (85 percent), support is very strong for increased investment in afterschool programs serving rural communities, to ensure that all children in rural communities have the supports they need to thrive in school and beyond.

# THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Three iterations of the *America After 3PM* study, conducted over the course of a decade, demonstrate that more children than ever are taking part in an afterschool program. In 2014, 10.2 million children (18 percent) participated in an afterschool program, an increase from 8.4 million children in 2009 (15 percent) and 6.5 million children in 2004 (11 percent). Additionally, *America After 3PM* found that participation in summer learning programs increased between 2008 and 2013, with 33 percent of parents reporting that their child took part in a summer learning program in 2013, up from 25 percent in 2008.

## In rural communities, afterschool and summer learning program participation has grown.

Similar to the national afterschool participation trend, rural communities have also seen a growing number of children taking part in afterschool and summer learning programs. From 2009 to 2014, the two *America After 3PM* editions that captured information by community type, afterschool program participation in rural communities increased from 11 percent in 2009 to 13 percent in 2014. Participation in summer learning programs in rural communities also saw an increase, with the percentage of families with a child enrolled in a summer learning program jumping from 20 percent in 2008 to 28 percent in 2013.

### 1.2 million rural children are in an afterschool program

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PARTICIPATION: 2004-2014

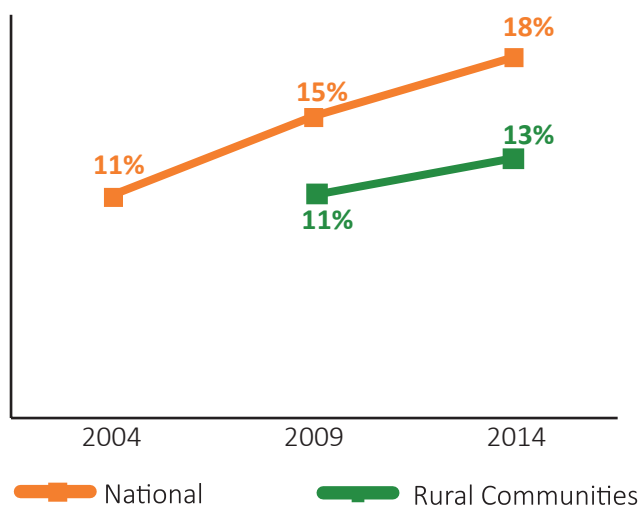


Photo courtesy of Flicking ELRC



### AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM PARTICIPATION BY COMMUNITY TYPE

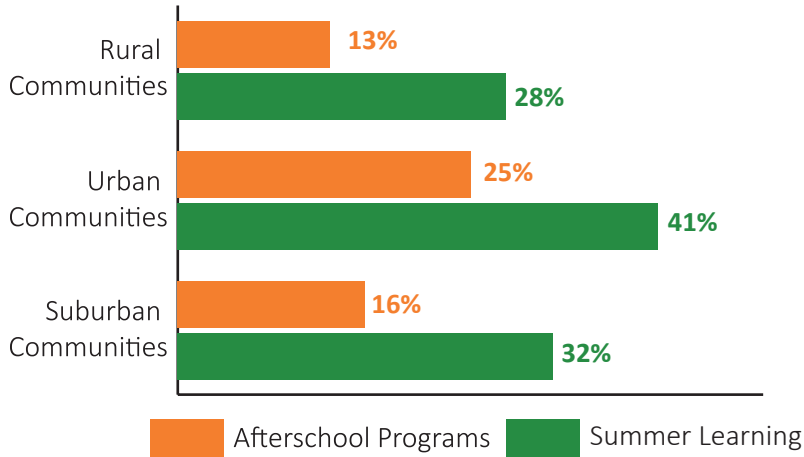


Photo courtesy of BGCA

Although rural communities have seen an increase in afterschool and summer learning program participation, it is important to point out that both continue to lag behind program participation at the national level. It is also worth noting that the percentage of children in rural communities who take part in an afterschool and summer learning programs is lower than the participation rate in urban and suburban communities. These numbers help to place the growth in afterschool and summer learning program participation rural communities are experiencing into context: while parents in rural communities are increasingly choosing afterschool and summer learning programs for their children, more will need to be done before rural communities catch up with the rest of the nation.

### For children and families in rural communities, there remains a strong call for more afterschool and summer learning programs.

Based on the finding that the percentage of children in rural communities participating in an afterschool program has increased in recent years, one might surmise that there would be a corresponding decrease in the number of children not in a program who would like to be enrolled if a program were available to them. Yet, *America After 3PM* reveals that the unmet demand for afterschool programs in rural communities remains the same. The percentage of rural children not currently in an afterschool program who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them remained stable at 39 percent in 2014. The call for summer learning programs in rural communities is also high, with close to half of rural parents (45 percent) reporting that they want their child to take part in a summer learning program, compared to 51 percent of parents nationally.

**3.1 million rural children would be enrolled in an afterschool program if one were available to them**

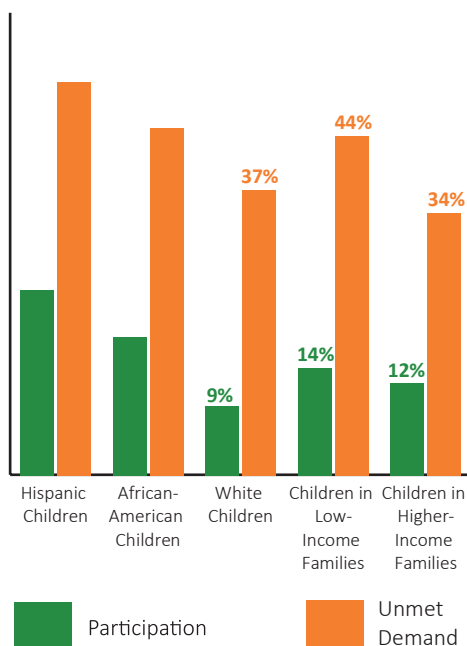


It is noteworthy that while the percentage of children in rural communities who participate in an afterschool program runs below the national average (13 percent versus 18 percent), the demand for afterschool programs in rural communities remains close to the national average (39 percent versus 41 percent). Additionally, the percentage of children in rural communities who are alone and unsupervised during the hours after school is on par with the national average, with 1 in 5 children taking care of themselves after school.

**Afterschool program participation and unmet demand in rural communities is higher among low-income families, African-American families and Hispanic families.**

A closer examination of families living in rural communities by income level and race or ethnicity reveals distinct differences among these populations. Afterschool program participation and the unmet demand for afterschool programs are both higher among Hispanic and African-American children compared to White children, and higher among children in low-income families compared to their higher-income counterparts. Regarding afterschool program participation, 24 percent of Hispanic children and 18 percent of African-American children in rural communities take part in an afterschool

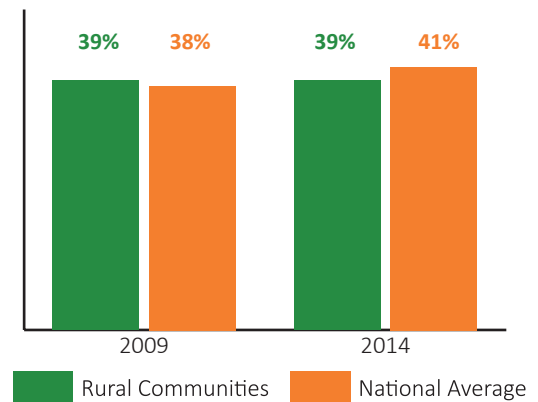
**PARTICIPATION AND UNMET DEMAND FOR AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY AND INCOME LEVEL**



program compared to 9 percent of White children living in rural communities. The percentage of rural Hispanic and African-American children who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them is also much higher than White children. More than half of rural Hispanic children (51 percent) and close to half of African-American children (45 percent) who are not in a program would be enrolled if a program were available to them, 14 and 8 percentage points higher than White children (37 percent).

Turning to rural children in low-income families, 14 percent participate in an afterschool program, and 44 percent would be enrolled in an afterschool program, compared to 12 percent and 34 percent of rural children in higher-income families. Between 2009 and 2014, afterschool program participation among children from low-income families in rural communities increased from 12 percent to 14 percent. The unmet demand for afterschool programs among children from low-income families in rural areas decreased slightly from 46 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2014.

**UNMET DEMAND FOR AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS**





## WHAT DRIVES AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND DEMAND IN RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Several questions in the *America After 3PM* survey ask parents about their views on afterschool programs to help decipher why participation in afterschool programs and the demand for afterschool programs continue to rise in rural communities. Based on their answers, it is clear that rural families see afterschool programs as an important component of their community, from exciting children about learning to providing access to nutritious foods to supporting working parents.

### Parents in rural communities value the role that afterschool plays

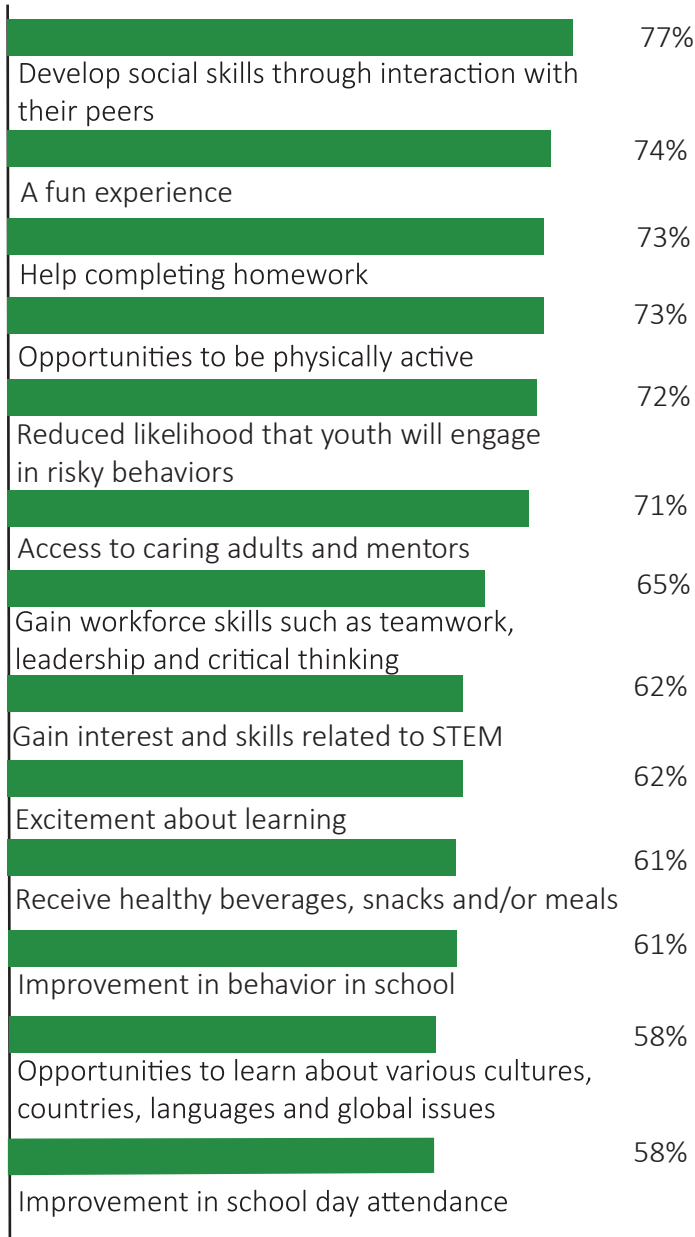
Parents living in rural communities agree that afterschool programs provide important academic supports for their children. For instance, 73 percent of rural parents agree that afterschool programs can help children with their homework assignments and 62 percent of parents agree that afterschool programs can help children gain skills related to science, technology, engineering or math.

But rural parents also see afterschool programs as much more than simple academic supports for their children. Parents view afterschool programs as a place where an interest in learning is ignited and the social and emotional growth of their child is supported. An overwhelming majority of rural parents agree that afterschool programs provide a fun experience (74 percent), excite children about learning (62 percent), help children develop social skills through interaction with their peers (77 percent), provide caring adults and mentors (71 percent) and help children gain workforce skills including teamwork, leadership and critical thinking (65 percent). The ability of afterschool programs to activate an interest in learning and support a growth mindset for their students is important in rural communities, where, although high school graduation rates are above the national rate,<sup>xvi</sup> college completion is much lower than in urban areas.<sup>xvii</sup>

Food assistance is especially desirable in rural areas, where food insecurity is higher than in metropolitan areas.<sup>xviii</sup> Counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are increasingly likely to be rural, and the proportion of rural food-insecure counties has grown over the years. In 2013, 54 percent of high food-insecure counties were rural—an increase from 52 percent in 2012 and 48 percent in 2011.<sup>xix</sup> What's more, in 2014, 20 percent of rural counties were considered "food deserts." These are counties where the distance between residents and supermarkets is at least 10 miles, making access to healthy foods, such as fresh produce, more challenging.<sup>xx</sup>



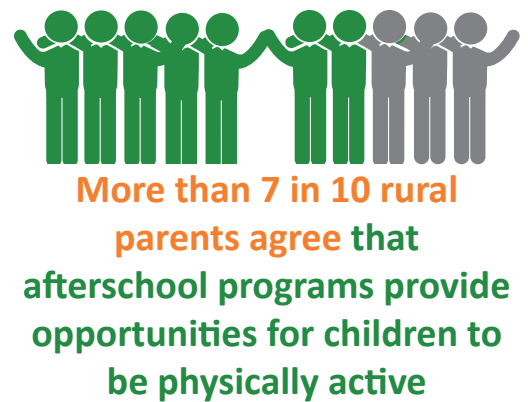
**RURAL PARENTS AGREE THAT CHILDREN CAN BENEFIT FROM AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:**



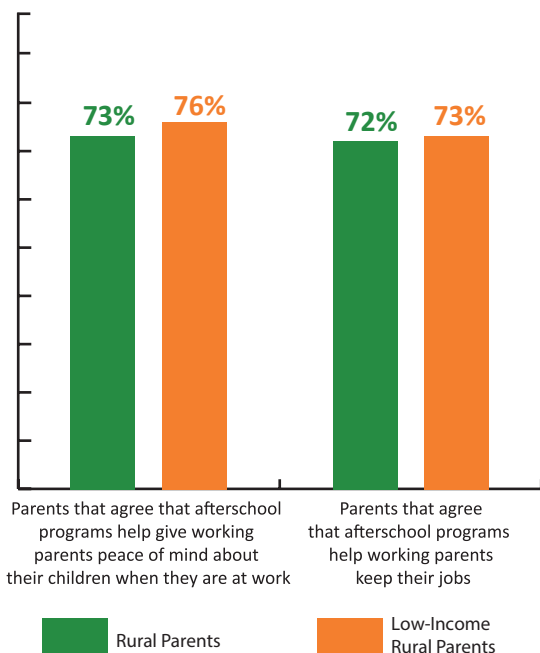


Rural parents look to afterschool programs as a source of a nutritious meal or snack during the hours after school, much more so than parents living outside of rural areas. Sixty-nine percent of rural parents report that an afterschool program providing healthy snacks or meals was very important in their selection of a program, 9 percentage points higher than parents who do not live in a rural area (60 percent). More than 7 in 10 rural parents (72 percent) agree that afterschool programs should provide children healthy foods, and more than 3 in 5 rural parents agree that afterschool programs currently do provide children healthy foods (61 percent).

Rural parents also agree that afterschool programs play a role in supporting children’s overall wellness through physical activity and positive reinforcement. More than 7 in 10 rural parents agree that afterschool programs provide opportunities for children to be physically active (73 percent) and can help reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in risky behaviors (72 percent).



**RURAL PARENTS AGREE THAT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS SUPPORT WORKING PARENTS**



Additionally, rural parents agree that the benefits of afterschool programs extend beyond the children who are able to directly participate in the program and apply to the family unit. More than 7 in 10 rural parents agree that afterschool programs help give working parents peace of mind about their children when they are at work (73 percent) and agree that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs (72 percent). Low-income parents living in rural communities are even more likely to agree that afterschool programs support working families, with 76 percent of low-income rural parents agreeing that afterschool programs help give working parents peace of mind about their child when they are at work, and 73 percent agreeing that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs. As families in rural communities struggle with poverty, including the overall poverty rate and the child poverty rate, greater than those of urban communities,<sup>xxi</sup> the support and care afterschool programs offer during the out-of-school-time hours for working families is critical.

# THE FIVE W'S OF AFTERSCHOOL IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

## **WHO** are afterschool programs providers?

Afterschool programs run by public schools (37 percent), Boys & Girls Clubs (17 percent), private schools (14 percent) and YMCAs (13 percent) are the most common afterschool programs for children in rural communities, very similar to children living outside of rural areas (43 percent, 18 percent, 11 percent and 16 percent, respectively).

However, compared to children living outside of rural communities, children in rural areas are more likely to take part in an afterschool program run by a city or town, including the Parks and Recreation department (13 percent versus 8 percent), or a 4-H program (12 percent versus 4 percent).

## **WHERE** are afterschool programs located?

Parents in rural communities are less likely than parents living outside of rural areas to report that their child's afterschool program is located in a public school building, 66 percent compared to 74 percent.

## **WHEN** do children take part in afterschool programs?

Children in rural communities spend an average of 3.5 days and 6.5 hours per week in an afterschool program and an average of 5 weeks and 5 hours per day in summer learning programs.

## **WHAT** is the cost of afterschool programs?

Parents living in rural communities report slightly lower per week costs for their child's afterschool program than non-rural communities—\$95.80 versus \$117.30. Low-income parents in rural communities report lower costs for their child's afterschool program, spending an average of \$94.70 per week.

## **WHY** do parents enroll their children in afterschool programs?

Parents living in rural communities look to afterschool programs for a variety of reasons: keeping their children safe, providing help with homework, promoting physical activity and consumption of healthy snacks and meals, and giving working parents peace of mind when they are at work. For instance, regarding academics, 73 percent of rural parents agree that afterschool programs can help children with their homework assignments, and 62 percent agree that programs can help children gain skills related to STEM. Benefits in social emotional growth are also evident: 77 percent of rural parents agree that programs help children develop social skills and 65 percent agree that they can help children gain skills such as teamwork, leadership and critical thinking. Nutrition and physical activity are also benefits rural parents associate with afterschool programs, with 73 percent of rural parents agreeing that programs provide opportunities for children to be physically active and 61 percent agreeing that programs provide children healthy foods. Additionally, 72 percent of rural parents agree that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs.



# WHAT DOES THE AFTERSCHOOL EXPERIENCE LOOK LIKE FOR RURAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

*America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand* reported that children in afterschool programs across the country are being kept safe, are surrounded by supportive adults and mentors, and are taking part in a variety of academically enriching activities. A look at the responses of rural parents find very similar results, with most parents happy overall with their child's afterschool program and report that their child is taking part in a wide range of learning experiences.

## Afterschool programs are helping rural children reach their full potential

Rural parents with a child in an afterschool program paint an encouraging picture of the programs that serve rural communities. An overwhelming majority of rural parents report that they are satisfied with their child's afterschool program overall (85 percent), and that they are satisfied with the safety of the afterschool program's environment (89 percent), the programs' quality of care (89 percent), and program staff knowledge and training (89 percent). More than 8 in 10 rural parents (84 percent) said that they were content with the variety of activities offered by the afterschool program, which encompassed everything from academic enrichment activities to helping their child develop communication skills to providing opportunities to be physically active.

### Academic enrichment

Rural children are taking part in an assortment of academically enriching activities in their afterschool programs, including reading, writing and STEM learning. When asked about the academic enrichment activities offered in their child's afterschool program, 75 percent of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for reading or writing, 66 percent report the program provides STEM learning opportunities and 62 percent report the program offers academic programs or clubs. Additionally, close to 8 in 10 parents (77 percent) report that the afterschool program helps their child with his or her homework.

*America After 3PM* also probed into the level of satisfaction with the academic enrichment provided by afterschool programs and found that overall, most rural parents are happy. Eighty-two percent of rural parents are satisfied with the homework assistance provided, 77 percent are satisfied with the quality of academic programs or clubs, 73 percent are satisfied with the program's opportunities for reading or writing and 68 percent are satisfied with the program's STEM learning opportunities. Rural parents also agree that afterschool programs are helping to activate their children's interest in learning. When asked if afterschool programs help to encourage learning, 84 percent of rural parents with a child in a program agreed that programs can help "excite" children about learning.



# PROMISING PRACTICE: STRONG PROGRAM STAFF

*\*During the summer of 2015, the Afterschool Alliance conducted an online survey of rural afterschool program providers to learn more about the challenges they face and opportunities they have discovered as program providers in rural communities. Between June 26 and July 29, 2015, 661 rural afterschool program providers responded to the online survey, giving a program perspective of the state of afterschool in rural communities.*



*Photo courtesy of BGCA*

A strong program staff is a vital element for any high-quality afterschool program, no matter its location. Working in an informal educational space, afterschool program staff often become mentors in the eyes of students, helping them feel safe, welcomed and supported during the after school hours. Programs with a strong staff create a positive atmosphere through strong staff-student relationships, hire staff with youth development experience and provide professional development opportunities to support staff growth.

Rural afterschool program providers fully recognize the importance of recruiting and retaining a strong staff, but they are confronted with a number of challenges unique to the circumstances of being located in a rural community. Recruiting qualified staff was one of the most significant challenges reported by rural afterschool program providers, second only to raising a sufficient amount of funding for their program.\* When asked about the challenges of recruiting qualified staff and retaining staff, close to 6 in 10 program providers (59 percent) report that recruiting qualified staff is challenging, and half report that retaining staff is challenging. A limited staffing pool, difficulty offering competitive salaries and a location in an isolated region are among the obstacles rural afterschool programs are working to overcome. One rural program provider writes, "... it is almost impossible to recruit and retain quality afterschool staff due to low wages and isolation in rural regions ...[often] staff take jobs and move to larger towns/cities." Another writes, "Recruiting qualified staff is challenging, as the area has little to attract qualified candidates and their families in the way of parks, public transit, housing, and city services. Retaining staff is also a problem, as when qualified personnel receive better offers, they often leave the area so that they can better provide for their families..We are always scrambling to find money to hire more staff so that we can fill the overwhelming demand from parents."

Despite the difficulties in finding and keeping staff onboard, many rural afterschool program providers have developed strategies to combat these challenges. For example, most rural afterschool program providers surveyed report offering their staff some form of professional development, including on-site trainings (87 percent), sending staff to attend national or state conferences (79 percent) or sending staff to standalone workshops (71 percent). These professional development opportunities encourage staff growth and can help train staff properly, providing the professional support that staff need to better understand their job responsibilities and feel adequately prepared to take on tasks assigned to them.

# PROMISING PRACTICE: STRONG PROGRAM STAFF CONTINUED



Photo courtesy of Flicking ERLC

Professional development opportunities also help retain staff, showing staff that their growth is important to the program and ensuring that the staff feels supported. An interview with one rural afterschool program provider found that the program makes sure that it is responsive to the needs of their staff by providing professional development opportunities based on the feedback of their staff and where it seems that their staff is struggling.

Working with school-day teachers is another way rural afterschool programs address their staffing challenges. For example, one provider writes, “All of our site coordinators are certificated teachers who are teaching at the school site during the day and coordinate the program after school. This allows us to have access to the schools and makes recruitment easier.” Another program provider says, “Many of our afterschool staff are district teachers from the districts that they were raised in, still live in and now teach in. They have a sense of community pride and want to [pay] it forward. Their dedication to our afterschool programs builds on respect.” One provider shares how employing school-day teachers not only helps with their staffing issues, but also supports their ability to provide professional development for their staff, “...85 percent of our afterschool staff are also our school district day school teachers so many of the training opportunities provided to the day school staff carry over to the afterschool program.” Other programs work closely with school-day staff and bring in teachers to help train afterschool program staff on ways to better align afterschool program activities with school day lessons.

Volunteers often supplement traditional afterschool program staff. For example, one rural program provider works with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) volunteer teams for their summer learning programs. Another has senior citizens from the community as active volunteers, and others located near two and four-year colleges are able to recruit college students to work with program students. However, more than 6 in 10 rural program providers (61 percent) report that recruiting volunteers is a challenge.

## Health and wellness

Supporting the health and wellness of their students is another way rural afterschool programs are improving the welfare of the students in their community. More than 8 in 10 rural parents (82 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity, and 77 percent report that the program offers beverages, snacks or meals. Among parents whose child's afterschool program provides food, 83 percent describe the snacks served as healthy. Less than 1 in 5 parents (17 percent) say that the snacks served include unhealthy foods. Looking at parents whose child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity, most parents say that their child gets at least 30 minutes of physical activity during a typical day in the program (63 percent) and close to all parents (91 percent) report that at least some of that physical activity is moderate to vigorous. Rural parents are also highly satisfied with the physical activity and healthy foods provided by their afterschool program, with 85 percent of parents satisfied with the variety of physical activity offered, and approximately 8 in 10 parents satisfied with the amount of physical activity offered (81 percent), the food provided by the program (79 percent) and the healthfulness of the food served by the program (79 percent).



**More than 8 in 10 rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity**

## 21<sup>st</sup> century skills

Based on parents surveyed, children in rural afterschool programs are being given a well-rounded learning experience, ranging from exposure to music and the arts to development in teamwork and communication skills. Close to 6 in 10 rural parents (58 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for music or art, and 7 in 10 parents (69 percent) are satisfied with those opportunities. When asked about the opportunities for workforce skills development, more than 4 in 10 parents (43 percent) say that the afterschool program helps their child build teamwork, leadership and critical thinking skills, and 7 in 10 parents (69 percent) are satisfied with the workforce skills support provided by the afterschool program. Afterschool programs are also a place where children are able to practice communications skills and interact with their peers. Nine in 10 rural parents say that they are satisfied with their child's opportunities to interact with peers in the program.



**More than 3 in 4 rural parents report that the program offers beverages, snacks or meals**



## Rural afterschool program activities and services that stand out

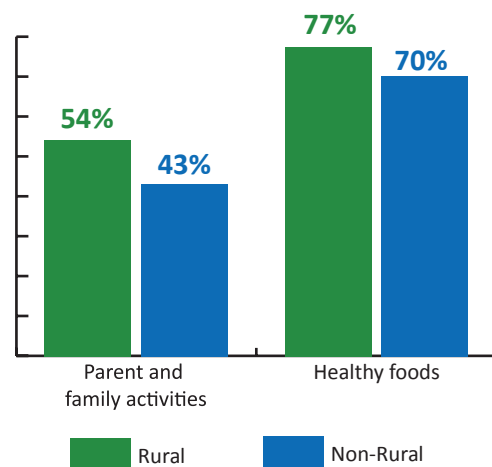
It might be expected that, due to the distinct characteristics of rural communities, the activities and offerings of afterschool programs in rural communities would also look distinctly different than their urban and suburban counterparts. However, on the whole, the activities and offerings of rural afterschool program providers look similar to those reported by parents living outside of rural communities. For example, 8 in 10 rural parents (82 percent) and parents living outside of rural communities (80 percent) say their child's afterschool program provides opportunities for physical activity and more than 3 in 4 rural parents (77 percent) and parents who do not live in a rural area (76 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers homework assistance. Despite the many parallels that can be drawn between the afterschool program experiences in rural and non-rural communities, a few differences do arise, particularly when comparing the responses of parents in rural areas to parents living in urban settings.

### Areas of strength for rural afterschool program providers

When comparing the answers of parents living in and parents living outside of rural communities, it appears that rural afterschool programs are more likely to engage their students' families, provide transportation and offer healthy snacks than afterschool programs outside of rural areas. More than half of rural parents (54 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers parent and family activities, 11 percentage points higher than non-rural parents (43 percent). Rural parents are also more satisfied than non-rural parents with the parent and family activities provided by their afterschool program (69 percent versus 61 percent). This includes more than 4 in 10 rural parents (42 percent) who are extremely satisfied with the parent and family activities, compared to 32 percent of parents living outside of rural areas.

Parents living in rural communities are more likely than parents living outside of rural communities to report that the food at their child's afterschool program is healthy, with 83 percent of parents in rural communities reporting that the snacks at their child's afterschool program include healthy foods compared to 70 percent of non-rural parents. Only 17 percent of rural parents report that their afterschool program offers snacks that include unhealthy food versus 25 percent of parents outside of rural communities.

**PARENTS REPORT THAT THEIR CHILD'S AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM OFFERS THE FOLLOWING**



# WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT PARENT ENGAGEMENT?



While parents living in rural communities are more likely than parents outside of these areas to report that their child's afterschool program offers parent and family activities, and are more likely to report satisfaction with these activities, rural afterschool program providers have mixed feelings about the level of engagement of their students' parents and families. A significant majority of rural afterschool program providers (59 percent) report that parent engagement is challenging, with 1 in 4 reporting that it is very challenging.\* Providers' explanations for this challenge includes parents' late work hours, lengthy distances and commute times required to reach the afterschool program, and lack of interest on the part of parents.

Despite the difficult undertaking to foster parent engagement in afterschool programs, many rural afterschool program providers continue to dedicate time and resources toward parent engagement because they view parent involvement as invaluable. In one phone interview with a rural afterschool program provider, the provider said, "...anytime you can get parents involved, it makes a huge difference. In a small rural community, all you have is each other."

To increase parent involvement, rural afterschool program providers employ a variety of approaches to connect with and engage their students' parents. Some programs offer classes specifically for parents,

such as adult literacy classes, whereas others hold classes for parents to participate in a learning activity side-by-side with their child. Hosting family nights, holiday parties, fun walk/runs and events showcasing students' work are additional ways programs encourage parents to become more involved in the program.

Programs also find ways to incorporate parent engagement into their organizational and programmatic structures. One rural program includes parents on the program's advisory board, giving them a forum to share their ideas and thoughts about the program with other board members, including program staff, school day staff and business leaders in the community. Another rural program has a parent advisory committee—comprised solely of parents—who provide the program with input about the current activities offered and the programming they would like to see. A program with a large Hispanic and Somalian population has staff from those communities on board to help make parents feel more welcome in the program. Staff at another program are trained to check in with parents each time they pick up their child, speaking with parents about the progress their son or daughter is making. The program makes sure that interactions with parents are not only about problem behavior, but their child's successes.

Perseverance and patience are common threads throughout programs' continuous efforts to build rapport between parents and program providers. As one rural program provider stated in a phone interview, "Get moms and dads involved, even if it's a daunting task. Be willing to work together because it's worth it."\*\*

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*\*Survey responses are based on an Afterschool Alliance online survey of rural afterschool program providers, conducted between June 26 and July 29, 2015.*

*\*\*Phone interviews with rural afterschool program providers were conducted by the Afterschool Alliance between September 21 and October 13, 2015.*

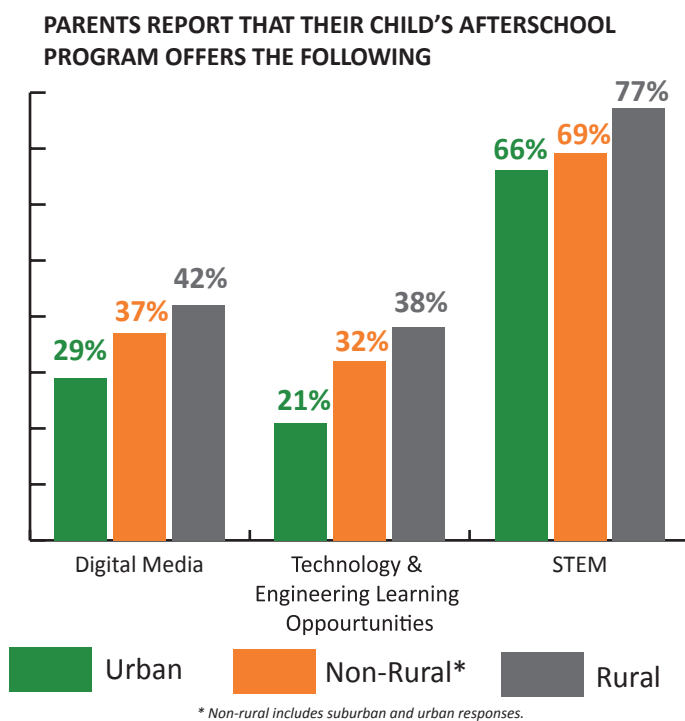
## Areas for growth

Although the overall afterschool program experience painted by parents living in rural communities is a very positive picture, certain program elements are not as prevalent in rural afterschool programs when compared to programs outside of rural areas, in particular activities associated with technology.

Across the country, regardless of geographic region or community type, it appears that opportunities in afterschool programs to engage with technology are not commonplace, based on parents surveyed. However, parents living in rural communities are even less likely to report that their child's afterschool program offers technology learning opportunities. For instance, when asked if their child's afterschool program offers digital media opportunities, 29 percent of rural parents report in the affirmative, compared to 37 percent of parents living outside of rural areas, an 8 percentage point difference. The difference appears even starker when winnowing the answers of non-rural parents, which comprise both urban and suburban parents. When comparing the answers of urban parents to rural parents, more than 4 in 10 parents living in urban communities (42 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers digital media opportunities, a 13 percentage point difference compared to rural parents. The satisfaction with digital media opportunities is also lower among rural parents, with just under half saying that they are satisfied (48 percent), compared to 62 percent of urban parents.

Similarly, 1 in 5 rural parents (21 percent) report that technology and engineering learning opportunities are offered by their child's afterschool program, compared to close to 1 in 3 non-rural parents (32 percent)—an 11 percentage point difference. Again, parents living in urban communities (38 percent) are more likely to say their child's program offers technology and engineering learning opportunities—a 17 percentage point difference.

Although little difference exists between rural parents' answers regarding STEM programming in their child's afterschool program and the answers of parents living outside of rural communities as a whole,<sup>4</sup> a closer examination reveals a significant difference between rural and urban parents' answers. Sixty-six percent of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers STEM learning opportunities, compared to 69 percent of parents living outside of rural



<sup>4</sup> The definition of "non-rural communities" in America After 3PM includes parents who select "urban" or "suburban" as their community type.



areas. However, among parents living in urban communities, 77 percent report that their child has STEM learning opportunities in his or her afterschool program, 11 percentage points higher than rural parents. Parents living in urban communities are also more likely to say that their child’s afterschool program offered STEM learning opportunities more frequently than parents in rural communities, with 63 percent of urban parents reporting that their child participated in a STEM learning opportunity more than once a week, 18 percentage points higher than rural parents (45 percent). The satisfaction with STEM learning in afterschool programs was also higher among urban parents (74 percent) compared to rural parents (68 percent).

Music and art offerings were another area where rural afterschool programs appeared to lag behind urban programs. Fifty-eight percent of rural parents say that their child’s afterschool program offers music or art, compared to 66 percent of parents living in urban communities. Rural parents were also less likely to say that they are satisfied with the music or art offered by the afterschool program: 69 percent versus 75 percent.



Photos courtesy of BGCA



# PROMISING PRACTICE: STRUCTURED PROGRAM DESIGN

Integral structural and programmatic features of promising afterschool programs include clearly stated and organizationally internalized goals, the appropriate amount of time and resources dedicated to instruction and skill development, sequenced and coordinated activities to master specific skill sets, and a variety of active forms of learning and hands-on exercises. Although many rural afterschool program providers report difficulties securing the resources they need, such as specific curricula—like STEM programming or a diverse or new set of activities, overall, providers are finding ways to engage their students in varied and experiential learning activities.

Parents in rural communities are predominantly satisfied with their child’s afterschool program, including the variety of activities offered by the program. Altoona Campus Kids Klub in Iowa provides a fitting example of structured programming in a rural setting. The program helps with homework and tutoring, offers snacks, dedicates time each day to a STEAM enrichment activity—like constructing a roller coaster and building a ramp to launch marbles—and incorporates physical activity for students into the daily routine.

Systems are also being developed to support rural afterschool program providers in delivering quality programming. In Nebraska, the afterschool statewide network Beyond School Bells developed a statewide coalition of city-wide afterschool systems to support sustainability and capacity development across the state. One goal of these systems is to help raise funding and provide technical assistance to support community outreach efforts and STEM programming in rural communities.



*Photos courtesy of Camp Fire Iowa*



# THE BARRIERS TO AFTERSCHOOL PARTICIPATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

## Gains have been made in rural communities to access afterschool programs, but challenges remain

While *America After 3PM* found that a growing number of children living in rural communities participate in afterschool programs, it also found that 3.1 million children are unable to participate in a program even though their parents would like to enroll them. Among families not participating in afterschool programs, most parents living in rural communities (71 percent) report that they did not enroll their child in an afterschool program because they have a parent or guardian home during the hours after school. However, when examining the barriers families in rural communities face when contemplating the decision to enroll their child in an afterschool program, challenges that include the affordability, the availability, and the accessibility of afterschool programs emerge as the primary reasons parents decline to enroll their child in a program. Though the cost of afterschool programs and access to afterschool programs were also challenges reported by rural parents in 2009, it is notable that rural parents in the most recent *America After 3PM* survey were slightly less likely to report these factors as barriers.

### Affordability

Nationally, families reported spending an average of \$113.50 per week on their child's afterschool program in 2014, an increase from \$74.41<sup>5</sup> in 2009. The average weekly cost among rural families, while lower than the national average at \$95.80 per week, almost doubled from 2009, when rural families reported spending \$51.86<sup>6</sup> on afterschool programs each week. When asked if the current economic conditions have made it difficult to afford placing their child in an afterschool program, 6 in 10 rural parents with a child in an afterschool program agreed that it had (59 percent).

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**6 In 10 parents of children in an afterschool program agree that the current economic conditions have made it difficult to afford placing their child in an afterschool program**

Given the increase in the cost of afterschool, it is unsurprising that most rural parents (70 percent) with a child in an afterschool program report that cost was a very important factor in selecting their child's afterschool program, or that an extremely small percentage of rural parents said that cost was not very important in their decision (3 percent).<sup>7</sup> The expense of afterschool programs was also a greater factor for rural parents in 2014 than in 2009 (65 percent).

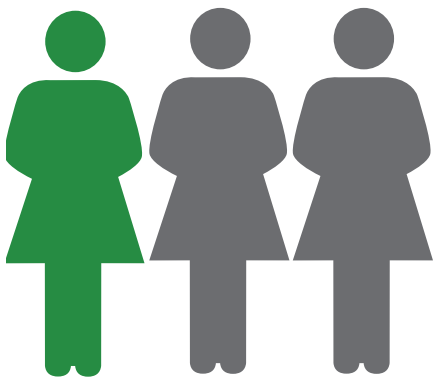
<sup>5,6</sup> The average weekly cost of afterschool programs in 2009 was adjusted for 2014 dollars.

<sup>7</sup> Parents with a child in an afterschool program were asked on a 7-point scale, where 7 represented "extremely important" and 1 represented "not at all important," "How important were each of the following reasons in selecting your child's primary afterschool program?" For the purposes of this report, "very important" is defined as a parent's response to the question with a 6 or a 7 and "not very important" is defined as a parents' response to the question with a 1 or 2.



Despite the increased cost and the role that cost plays in their decision-making, most rural parents still see afterschool programs as a worthwhile investment. Three in 4 rural parents with a child in an afterschool program reported that they were satisfied with the program's cost.

For some parents, however, the cost is prohibitive. The expense of afterschool programs was not only front of mind for parents when choosing a program for their child, it was also a factor that kept many parents from enrolling their child in a program. The most recent *America After 3PM* found that 4 in 10 parents in rural communities report that an important reason for not enrolling their child in an afterschool program is that the programs were too expensive.



**1 in 3 parents with a child in an afterschool program report that a very important factor in selecting a program is that no other afterschool programs are available**

### **Availability**

The scarcity of afterschool programs is another significant challenge families living in rural communities face. For rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, approximately 1 in 3 parents (32 percent) report that a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program is that “no other programs are available,” higher than what rural parents reported in 2009 (24 percent). Additionally, approximately 2 in 3 rural parents (67 percent) with a child in an afterschool program agreed that it was challenging to find an enriching environment for their child in the hours after school, 7 percentage points higher than parents living outside of rural areas (60 percent).

The lack of available afterschool programs also plays a part in keeping children living in rural communities from participating in a program, although less so compared to five years ago. In 2014, close to 1 in 3 rural parents (29 percent) reported that an absence of available afterschool programs was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program, much lower than what rural parents reported in 2009 (40 percent). When rural parents without a child in an afterschool program were asked about their level of satisfaction with the afterschool programs available to them in their community, less than half (47 percent) said that they were satisfied.

# WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT PROGRAM COST?

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According to rural afterschool providers, the single biggest challenge in operating a rural program is raising enough funds to run and sustain their program.\*

Rural afterschool program providers surveyed overwhelmingly report funding is a challenge for them (68 percent), and close to half of program providers (47 percent) say that it is “very challenging.” Although many programs report making the most of the funding that they have, the everyday expenses of running a program add up. Providers look to a variety of funding sources, but programs in rural communities do not typically have many local businesses or philanthropic organizations to solicit, and the business and philanthropic organizations they can access often have limited available funds themselves.

Costs related to providing a safe and secure space, employing staff who serve as mentors and role models to students and providing transportation to make the program more accessible are a few of the primary expenses rural afterschool program providers report. In a phone interview, a staff member of a rural afterschool program shared that her biggest challenge is funding, with a large part of her funding dedicated to staff and staff development in order to deliver quality programming. Another rural program provider discussed how finding sufficient funding for staffing and transportation are “...keeping [the program] from doing so much more in the community.”

Program fees are part and parcel of afterschool programs’ constant struggle to meet the needs of their students and families. As program providers do their best to keep their doors open, they also are challenged to keep program costs at an affordable rate for the families in their community. More than 4 in 10 rural program providers (45 percent) say that it is challenging for them to keep program costs affordable for families. One program provider writes, “We have established funds to support afterschool programming from the district...however, that only covers about 1/3 of the actual programming costs. We continue to increase fees to help support programming and search out partners, donations and fundraising opportunities to continue to support our program at the same level.” On the other end of the spectrum, a program

provider shares how keeping the program affordable for its families impacts their services, stating, “We do not charge a fee for students to attend. Costs limit resources we can provide. Volunteers are hard to find and [it] is costly to hire staff to maintain [the] state required ratio.”

Although many rural afterschool program providers surveyed report the challenges of funding, many share their strategies for maintaining both their services’ affordability and quality. A program provider says, “I think in a small community such as ours, we do what we can to make our program affordable and maintain our numbers. We offer so much flexibility in our contract options, such as providing discounts for multiple children and allowing families to flex their schedules without holding them to a minimum. As a result of our flexibility, we do not take in the fee income that we should be; however, we feel having a program that families feel is accessible is more important.”

A number of rural afterschool program providers also enjoy resources provided by a statewide afterschool network. Many statewide afterschool networks—networks established to develop systems of support for afterschool programs—provide a variety of services to help afterschool programs with sustainability challenges. For instance, to address the needs of afterschool programs in Kansas, including rural programs, the Kansas Enrichment Network offers regional roundtable discussions, technical assistance sessions, and hosts three conferences a year that include sessions covering sustainability and quality. These offerings provide professional development and networking opportunities, spur new ideas and potential partnerships, and create a close-knit community that can leverage the resources and expertise of those involved.

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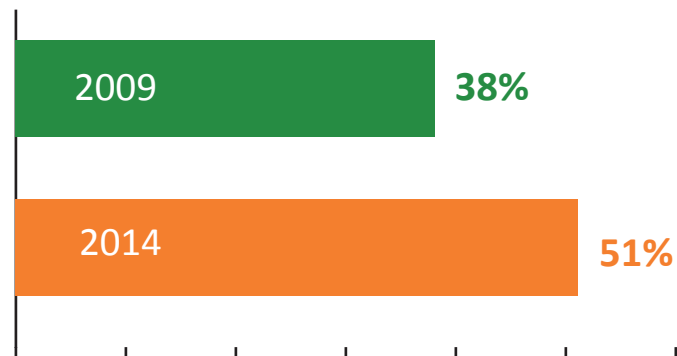
*\*Survey responses are based on an online survey of rural afterschool program providers, conducted between June 26 and July 29, 2015*

## Accessibility

In the Afterschool Alliance's report, *America After 3PM: From Big Cities to Small Towns*, issues related to accessibility, including transportation and finding a program that was conveniently located, were factors parents living in rural communities struggled with in 2009. Analyzing rural family data in the most recent *America After 3PM* reveals that rural families with or without children in afterschool programs, continue to grapple with the same issues.

For instance, among rural parents who do not have a child in an afterschool program, but who would enroll their child if a program were available, close to half (46 percent) report that they opted not to select an afterschool program because of the lack of a safe way for their child to get to and come home from the program, and 42 percent said that inconvenient program locations factored into their decision. Less than 1 in 4 parents report that an inconvenient location (23 percent) or a lack of a safe way for their child to get to and home from the program (23 percent) was not important in their decision.

**RURAL PARENTS WHO REPORT THAT TRANSPORTATION TO AND FROM AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM IS IMPORTANT IN THEIR PROGRAM CHOICE**



Accessibility is also top of mind for parents who have enrolled their child in an afterschool program, with more than 8 in 10 rural parents (84 percent) reporting that the location of an afterschool program is very important in the decision of where to enroll their child. Compared to five years ago, rural parents with a child in an afterschool program are much more likely to say that transportation to and from the program is important in their choice of a program. In 2014, more than half of rural parents (51 percent) said that the provision of transportation was very important in their selection of a program, compared to 38 percent of rural parents in 2009. Rural parents were also more likely than parents living outside of rural areas to report that transportation was important to them. Approximately 4 in 10 parents living outside of rural areas (42 percent) reported that transportation was important in selecting an afterschool program, 9 percentage points lower than rural parents.



# WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY?

A survey of rural afterschool program providers found that they recognize the accessibility challenges facing the families they serve, and it is an area of concern as well as an issue they struggle with in their day-to-day operations.\* When asked about the unique challenges they face as rural afterschool program providers, a large number of responses were related to transportation issues. For example, one respondent wrote, “When it is not possible to offer transportation home from [the] program, attendance is often lower...being rural means that everything is much more spread out than in an urban setting. Students often do not have the option to walk home, and parents cannot justify the extra cost of picking their children up.” Another provider writes, “Students from outlying towns are less likely to participate due to transportation restrictions. Because of the transportation issues and program costs, when students get older, some parents opt to have them stay home alone rather than have them attend [the program].”

Close to 4 in 10 rural afterschool program providers surveyed (39 percent) say that providing transportation from the program is challenging and approximately 3 in 10 (29 percent) say that providing transportation to the program is a challenge. A provider writes, “...transportation is a huge barrier. The limited resources available for the program don’t stretch far enough to provide the buses needed to get children home after the program.” Another says, “...one of the unique challenges we have is being able to provide the afterschool program to ALL the students who attend our school. Some of these are 30-50 miles from our school. The majority of our students come from low-income families, who often do not have transportation at home. We provide transportation for our students every night, and since we have a limited budget, we can only provide transportation one night a week to the different communities. This limits students who may need extra help in certain areas from attending more than one night of afterschool a week.”

However, there are rural program providers that have come up with innovative ways to help their students and families address the gaps in transportation. Partnerships with schools and other community organizations, such as churches, is one way programs are providing transportation for their students. Vouchers for transportation, including gas and county transit service vouchers for families, is another resourceful alternative programs have used to address transportation issues. Many programs’ partnerships with the local schools also involve retaining a room or meeting space in the school, mitigating transportation costs and tackling difficulties with bringing students to the program.

*\*Survey responses are based on an online survey of rural afterschool program providers, conducted between June 26 and July 29, 2015.*

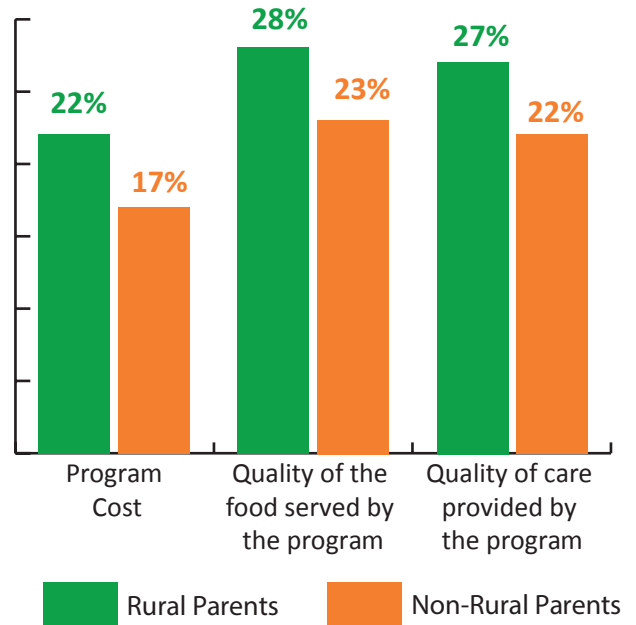


### Knowledge of afterschool programs

A review of the responses by parents living in rural communities who do not have a child in an afterschool program also gives an overarching picture of a lack of information about the afterschool programs in their community, particularly when compared to parents living outside of rural areas. For example, only 42 percent of parents in rural communities agree that information about afterschool programs is readily available to them, 10 percentage points lower than parents living outside of rural communities (52 percent).

Rural parents without a child in an afterschool program were also more likely than parents outside of rural areas to answer that they did not know enough about specific characteristics of programs to make a decision about enrolling their child in a program. Rural parents were more likely to say that they did not know if specific factors, including program cost, the quality of the food served by the program and the quality of care provided by the program, influenced their decision to enroll their child. Rural parents of high school students were even more likely than rural parents overall to report that they were uncertain about various aspects of afterschool programs, such as the program's cost (30 percent), food quality (35 percent) or quality of care (34 percent).

### PARENTS REPORTING THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW IF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS INFLUENCED THEIR DECISION NOT TO ENROLL THEIR CHILD IN AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM



## Barriers to afterschool program participation are higher for specific groups within rural communities

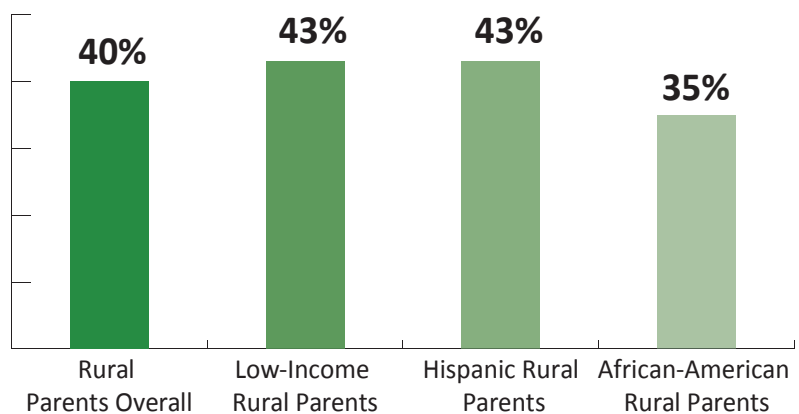
Looking closer at the responses of African-American, Hispanic and low-income families in rural communities, it is apparent that issues of affordability, availability and accessibility of programs are even greater for these specific groups within rural communities. Cost plays a major role in selecting an afterschool program, as more than 3 in 4 low-income parents in rural communities (77 percent) report that cost was a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program, with more than half reporting it was extremely important (52 percent). More than 7 in 10 African-American parents (75 percent) and Hispanic parents (72 percent) in rural communities report that cost was a very important factor in their selection of an afterschool program, with more than half reporting it was extremely important (61 percent and 59 percent, respectively).

Low-income parents and Hispanic parents living in rural communities were also more likely than rural families overall to say that the current economic conditions have made it difficult for them to afford placing their child in an afterschool program.

Close to 6 in 10 low-income rural parents (58 percent) and Hispanic rural parents (55 percent) agreed, compared to 49 percent of rural parents overall, and 47 percent of African-American parents living in rural communities. When asked if the cost of afterschool programs factored into their decision not to enroll their child in a program, 43 percent of low-income rural parents said it was an important factor, higher than rural parents overall (40 percent).

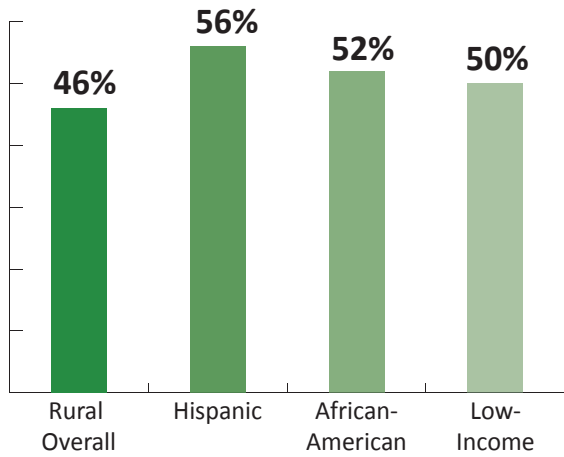
The availability of afterschool programs also presents issues: rural low-income parents, African-American parents and Hispanic parents with and without children in a program were even more likely to report the lack of available afterschool programs, as well as difficulty finding an enriching environment, than rural parents overall. Among rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, 42 percent of African-American parents and 47 percent of Hispanic parents report that a very important factor in their selection of their child's afterschool program was that no other programs were available.

**PARENTS THAT REPORT THAT THE COST OF AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM WAS A REASON WHY THEY DID NOT ENROLL THEIR CHILD IN A PROGRAM**

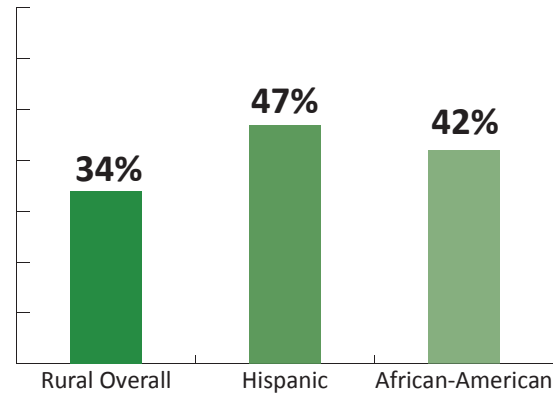




**RURAL PARENTS WHO AGREE THAT FINDING AN ENRICHING ENVIRONMENT FOR THEIR CHILD AFTER SCHOOL IS A CHALLENGE—BY SUBGROUPS**



**RURAL PARENTS WHO AGREE THAT A VERY IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THEIR SELECTION OF THEIR CHILD’S AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM WAS THAT NO OTHER PROGRAMS WERE AVAILABLE—BY SUBGROUPS**



To take a look at the responses of rural parents without a child in an afterschool program, the lack of available afterschool programs was more likely to be cited by African-American (38 percent), Hispanic (36 percent) and low-income parents (33 percent) as a reason for not enrolling their child in a program than rural parents overall (29 percent). Finding an enriching environment for their child was also a greater challenge for Hispanic (56 percent), African-American (52 percent) and low-income parents (50 percent) in rural communities than for rural parents overall (46 percent).

Along similar lines of difficulty pertaining to the availability of afterschool programs, accessibility of programs was challenging for low-income parents, African-American parents and Hispanic parents. Among low-income parents (61 percent), African-American parents (64 percent) and Hispanic parents (57 percent) living in rural areas, transportation was more important in their selection of a program than it was for rural parents overall (51 percent). Among parents without a child in an afterschool program, 47 percent of African-American parents in rural communities report that the lack of a safe way to get to and from the program was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in afterschool, along with 42 percent of Hispanic parents and 41 percent of low-income parents, compared to 36 percent of rural parents overall.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The supports provided by afterschool programs can greatly enrich the fabric of a rural community—providing fun and enriching learning experiences for children, serving healthy snacks and meals, and keeping children active in a safe environment surrounded by supportive mentors. Yet despite the supports afterschool programs provide rural children and families, there are clear barriers to participation, as well as areas where program improvements can be made. Based on findings from *America After 3PM* and the survey of rural afterschool program providers, the following recommendations suggest ways to increase access to afterschool programs in rural communities, as well as make certain all children in rural communities are able to take part in high-quality afterschool programs. Afterschool programs are an important component in the ecosystem of learning, and it will take a national effort—including (but not limited to) rural communities themselves—to help ensure that children in rural communities are afforded the opportunities all children deserve to succeed as they move through school, work and beyond.

## **Ensure information about afterschool programs is more readily available to parents in rural communities.**

With less than half of parents in rural communities (47 percent) agreeing that information on afterschool programs in their community is readily available, more work must be done to make sure that all parents are given adequate information about afterschool programs, so they can make fully informed decisions about their child’s afterschool care.

In particular, it’s important for programs to reach out to parents with middle- and high-school age children, to let them know about the many and varied benefits of afterschool programs. According to the data, rural parents of middle school students are more likely than parents outside of rural areas to agree that their child is old enough to care for him or herself (59 percent versus 50 percent). Interviews and an online survey with rural program providers revealed similar sentiments among program providers. A few rural program providers recounted instances where younger siblings enrolled in the program would stop attending once the eldest was determined to be old enough to watch his or her younger brothers and sisters. Such children might miss important learning opportunities. An increased awareness of the educational supports and important life skills children gain from participating in afterschool programs, as well as helping parents locate afterschool programs that meet their child’s needs, can better connect afterschool programs with the children and families in their community.

## **Raise national attention to the important role rural afterschool programs play in their communities.**

Afterschool programs in rural communities create environments where youth thrive and families feel supported: providing academic enrichment, nurturing the social and emotional development of students, building ties between families and their community, and giving working parents peace of mind about their child while at their job. An overwhelming percentage of parents in rural communities are pleased with their child’s afterschool program; however, rural program providers report constant

funding struggles to maintain the quality and the variety of their services. In an interview with a rural afterschool program provider, the program director discussed the difficulties of finding funders focused on rural communities and finding funders who understand the specific needs and challenges of rural afterschool program providers.

Afterschool programs can enjoy higher profiles by raising awareness at the national level of the number of rural afterschool programs across the country that are helping to keep their students safe, engaged in learning and providing them with the skills and tools they will need for future success. Highlighting the value of rural afterschool programs, as well as the areas in which help is needed, could expand the types of partnerships and supports programs can garner from inside and outside of their community.

- **Hosting a National Summit on Rural Afterschool** as a high-visibility event to bring together leading national rural and afterschool organizations could lead to meaningful collaboration and drawing national attention to the need for and benefits of afterschool programs in rural communities. The summit will serve as a call to action, gathering together a diverse group of stakeholders that include business and industry leaders, elected officials, and national, state and local afterschool leaders representing rural communities. This large signature event would be a chance for a diverse group of stakeholders to coalesce around the unique challenges faced by families and providers in these communities.

- **Holding an award competition to recognize exemplary rural afterschool programs** will help raise awareness of the important supports afterschool programs in rural areas provide the children and families in their community. A national award competition would also shine a light on the promising and innovative practices in the afterschool field.





## Provide opportunities to support and enhance the sharing of promising practices and resources.

In an online survey of rural afterschool program providers, 6 in 10 respondents (61 percent) agreed that they face unique challenges as a rural afterschool program, and 3 in 10 providers reported that it was challenging to keep up-to-date on available resources for afterschool programs. Digging deeper into the unique challenges confronting rural afterschool program providers, a common thread throughout the hundreds of open-ended responses was the difficulty locating and securing resources when in a rural community. One program provider wrote, “We don’t have a variety of opportunities to offer our students like those available in urban programs. For example, I’d love to have our kids learn enrichment activities like ballet, guitar lessons, karate, etc., but we simply do not have anyone in a 70-mile radius to teach those things, and most people are unwilling to drive 2.5 hours round trip to teach a 1-hour class.” Similarly, another program provider wrote, “We have to bring in programming from much farther away when it is not available in our local community; access to stores where we can buy materials is limited; it is much more difficult to take students to activities outside of our facility.”

Many providers also shared their struggles to find funding sources, as well as businesses or other community organizations to partner with when located in a smaller, rural community. More than half of program providers said that it was challenging to secure funding from local businesses and companies (55 percent), as well as from private grants, such as foundation grants (52 percent). One rural program provider shared, “Being in a rural and low [social economic status] community provides numerous challenges. There are not a lot of businesses or organizations that you can partner with and this also [poses] a challenge for fundraising as well.” A different rural afterschool program provider contemplates the awareness on the part of larger entities of the strained resources of rural communities, “We rely solely on parents to volunteer and fundraise for travel, meals, events, etc. It would be nice to have large corporations or outside agencies help with funding to these smaller remote programs. Perhaps, they have no idea we even exist.”

It is evident that rural afterschool program providers are in need of easily accessible and affordable resources that provide the tools they need to offer their students quality programming, as well as a means to connect with others in their region who may be potential partners or who may have faced similar challenges, and can offer guidance.

- **Holding mini-conferences or symposia** that provide expert advice, program support, and resources expressly for afterschool programs serving rural communities can provide access to the professional development opportunities rural program providers want. A majority of program providers surveyed (54 percent) say that a mini-conference or symposium focused on issues facing rural afterschool programs, including promising practices, tools for data collection and evaluation and overall resources for rural afterschool programs, would be very helpful to them. Mini-conferences or symposia are good vehicles to help ensure that rural afterschool programs have access to strategies, experts and resources tailored to their needs.

# PROMISING PRACTICE: STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

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*\*During the summer of 2015, the Afterschool Alliance conducted an online survey of rural afterschool program providers to learn more about the challenges they face and opportunities they have discovered as program providers in rural communities. Between June 26 and July 29, 2015, 661 rural afterschool program providers responded to the online survey, giving a program perspective of the state of afterschool in rural communities.*

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Strong partnerships, particularly in rural communities, are crucial to afterschool program providers. Building and securing relationships with families, the community and schools is a promising practice for rural afterschool programs that often struggle with securing resources and funding due to the limited options available to them. From acquiring program space to strengthening program offerings to filling staffing needs to obtaining transportation, partnerships are helping rural afterschool programs make ends meet and serve the children and families in their community to the best of their ability.

When asked in an online survey how they sustain their program offerings, rural afterschool program providers shared the various ways they leverage partnerships to ensure that their students enjoy a fun and academically enriching variety of activities. One provider wrote, “We have been able to partner with a local nature conservancy, a community music school, the state college extension service, school staff volunteers and 4-H to bring quality enrichment activities to our program.”

Finding an adequate program space was another challenge that good partnerships could help overcome, according to a number of rural afterschool program providers. Schools, community centers and churches oftentimes work with afterschool programs to provide their existing space free of charge or at a discounted rate.

Partnerships are also a tool rural afterschool program providers use to staff their program. For example, a program provider shared, “We try to keep the whole community involved by offering events, classes and volunteer opportunities for all ages. We use a vacant classroom in the school to host a weekly gathering for senior citizens who are now active volunteers in our school and community.” Another provider shared the benefits of partnering with the local school, stating, “All of our site coordinators are certificated teachers who are teaching at the school site during the day and coordinate the program after school. This allows us to have access to the schools and makes recruitment easier. We have the support of our school district, which makes our program successful.”

As integral as partnerships are for rural afterschool program providers, they can also be difficult to form and maintain in rural communities. A limited number of local businesses; a lack of institutions of higher education, museums, science centers and other cultural institutions in the area; and the strained resources of community partners are a few of the challenges rural afterschool program providers report facing. By dedicating the time to build personal relationships, inviting the community into the program, inviting community members onto advisory boards, and being flexible and open to various types of support—in-kind or monetary—from community partners, rural afterschool program providers are making the most out their circumstances. One rural program provider discussed the importance of developing a sense of shared ownership over the program, voicing the opinion that it is easier to build support in rural communities strengthened by a connectedness and closeness that other communities may lack.

- **Creating an online resource center or Hub geared toward rural communities** can provide a central platform where rural afterschool programs can access information that is uniquely suited to rural providers. A hub can serve as a one-stop shop to which rural afterschool program providers can turn to find information tailored to their needs: funding resources, helpful links, potential partners, best practices, evaluation tools and curricula. Afterschool program providers can also use the Hub to find information tailored to their needs in the form of articles and papers, templates to help start up an activity at their program, webinars, blog posts and social media. It can also function as a forum where providers can ask questions, share helpful tips, and connect with one another to find mentors and form partnerships that leverage the resources and expertise of program providers.

### **Increase STEM programming in rural afterschool programs.**

STEM programming, technology learning opportunities in particular, is an area *America After 3PM* indicates that rural afterschool programs struggle to provide. Rural parents are less likely than parents living in urban communities to say that their child’s afterschool program offers STEM programming as a whole, and much less likely to report that the program offers the technology and engineering activities or digital media opportunities. Rural parents are also less likely than urban parents to agree that afterschool programs can help children gain STEM skills. On the program side, approximately 1 in 3 rural afterschool program providers (32 percent) report that offering STEM learning opportunities in their program is challenging. A provider writes, “With the current emphasis on STEM, we have been challenged because we do not have many local people available who have knowledge they are willing to share in the areas of science, technology, math, and engineering. We attend professional development sessions focused on STEM and bring the knowledge back to share with all of our staff; even they are reluctant to lead a class relating to any of the STEM areas.”

Greater supports to increase quality STEM programming in rural afterschool programs, as well as parent education on the importance of STEM learning for their children’s future, are necessary to ensure that rural students are afforded the opportunities to immerse themselves in meaningful STEM learning. STEM skills can help prepare students for the challenges of tomorrow, place them ahead of the curve in a growing STEM workforce, and give them the critical thinking skills essential to do well in an ever-evolving world. As children in rural areas are also less likely than children nationally to have STEM-specific resources in their community, such as science museums, and less likely to have robust STEM learning experiences during the school day,<sup>xxii</sup> the need for increased quality STEM programming in afterschool programs becomes more significant.



## Increase investment in afterschool programs serving rural communities.

The number one challenge confronting rural afterschool program providers is securing enough funding to run and sustain a program. Close to 7 in 10 rural program providers surveyed (68 percent) report that raising enough funding to run and sustain a program was challenging, with close to half reporting that it was “very challenging” (47 percent). As rural program providers struggle to sustain their current program offerings, they are unable to meet the needs of the 3.1 million rural children not in a program who would be enrolled if a program were available to them. A rural program provider summarizes the funding struggles that are part of being a rural program provider, stating, “...fundraising in a small community brings its own unique challenges...if you [rely] on several different sources of funding—federal, state, local, fundraising, help from a school district—and that funding is changing from year to year, it may be very difficult to maintain consistency in the program. Without consistency I don’t think you will have success.”

In order to fully meet the needs of the families in their communities, rural afterschool program providers need increased public and private investment at the national, state and local levels. The potential partnerships that can be formed between programs and the business and philanthropic communities are many, just as the range of supports afterschool programs provide and areas of focus are wide-ranging, from STEM to workforce skills to health and wellness. National and state investment is especially vital for rural afterschool programs, many of which already work closely with their local leaders and businesses whose resources are often stretched thin. “Being somewhat secluded from big businesses, we are faced with asking the same small business for their support. We are not able to gain a significant amount of support from these businesses because we are not the only program asking them for partnerships, donations, and volunteers...” one provider writes. Another provider shares a similar sentiment, “...securing funds is difficult, as everyone is operating on a tight budget...We don’t have big corporations with whom we can reach out to for partnerships. Instead, we are relying on local small businesses, or public libraries. Their ability to volunteer or donate is largely based on their own budget.”

As rural communities struggle with food insecurity, poverty, and lack of resources, it is evident that families in rural communities are in need of additional supports that can help them thrive. Parents in rural communities overwhelmingly support public funding for afterschool and summer learning programs. More than 8 in 10 rural parents favor public funding for afterschool (84 percent) and summer learning programs (85 percent). Afterschool programs are important partners in the ecosystem of supports for rural communities, and an increased investment in rural afterschool programs can help them provide children with the additional support they need during the afterschool hours to reach their full potential.



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