



News Release

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New Study: Half of U.S. Children Whose Parents Want Structured Summer Learning Programs for Them Are Missing Out

Survey of 30,000+ Parents Finds Cost Is Greatest Barrier; Just 13% of Kids in Low-Income Families Participate; Vast Majority of Parents Give Programs High Marks

Washington, D.C. – Millions of U.S. parents want their child in a structured summer program that keeps them safe, active, and engaged, with caring staff and opportunities for them to develop new skills and be socially active. But enrolling their child is an insurmountable challenge for many, and affordability is by far the greatest barrier families face.

[*The Summer Struggle*](#), released today by the Afterschool Alliance, finds the parents of 24.6 million children want a structured summer experience – an enrichment or sports program, summer camp or school, or a job or internship – for their child. But just 12 million of those children are enrolled, and 12.6 million (51%) are missing out due to cost and other barriers families face. The study is based on a survey of 30,515 U.S. parents of school-age children who live in their households, conducted by Edge Research. It also finds that an overwhelming majority of parents who *were* able to enroll their child in a summer program (96%) give it high marks – and nearly nine in ten parents overall (89%) favor public funding for summer learning.

“Finding affordable summer programs for their children is one of the greatest challenges many working families face,” said Afterschool Alliance Executive Director Jodi Grant. “Too often, especially for low- and middle-income families, that challenge is impossible to meet. Parents need to stay in their jobs to provide for their families, but they can’t find affordable summer programs. So instead of being active, engaging with peers and caring adults, and learning new skills over the summer, their children may be unsupervised, on screens, at risk, and in some cases without healthy food during the summer months. We can and must do better by creating more quality summer programs, which keep kids safe, engaged, and learning while giving working families peace of mind.”

The study, part of the *America After 3PM* series of household surveys, finds a significant opportunity gap—the divide between who does and does not have access to summer programs—with 45% of children in high-income families, 26% of children in middle-income families, and just 13% of children in low-income families attending a summer program. High-income families are most likely to say they did not enroll their child because their family does other things together over the summer. For every \$100 earned during the summer, low-income families who were able to enroll their child spent \$10 on the summer program; middle-income families \$5; and high-income families less than \$3.

“Summer programs are tremendously important in supporting young people’s growth, learning, and wellbeing, and they are especially important for children and youth who face structural or systemic barriers that could limit their ability to grow and thrive,” said Gigi Antoni, Vice President, Youth Development at The Wallace Foundation, which funded the research. “These programs offer young people the opportunity to learn, lead, and make a difference – both to them individually and within their communities. But this report makes clear that too many young people are missing out. Costs keep rising and millions of families can’t keep up. A lot of our kids could use more of the human connection summer programs provide and more time with the caring adults who see them, know them, and are their champions. Investing in our youth is investing in our future.”

Among the other findings:

Affordability is the most common barrier faced by families unable to enroll their child.

- 38% of these families cite cost as a factor contributing to their inability to enroll their child in a summer program.
- 18% cite program’s location or transportation as a reason.
- 13% report having difficulty finding a program, say summer programs are not available in their community, or the program’s hours do not meet their needs.
- 10% say programs had no open slots.

Parents with a child enrolled give summer programs high marks.

- 96% of these parents report being satisfied with the summer program their child attends, with 63% reporting extreme satisfaction.
- Half of parents with a child in a summer program (50%) say they are extremely confident their child will be well prepared for the coming school year, compared to 43% of parents whose child is not in a summer program.

Parents’ support for public funding for summer programs is strong and growing.

- Nine in ten parents (89%) favor public funding for summer learning opportunities, up from 83% in 2009, 85% in 2014, and 88% in 2020.
- In the current study, 94% of Democrats, 89% of Independents, and 87% of Republican parents support public funding.
- 93% of parents in urban communities, 89% of those in suburban communities, and 87% of parents in rural communities support public funding.

Across demographic lines, parents want summer opportunities for all children.

- 87% of parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs.
- 92% of parents who are Democrats and 85% of those who are Independents or Republicans agree.
- 88% of parents in suburban and urban communities, and 85% of those in rural communities agree. Support is overwhelming in every region of the country.
- At least 86% of parents of every race/ethnicity agree.

The new study offers recommendations, including:

- **Increase public and private investments in summer programs** at the national, state, and local levels. At the federal level, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative supported summer programs for nearly 200,000 children during the 2022-2023 school year, the most recent

year for which the U.S. Department of Education has issued data, but it doesn't come close to meeting the need for these programs. As one example, at the state level, Oregon's Summer Learning Grants allocates funding to summer learning initiatives, but not enough states are funding summer programs. Localities, philanthropies, and businesses also should step up.

- **Reduce barriers that prevent summer programs from providing snacks and meals.** Child hunger tends to spike in the summer because children are not receiving school lunches and breakfasts. Inadequate funding and bureaucratic hurdles mean many summer programs cannot provide the snacks and meals children need and parents want for them. At this time when the cost of food is soaring, it is especially important to eliminate all the barriers that prevent summer programs from receiving grants that would make it possible for them to feed children or expand the number of meals they can provide.
- **Remove barriers to student participation** in summer programs, including by offering grants to fund transportation to and from programs, and by helping families more readily find information on the summer program options available to them.

This is the Afterschool Alliance's fifth national household survey. It included 30,515 U.S. parents or guardians with a school-aged child living in their household, with at least 200 interviews completed in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Conducted in English and Spanish, it used a mixed-mode methodology to reach as many households as possible. Data were collected from January 31 to April 21, 2025. The margin of error for the child- and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent. Previous *America After 3PM* household surveys were conducted in 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2020.

The *America After 3PM* summer findings are based on research funded by The Wallace Foundation.

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The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at www.afterschoolalliance.org.

About The Wallace Foundation

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