

Taking the Temperature of Afterschool

Perceptions of
Afterschool among
New Jersey Stakeholders



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About NJSACC

NJSACC, the network for New Jersey's afterschool communities, promotes and supports the development, continuity and expansion of quality programs for children and youth during out-of-school time.

The New Jersey Afterschool Network is a project of NJSACC and its state and local agency and private sector partners. The Network grows lasting public support for quality afterschool programs across New Jersey. Led by a public-private partnership, the network enhances public awareness and support; offers guidance for parents, providers, and advocates; strengthens relationships with policymakers, funders, practitioners, and parents, and shares best practices in the field.

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Purpose

Taking the Temperature of Afterschool identifies the top priorities for the afterschool field in New Jersey. In this time of diminishing resources, growing needs and great advances in our understanding of the many roles afterschool programs can play in the lives of children, families and communities, NJSACC set out to identify what is most important to those people in positions to shape the field. It is our hope that this research will provide the foundation for a clear agenda and action plan for the strengthening and expanding quality afterschool services in New Jersey.

Methodology

Taking the Temperature of Afterschool was conducted online between January 12 and February 4, 2010. 962 people answered some or all of the questions. Of the respondents,

- 52% work at schools,
- 20% work at afterschool programs,
- 6% work at government agencies,
- 7% work at community organizations, and
- 2% work at funders.

Forty-three percent of respondents work in urban areas, 46% work in suburban areas, and 11% work in rural areas.

“Afterschool can develop academic and personal goals for each child to ensure that they will be successful in school, graduate from high school and become productive citizens.”

The survey included two types of questions. The first set of questions pertained to the field of afterschool. Participants were asked how important it is for afterschool to accomplish certain activities. They were also asked if afterschool programs need to improve in these areas.

The second set of questions asked what NJSACC should do to strengthen afterschool programs and to build support for them.

Key Messages

Overview

This survey yielded a clear and coherent picture of how New Jersey stakeholders perceive afterschool, how it needs to be improved and what role NJSACC can play in strengthening the field. Participants sent a strong message about afterschool—it is a valuable contributor to the development of children as productive adults. Participants recognized that afterschool organizations must first and foremost keep children safe in appropriately staffed environments while parents work. After acknowledging this, participants focused on afterschool’s role in readying children for school and life success.

At the same time, afterschool is seen as fundamentally different from the school day. Participants highlighted the ways in which afterschool programs can lead to better school outcomes without offering “more of the same” in the afterschool hours.

They told us that NJSACC can provide the building blocks that afterschool programs need to improve school outcomes, by promoting funding opportunities, disseminating quality standards, and offering training. NJSACC can also build support for afterschool as an important part of children’s academic success by reaching out to key audiences and sharing success stories.

“A quality afterschool program for low-income students would include a strong family connection, services for parents, nutritious dinners, small size (no more than 10 students/group), music, art, and technology courses. There should also be transportation.”

Priorities for afterschool programs:

Support children academically, socially and emotionally

Participants understand the importance of afterschool, both to working parents and to children.

The core function of afterschool—keeping children safe and well-cared for while parents work—emerged as a baseline priority for afterschool programs.

- 93% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to employ staff that serve as role models for young people.
- 90% said that is very important for afterschool programs to provide a safe place for students to spend time when school is not in session.

Once the need for appropriate staffing and safe environments are addressed, the focus shifts to afterschool's roles in supporting youth development and youth engagement in learning. Participants told us that afterschool programs can play an important role in developing these important foundations for success in careers and in community life.

- 81% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to create a youth-centered environment
- 77% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to promote youth development and youth engagement
- 75% said it is very important for afterschool programs to allow time for thinking, exploration and problem solving
- 73% said it is very important for afterschool programs to teach life and social skills

Afterschool's role in supporting in-school activities emerged as an important, but slightly lower priority among respondents. Leaders in the afterschool field nationally emphasize the importance of afterschool as an extended learning opportunity. While New Jerseyans value afterschool as an extended learning opportunity, it did not emerge as a top priority. This may point to a need for further discussion about the issue.

- 67% said that it is very important that afterschool organizations provide tutoring
- 64% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to expand on learning that happens during the school day
- 61% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to offer programs that school can't offer (art, music, environmental studies, cooking)
- 61% said that it is very important for afterschool programs to offer sports and fitness activities

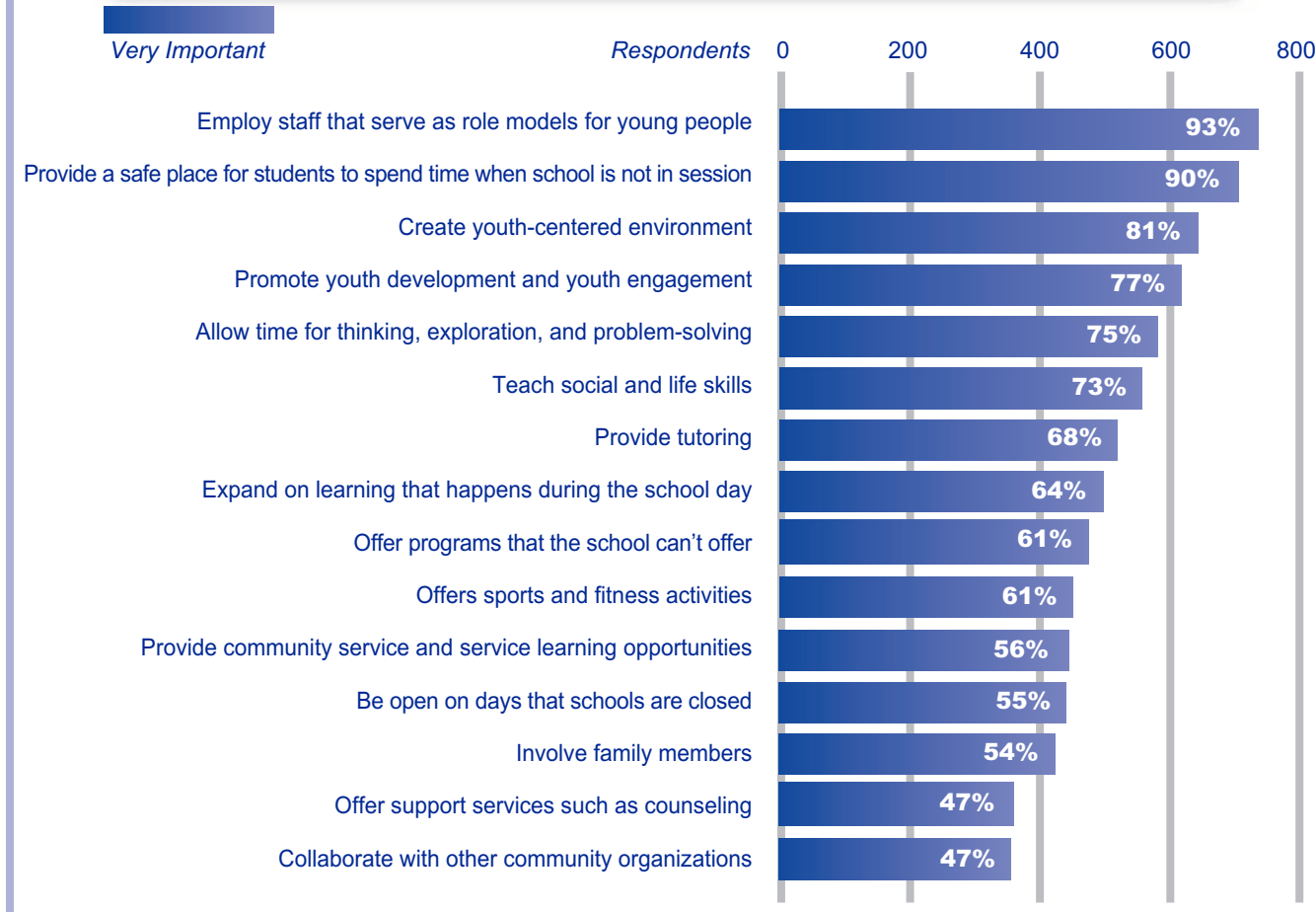
The following areas were less likely to be considered very important. These areas were ranked "very important" by approximately half of all respondents. While they are still considered valuable, they are lower priority areas:

- Provide community and service learning opportunities
- Be open on days that schools are closed
- Involve family members
- Offer support services such as counseling
- Collaborate with community organizations

"Kids need organized time in a safe environment for helping them with homework, offering sports & other activities, and providing kids with a few choices of these activities or sports."

"School/community based afterschool programs can be more motivating & interesting for youth than traditional tutoring. Youth development programs and artist in residence, poetry jams, service learning and experiential learning should be tied to school-based learning."

How important is it for afterschool programs to:

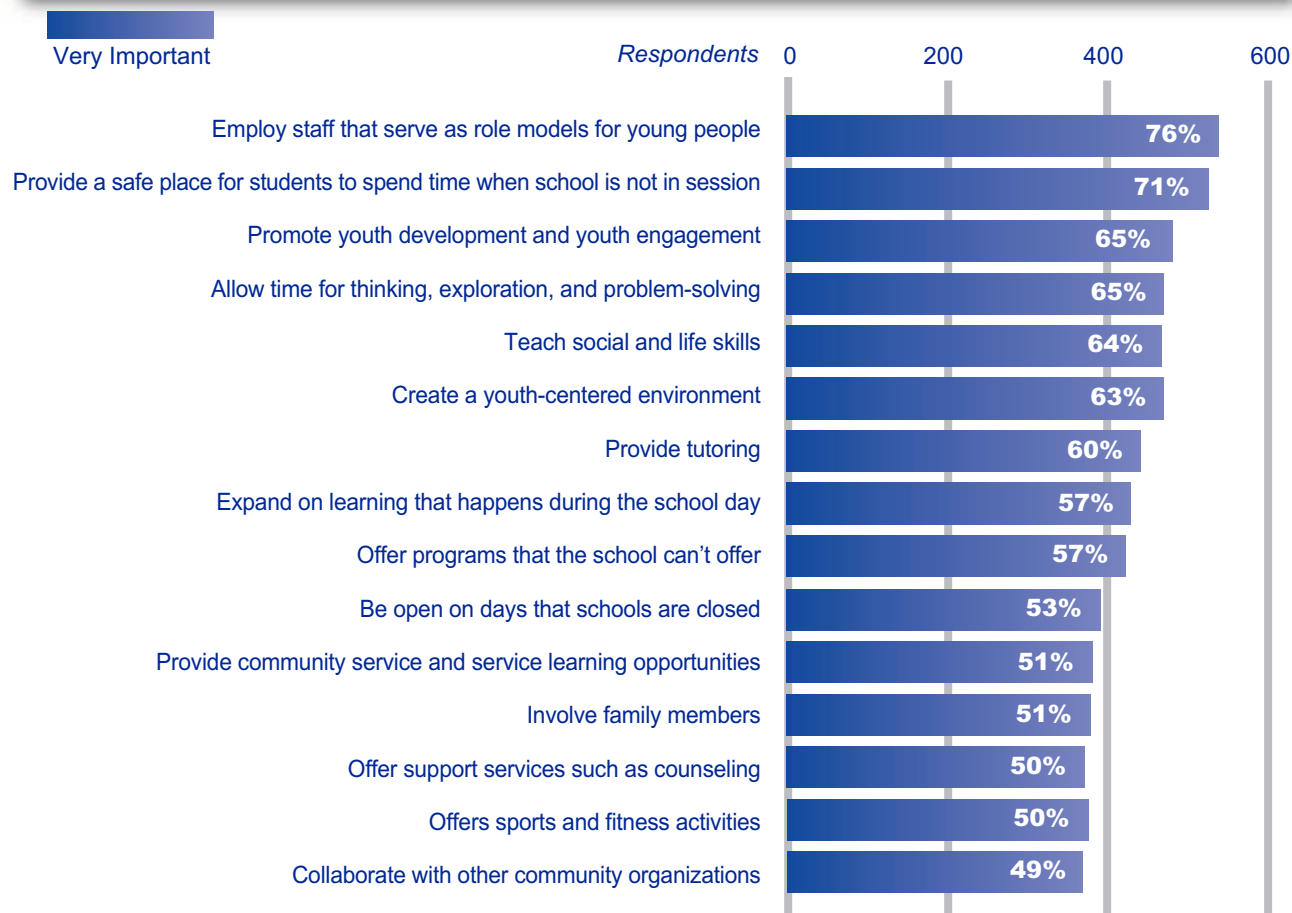


Respondents were asked, “in what areas do afterschool programs need to improve?” Their response was, let’s see **improvement everywhere**. Every category, except one (collaborate with community organizations) was considered very important by at least 50% of respondents.

“Every child’s needs should be met through a coordinated effort and programs should be evaluated against a high standard. Afterschool providers can work more closely with existing programs that offer professional development, sustainability planning, parental involvement, volunteerism and better coordination between day and afterschool programs.”

This emphasis on improvement may reflect an interest on the part of the respondents to see continuous improvement in afterschool programs. A recent survey conducted by the national Afterschool Alliance found that **95% of New Jersey parents are satisfied with the afterschool program their child attends.**

In what areas do afterschool programs need to improve?



Respondents also told us that **inclusion should be a priority for afterschool**. Several comments focused on that message.

You need to be inclusive, but clearly establish standards, guidelines and programs with built-in safeguards for students with neurological disabilities. Staff must be compassionate and understanding of the disabilities. Staff must be trained in positive supervision techniques. Parents need to be part of the solutions here.

There is a critical need for afterschool programs that can receive and handle students with special needs. I believe that programs could be strengthened by providing training for caregivers in such areas as autism and ADHD, along with encouraging hiring practices that would provide an appropriate adult-to-student ratio to enhance care options for students with disabilities.

Priorities for NJSACC:

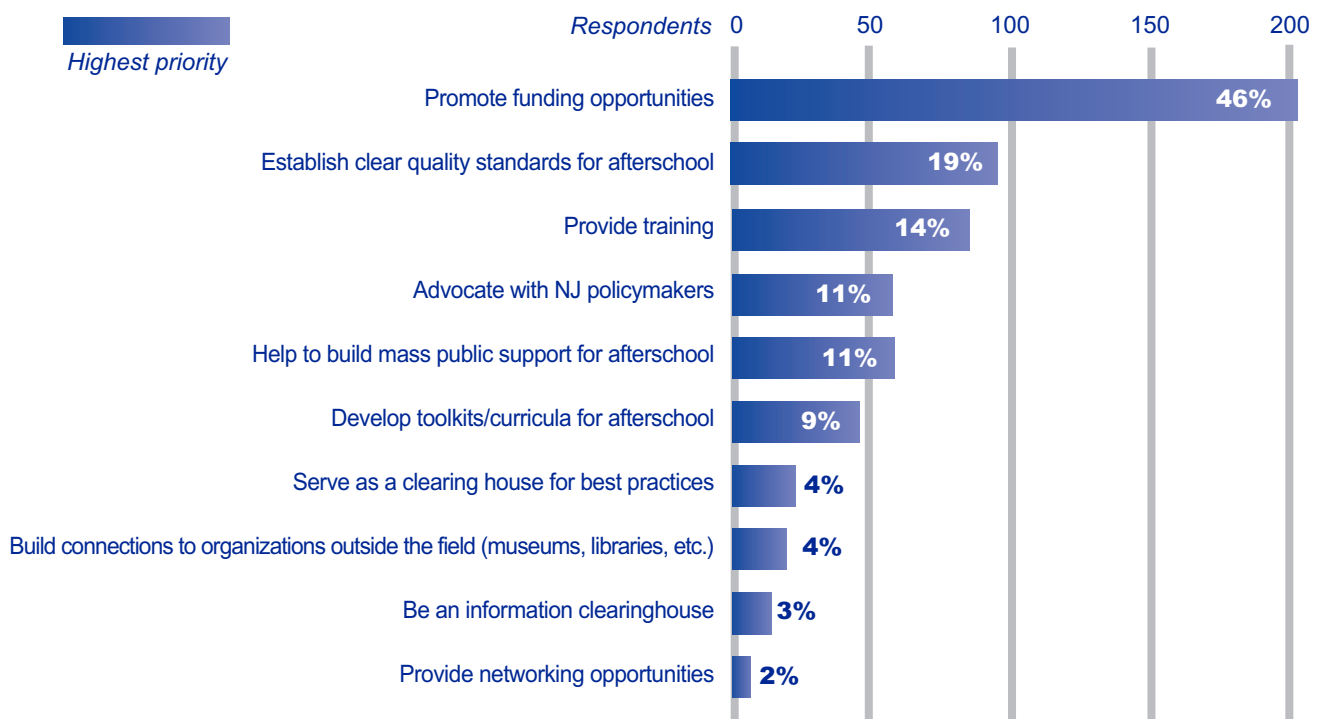
Strengthen afterschool programs and build public support

When asked what NJSACC can do to strengthen afterschool programs, almost half of the respondents told us that “promote fundraising opportunities” was the highest priority (46%). This result was unsurprising, given the challenging economic climate in New Jersey and nationally.

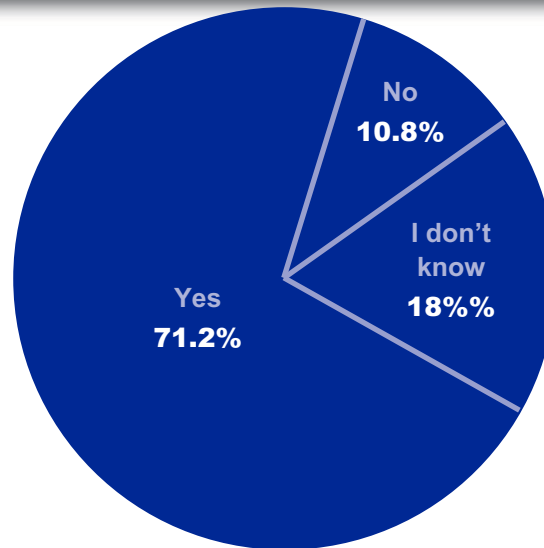
Participants also told us that ensuring the quality of afterschool is important. Nineteen percent of respondents said that **establishing clear quality standards should be a top priority** activity for NJSACC. Training, another tool for enhancing quality, also ranked near the top. In addition to fundraising, the following areas were ranked as high priority by respondents:

- Establish clear quality standards for afterschool (19%)
- Provide training (14%)
- Advocate with NJ policymakers (11%)
- Help build mass public support for afterschool (11%)

What should NJSACC do to strengthen afterschool programs?



Should all afterschool programs comply with state licensing requirements?



Several additional activities were not ranked as highly. They were much less likely to be ranked most important. These include:

- Developing toolkits/curricula for afterschool (9%)
- Being an information clearinghouse (3%)
- Serving as a clearinghouse for best practices (4%)
- Building connections to organizations outside the field (museums, libraries, etc.) (4%)

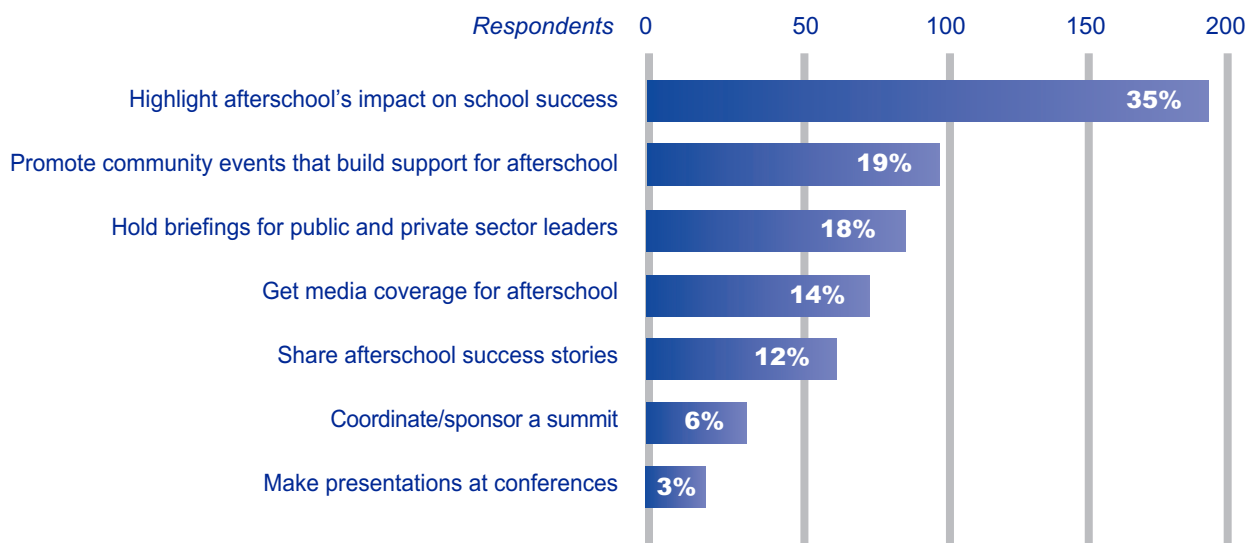
In another vote for quality standards, an overwhelming majority of respondents (71%) told us that **all afterschool programs should comply with state licensing requirements.** Only 11% disagreed.

“Our services help parents work more productively in the public and private sector knowing their children are safe and under adult supervision. Afterschool wages help pay city taxes, bank mortgages, etc. Police have easier jobs when kids are in afterschool programs, because 3 to 6 PM is the most common time for kids to get in trouble.”

When asked what NJSACC can do to build public support to expand and improve afterschool, 35% of participants identified “highlight afterschool’s impact on school success” as the top priority. Other high priorities include:

- Promote community events that build support for afterschool (19%)
- Share afterschool success stories (11%)
- Get media coverage for afterschool (14%)
- Hold briefings for public and private sector leaders (18%)

What should NJSACC do to build public will for expanding and improving afterschool?



Conclusion

New Jerseyans interested in afterschool have offered a clear direction for improving and expanding the field. They want high quality programs that provide young people with opportunities to grow educationally, socially and emotionally. They want clear standards to define quality, and more training to help programs improve themselves. They look to afterschool to enhance school day learning with a youth development focus and positive role models.

They also want broader recognition of afterschool as important to the educational, social and emotional development of young people. Policymakers, business leaders and the general public need to understand the impact of afterschool.

“Educate the public, teachers, and administration about afterschool programs. With the right people running them, afterschool programs make a huge difference in children’s lives; educational, emotional and socially. If we really want to make a difference in test scores and graduation rates, certain groups of children need more support outside of the regular school day.”

Special Thanks

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