



NJSACC:  
New Jersey's Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Professional Network

## **New Jersey Must Protect Afterschool—Before It's Too Late**

*By Ebony D. Grace, Chief Executive Officer, NJSACC: New Jersey's Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Professional Network*

What if the hours after school were a crucial part of youth learning, skill building, confidence, and connections?

That's the reality for thousands of children across New Jersey who benefit from afterschool and out-of-school time (OST) programs. These programs help students build academic confidence, social-emotional skills, supportive relationships and curb chronic absenteeism.<sup>1</sup> Afterschool and OST programs keep kids safe, allow parents to work, and connect families to vital community resources. But without action, we are at serious risk of losing them.

The proposed federal budget eliminates funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC)—the largest federal investment in afterschool and summer learning.<sup>2</sup> This program currently serves nearly 1.4 million youth nationwide, including 32,475 children in New Jersey. Our state receives \$33 million annually from 21st CCLC, funding 67 grantees at 152 sites in 39 communities across 18 counties, from Atlantic City to Paterson. See the full list here: [NJ 21st CCLC grantees](#).

This funding not only supports academic enrichment, it supports snacks and meals for hungry children. It provides a space to talk about mental health. It gives working parents peace of mind and children a place to belong. The proposed budget would either eliminate the program outright or fold it into a \$2 billion block grant, combining 18 education programs and slashing \$12 billion in overall education funding.<sup>3</sup> This is not consolidation—it's erasure.

Here in New Jersey, the impact would be immediate and devastating. That's why we cannot rely solely on the federal government. More than 28 other states have already created state-level investments in afterschool and summer learning<sup>4</sup>. ***New Jersey can—and should—be next.*** That's why NJSACC and over 11 other leading organizations, including the New Jersey Association for

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<sup>1</sup> [“Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: How Afterschool Programs are Building School-Day Engagement and Improving Attendance.”](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://afterschoolworksforamerica.org/proposed-budget-cuts/>

<sup>3</sup> [FY 2026 Budget Proposal details released: Administration eliminates dedicated funding for afterschool and summer](#)

<sup>4</sup> Afterschool Alliance- State Funding Examples  
<https://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/State%20Examples%20Funding%20Afterschool.pdf>

the Education of Young Children, the New Jersey Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs and the New Jersey YMCA State Alliance, are urging lawmakers to pass [A2414/S3457](#).

This legislation would create a statewide Out-of-School Time Advisory Commission to examine access, equity, funding, and quality in afterschool and summer programs. It is the first step in developing a sustainable, coordinated funding stream for OST programs that serve New Jersey's working families and vulnerable youth.

The urgency is clear. For every child in an afterschool program in our state, three more are waiting for access. That's over 650,000 children who could benefit from mentorship, learning support, and safe environments—but are locked out due to cost, transportation, or lack of local options.

While California, Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania have invested in OST to meet this demand<sup>5</sup> New Jersey has not yet restored a dedicated state funding stream, since it was zeroed out under the Chris Christie administration.<sup>6</sup> Families here face child care costs that can exceed \$17,000 per year—often surpassing college tuition.

A 2024 Gallup report found that low-income families access afterschool programs at just 38% the rate of higher-income peers, deepening opportunity gaps that begin early and last a lifetime. OST programs close those gaps.<sup>7</sup> They improve attendance, increase engagement in school, and reduce youth crime during peak hours. They also build skills like teamwork, communication, and leadership—qualities essential for New Jersey's future workforce.

Research from the National Academies of Sciences underscores what we've known for years: learning doesn't stop at 3 p.m. In fact, 80% of a child's waking hours occur outside of school. OST programs provide essential space for real-world learning, creativity, and connection.<sup>8</sup>

But while the benefits are clear, the system remains fragile. A fractured, underfunded landscape of short-term grants and overstretched staff cannot meet the growing demand. That's why we need a coordinated statewide plan to invest in the OST field—one that includes workforce development, sustainable funding, and equitable access for all children, regardless of their ZIP code. This is about opportunity, economic stability, and supporting the entire child care ecosystem. And still, no stable state-level investment exists for school-age care.

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<sup>5</sup> Youth Today Article: [Out of School Time Programs play an Outsized Role in Child Development](#)

<sup>6</sup> [NJ Gov. Chris Christie Wipes Out After-School Funding, Forcing “NJ After 3” Out of Business](#)

<sup>7</sup> [In U.S., 45% of Children Lack Summer Learning Opportunities](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Out-of-School Programs Provide Essential Benefits for Children and Youth; More Support Is Needed to Help These Programs Thrive](#)

At [NJSACC](#), we've spent decades supporting providers, training staff, and advocating for youth. Afterschool and summer programs in the Garden State are doing exceptional work and need additional resources to continue these essential services. "NJSACC is committed to continue our work in perpetuity, however, we are only providing a portion of the systemic support necessary for high quality afterschool and OST programs." Nearly all provide academic support and enrichment (96–98%), with 91% offering meals and social connection. They serve as vital hubs of safety and growth. Yet nearly half now have waitlists—up from just 23% last year—and 1 in 3 fear permanent closure due to funding instability.

Staffing remains a chronic issue. Providers report losing staff to better wages elsewhere, while struggling to offer full-time hours or sufficient benefits. Nearly half (47%) say it's difficult to hire or retain staff. We've watched the OST workforce—often women of color from the very communities they serve—show up day after day, underpaid and under-recognized. And while many programs are working to improve conditions—raising wages, offering professional development—their resources are finite.

These programs are foundational to child development, education, workforce preparation, and community well-being. Their success is our success. They deserve more than gratitude. They deserve real investment.

Passing A2414/S3457 is a critical step toward building the afterschool and summer learning system New Jersey families and the workforce deserves. It will help ensure that every child, from Phillipsburg to Parsippany, has a safe, enriching place to go when the school day ends.

Governor Murphy has rightly invested in early childhood education. Let's complete that vision and invest in the continuum of care, from ***Cradle to Career*** like the Wallace Foundation suggests<sup>9</sup>. Let's pass A2414/S3457 and Senator McKnight's budget resolution #557. This will ensure that New Jersey's children—and the programs that support them—have the funding, structure, and support they need to thrive.

The future of afterschool is hanging in the balance. Let's act now—before the lights go out on a lifeline too many families can't afford to lose.

Use this toolkit to learn how you can share your story, educate decision-makers, and protect these vital programs: <https://buff.ly/eN6pMIV>

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<sup>9</sup> [Investing in Youth From "Cradle to Career"](#)