



Scan of Out-of-School Time Programming in Minnesota

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I. Executive summary

Out-of-school time (OST) programs support youth before and after school and during the summer months. OST programs are delivered by youth development organizations including community-based organizations, school-based programs (including sports and academic support), and faith-based programs. From tutoring to summer camps, sports activities, and experiential excursions, OST programs provide opportunities for youth to try new experiences, grow their skills, enhance their social and emotional development, and help prepare for the future.

In 2025, the Minnesota State Legislature directed the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to conduct a scan of and report on OST and youth programming. DCYF partnered with the Minnesota Children's Cabinet to hire Minnesota Management and Budget's Management Analysis and Development (MAD) to lead the study. With the guidance of both internal and external advisory teams, MAD examined the availability, accessibility, funding, and trends of OST programs in Minnesota.

To capture a wide range of perspectives from around the state, the project team used multiple research methods, including surveys, listening sessions, interviews, and a review of existing research on youth programs. Youth, parents, and youth program providers served as key informants in the research.

Findings

Initial findings from the research highlight the essential role OST programs play in supporting young people across Minnesota, while also revealing significant gaps and challenges in the current system.

Research findings are organized to answer questions in four main areas.

Availability: What programs are available around the state? Results show that OST programs are an important part of youths' lives. Youth are engaged in sports and physical activities, leadership activities, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs, creative and performing arts programs, tutoring or academic support, and career and workforce programs.

There are differences in program availability across the state with many locations lacking affordable OST options entirely. Parents, youth, and OST providers shared concerns about the availability of consistently high-quality OST programs that are aligned with youth interests and needs.

Funding: How are OST programs funded? Youth program providers, parents, and youth identified stable, consistent funding as the most common challenge in the OST space. OST programs depend on braided and inconsistent funding streams, with limited flexibility and restrictions. Many programs report being stretched thin, with less than 40% of youth program providers reporting stable funding.

Accessibility: What prevents youth and families from participating in programs? Parents shared that cost and transportation were the top barriers to access and participation in OST programs. Youth program staff struggled to address these challenges in their programs, which has major impacts for youth.

Trends and considerations: What are current trends in OST programs? Several trends emerged from the research:

- OST programs provide valuable opportunities for connection, collaboration, and community-building.
- OST programs are navigating evolving challenges and instability. Youth program staff noted that broader community disruptions can strongly influence participation patterns, determining when and how youth and families engage.
- Youth mental health and disability support needs are rising, yet the special education and mental health services available during the school day do not extend into afterschool hours. As a result, youth program staff face added strain, which may lead to reduction in program quality and families are left with limited or no care options.
- Youth program providers want to collaborate, share resources, and create accessible program networks. There is a desire for infrastructure and system coordination to support this collaboration.
- Youth program providers emphasize the need to make their work a viable career path. Many programs struggle to offer full-time work and benefits to staff, leading to staff instability and negative impacts on program quality.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and discussion with the external and internal advisory team, MAD suggests the following seven recommendations support policy creation for OST programs. These recommendations support the need for a coordinated, statewide approach that supports equitable access, strengthens local partnerships, and provides stable and sustained investment.

- Establish a statewide priority for OST programs.

- Increase ongoing funding for OST programs.
- Strengthen coordination of OST programs through investments in intermediaries.
- Improve accessibility and affordability by addressing transportation barriers.
- Strengthen support for youth with disabilities and mental health needs.
- Build and sustain Minnesota's OST program workforce.
- Center youth and family voices in system design and funding decisions.

II. Study background

The Minnesota Legislature directed the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to conduct a scan of and report on out-of-school time (OST) and youth programming. DCYF partnered with the Minnesota Children’s Cabinet to hire Minnesota Management and Budget’s Management Analysis and Development (MAD) to lead these efforts. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for the legislation on page 47.

The legislation mandated engagement with relevant partners such as community organizations and programming providers; parents, youth, and families; and other individuals with expertise in out-of-school and youth programming. To achieve this, MAD convened an external and internal advisory team. Advisory team members provided guidance on the overall project and methods, shared expertise in areas like OST funding, trends, and relevant background research, and provided connections and contacts for external engagement through surveys, listening sessions, and interviews.

The internal advisory team was made up of staff from state agencies involved in OST programming, including DCYF, the Department of Education (MDE), the Department of Health (MDH), the Department of Labor and Industry (DLI), and Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB).

The external advisory team consisted of representatives from the youth work field, including several non-profit community organizations with statewide programs. A full list of internal and external advisory team members is available in [Appendix B](#) on page 48.

The following report presents the findings and recommendations from a multi-method study that used surveys, interviews, listening sessions, and a review of existing research.

Definitions

“Out of school time” is defined differently in the literature and in practice. MAD reviewed many definitions in research as well as those used across state agencies, to develop a blended OST definition for this report. MAD reviewed and took relevant pieces from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ignite Afterschool, and the Believe It, Build It Framework.

As a result, this project work and report used the following definition for OST programs:

OST programs support youth before and after school and during the summer months. Youth development organizations include community-based nonprofit organizations, school-based programs (including sports and academic support), and faith-based programs.

For this study, “youth” is defined as young people between the ages of 5 and 21.

III. Insights from existing research

MAD conducted a targeted review of the relevant literature to establish an understanding of the current state of the youth development field. This review provided valuable insight into participation and demand trends while underscoring the positive impact of OST program investments on youth and communities. The findings from the review informed the overall analytical approach and ensured alignment with the broader research context.

The value of OST programs

National and state research provide compelling arguments for the value of OST programs. Across studies, several themes emerge repeatedly:

- Demand for OST programs exceeds supply.
- Participation is linked to positive outcomes for youth and families.
- Access and participation vary across sociodemographic groups.
- OST programs consistently report unmet funding needs.

High demand for OST programs

Youth have approximately 2,000 hours of discretionary time per year (Afterschool Alliance 2025a). OST programs provide structured opportunities for learning, enrichment, relationship-building, and supervision during those hours. However, access to programs remains limited relative to demand. Nationally, the parents of nearly 30 million children reported that they would enroll their children in an OST program if one was available. In Minnesota, approximately two in three children would participate in an OST program if they had access to a program. These findings point to a substantial demand for affordable and accessible OST opportunities (Afterschool Alliance 2025c).

Participation is linked to positive outcomes for youth and families

The benefits that OST programs provide for youth and families are well-established. These benefits include increased youth safety, enhanced sense of belonging, improved academic performance, and employment support for working parents or caregivers. OST programs are also generally effective at producing their intended outcomes (McCombs, Whitaker, and Yoo 2017).

- **Academic and educational outcomes.** OST programs are a promising strategy to supplement in-class instruction and improve students' mastery of core subjects. For example, research on South Carolina's 21st Century Community Learning Centers found that six in ten participating students improved their reading grades by 5 points or more, while over half improved their math grades by a similar margin (Hicks 2025). Nationally, parents reported that OST programs foster more positive attitudes toward school (Afterschool Alliance 2025a). By offering hands-on academic support and enrichment, these programs also play a crucial role in preventing "summer slide," the learning loss that can occur when school is not in session (Lochner, Allen, and Blyth 2009).
- **Social-emotional learning and development.** OST programs help build essential life skills, and participation is correlated with notable improvements in student self-perception, positive social behaviors, and school bonding (Hicks 2025). Parents overwhelmingly agree that OST programs provide opportunities for youth to develop skills like teamwork, critical thinking, communication, leadership, and responsible decision-making, which are crucial for navigating life's challenges (Afterschool Alliance 2025a). When designed well, OST programs can foster social-emotional development, responsibility, and civic interest (Moroney and Nalmada 2025).
- **Health, safety, and prevention of risky behaviors.** High-quality OST programs provide safe, supervised environments while parents or caregivers work. Importantly, OST programs provide supervision between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. when juvenile crime rates spike (Hicks 2025). Nationally, 78% of parents agree that OST programs keep kids safe and out of trouble (Afterschool Alliance 2025a). Further, participation in organized OST programs is associated with reduced risky behaviors, including lower rates of illicit drug use, binge drinking, and alcohol consumption (Hicks 2025).
- **College and career readiness.** OST programs also serve as avenues for students to develop the skills necessary for success in higher education and the workforce. Through career exploration, apprenticeships, collaborative projects, and hands-on experience with technology, youth can develop applied knowledge and essential workplace skills such as time management (Hicks 2025). Similarly, some OST programs provide direct support for youth intending to pursue college through application assistance and test preparation.
- **Support for working families.** The benefits of OST extend directly to working parents and guardians. Across all income levels and community types, 85% of parents report that OST programs provide them with general peace of mind, and 84% state that the programs help them keep their jobs by ensuring their

children are in a safe and productive environment between school and the end of their workday (Afterschool Alliance 2025a).

Access and participation vary across sociodemographic groups

As mentioned, overall demand for OST programs greatly exceeds supply. However, participation rates look vastly different across various sociodemographic groups (Afterschool Alliance 2025a). A study examining participation rates in Minnesota found that youth in low-income families participate in fewer OST activities throughout the school year than youth from families with greater incomes (Lochner, Allen, and Blyth 2009). Further, immigrant youth and youth of color participate in OST activities at a lower rate than their white counterparts.

OST programs consistently report unmet funding needs

Two comprehensive studies published in 2009 and 2011 by the Minnesota Department of Education found that youth program providers have “very few consistent, dedicated funding sources,” forcing them to rely on a patchwork of various funding sources, such as federal, state, and local governments, and private philanthropic organizations. The lack of reliable funding results in program availability challenges and difficulties in organizational planning, staff retention, professional development, and program growth. Though a similar study has not been replicated since 2011, findings discussed later in this report suggest little change in the overall funding picture for youth program providers in Minnesota.

The same 2009 report also distinguished between program funding, which goes directly to the provision of program activities and services, and infrastructure funding, which refers to non-program-specific budget items like general operating support, capital needs, insurance, and security. While 40% to 70% of OST programmatic expenses are infrastructure-related, federal and philanthropic sources often award very little funding to cover infrastructure, which can further strain a program’s financial health (Minnesota Department of Education 2009).

Current state of Minnesota OST programs

The following section provides an overview of the current state of OST programs in Minnesota, including participation rates, funding sources, and state agency supported OST programs and grants.

Participation rates

Nationally, participation in OST programs has been declining since 2014. However, the percentage of Minnesota youth participating in OST programs has increased slightly over the past 20 years. According to Afterschool

Alliance’s latest America After 3PM study, Minnesota has 11% more youth participating in OST opportunities than the national average.

According to the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), which is conducted by MDE every three years, almost two-thirds of students reported participating in after school activities, with sports and physical activity reported as the most common (Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team 2025). However, research on participation rates in OST programs *outside* of sports and physical activities shows that most youth are not participating in OST programs consistently (Afterschool Alliance 2025c).

Multiple studies examining OST program participation rates note variations across community types and demographics in Minnesota. Particularly, immigrant, lower-income, and families of color have lower OST program participation rates. An OST Participation Gap Study examining participation rates across free or low-cost OST programs in Minneapolis and St. Paul found that only 30% of lower-income youth in those cities participated in a program (Youthprise 2015).

Funding and programs

Minnesota’s OST landscape is marked by both strong public support and persistent funding instability. Support for public funding for OST programming cuts across political divides, with nearly 90% of Minnesotans in favor of public funding for OST programs (Afterschool Alliance 2025c). Research also shows that OST programs generate a strong return on investment, with one Minnesota study noting an ROI of almost \$3 to \$5 for every dollar invested (Anton and Temple 2007) and a more recent California study showing returns of up to \$12 for every \$1 invested (After School Alliance 2026).

Majority of OST funding comes from state sources, followed by foundations and corporations, and the federal government (Minnesota Department of Education 2009). Providers rely on a variety of grants, but few grants are dependable sources of income for OST programs.

There are many existing efforts to support OST programming at the state level. To better understand the scope of grants and programs available through the State of Minnesota, the research team relied on interviews with internal advisory team members representing a range of state agencies. Because this approach focused on internally identified programs, the scan does not capture all funding sources supporting OST in the state. Table 1 below lists grants and programs administered by various state agencies. Additional information about each grant and program listed in Table 1 is available in [Appendix G](#) on page 115. A more comprehensive guide to grants and programs across state government and nonprofits can be found in this [MDE report](#) about coordinated funding.

The State of Minnesota has many grants and programs that support OST programs, including workforce development, prevention and adolescent health, transportation, college readiness, and culturally relevant programming. These grants fund programs that serve thousands of youth and families annually across the state. For example, the 21st Century Community Learning Center and After School Community Learning grants, the largest OST grants administered by the state of Minnesota, served over 36,000 youth in the 2024-2025 grant year.

Table 1. State of Minnesota grants connected to OST

Topic area	Programs by agency
OST grants	• DCYF – Child Care Assistance Program • MDE – 21st Century Community Learning Center Grants • MDE – After School Community Learning Grant • MDE – Targeted Services Program • Office of Higher Education (OHE) – Summer Academic Enrichment Program
Workforce development	• Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) – Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Grant • DEED – Minnesota Youth Program • DEED – Youth at Work Competitive Grant Program • DEED – Youthbuild • DLI – Youth Skills Training Program
Prevention and health	• DCYF – Youth Intervention Program • MDH – Minnesota Partnership for Adolescent and Young Adult Health Strategic Plan • MDH – Supporting children of incarcerated parents • MDE – Child and Adult Care Food Program
Transportation	• Department of Transportation (MnDOT) – Safe Routes to School • MnDOT – Towards Zero Deaths

Topic area	Programs by agency
College readiness	- OHE – Get Ready GEAR UP Program - OHE – Minnesota College Planning Series
Culturally relevant programming	MDE – American Indian Education Aid

Demand continues to significantly exceed available funding. The 21st Century Community Learning Center grant can serve only about a third of the applicants seeking funding. Further, the After School Community Learning grant is set to expire. This short-term funding stream allows the state to reach communities and organizations that would not otherwise qualify for the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant and provides about 22.5 million dollars in funding to grantees such as schools, cities, and nonprofits. Funding is scheduled to end on June 30, 2027. This loss will create a significant gap in funding for OST programs across the state.

How other states support OST

States across the country have varying funding, policies, and participation rates for their OST programs. Generally, Minnesota outperforms the national average for OST program participation rates (Afterschool Alliance 2025c). Many states have implemented best practices that Minnesota could adopt or prioritize further to continue strengthening its network of OST programs. Options include establishing dedicated funding sources, supporting increased coordination between OST programs, and increasing opportunities for social-emotional learning in OST programs. Additional detail about these policy considerations is noted in the Findings section below.

To ensure state comparison research yielded the most relevant and actionable information for Minnesota policymakers, the research team consulted advisory team members and OST subject matter experts to identify states for inclusion in the desk review. As a result, the research below is focused on states that have established state-sponsored funding streams, more robust collaboration across their OST systems, and a state programmatic focus in areas of opportunity, like social-emotional learning.

Funding approaches

California has fixed appropriations in its state budget to support the statewide After School Education and Safety (ASES) program (California Department of Education 2016), which offers grant awards for elementary and middle

schools. Eligible ASES grantees with transportation needs can also apply for an ASES Frontier Transportation grant, which can be used for transportation-related expenses like driver salaries, gas vouchers, tolls, staff mileage reimbursements, and contracted transportation services with local youth program providers. Most recently in 2025, California appropriated more than \$4 billion to further support its Expanded Learning Opportunities program, which supports summer enrichment and OST programs across the state (Freedberg 2025).

One county in Washington stands out nationally for its innovative use of local voter-approved ballot initiatives to finance youth programs. Through measures such as King County’s Best Starts for Kids levy and Seattle’s Families, Education, Preschool and Promise levy, the county has established multi-year, renewable funding streams that prioritize early intervention and youth development. These initiatives, regularly passed and renewed by voters, have generated hundreds of millions of dollars in stable, community-directed investments that support “after-school and summer programming for young people ages five to 13 through academic enrichment, cultural and social development activities, physical activity and health promotion, arts education, and leadership development” (Best Start for Kids 2024, 13).

Similarly, New Mexico has made significant strides in increasing its state budget allocations to support OST programs, awarding \$20 million in OST program funding in FY 2024. New Mexico has noted the positive impact of both OST programming and high-impact tutoring on youth in the state. To further support both OST programming and high impact tutoring in the state, New Mexico has separated the state budget funding to reduce competition between tutoring and OST programs (Hicks 2025).

Collaboration amongst the OST program systems

Many states and territories, including New Mexico, Illinois, South Dakota, Alaska, Georgia, and Washington, D.C., have undertaken initiatives to map available OST programs to increase awareness and participation. The maps have helped connect families with programs. In Washington, D.C., parents reported a 10-point increase from a previous survey in program awareness after OST program maps were made available. The mapping efforts have allowed policymakers and youth advocates to align resources to serve communities where need is the greatest (Afterschool Alliance 2025b).

Programmatic focus: Social emotional learning in OST programming

Social and emotional learning refers to “the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that help direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school, work, and life” (Wallace Foundation 2021). As discussed

in the research findings section of this report, many providers and youth program providers underscored the importance of OST programs in supporting the social, emotional, and mental well-being of participating youth. OST programs featuring integrated social-emotional learning approaches have been most effective in supporting healthy youth development, including youths' feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and school performance (Wallace Foundation 2021).

Wisconsin, a state with lower OST participation rates than Minnesota, has taken innovative steps over the last several years to infuse social and emotional learning into its OST programming statewide. Schools and OST programs across Wisconsin have implemented social-emotional learning approaches within existing programs and prioritize continued implementation across the state. A case study conducted in Milwaukee Public Schools found positive outcomes among high-risk students, including improved attendance, fewer fights and suspensions, and more positive perceptions of school. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2018).

IV. Research questions

The aim of this report is to provide an updated examination of Minnesota’s OST landscape and a deeper understanding of programming across demographic groups and geographic regions. Drawing on existing OST literature and consultation with subject matter experts, this study was guided by four main research topics: availability, funding, access, and trends (Table 2).

Table 2. List of research questions

Focus	Questions
Availability	• What types of OST programs currently exist in Minnesota? • What regional differences (across counties, Tribal nations, and school districts) exist in program type, reach, and accessibility?
Funding	• What are the federal, state, local, and/or private funding sources for OST programs? • What are costs for families to attend OST programs?
Access	• How does OST program availability and accessibility differ across the state? • What prevents youth/families from participating in OST programs?
Trends	• What are the trends in OST programs? Is OST getting better, worse, or staying the same? • What are the recommendations on policy and funding needs?

V. Methods

To capture a wide range of perspectives related to the project’s research questions, MAD used a combination of surveys, listening sessions, and interviews to gather input from a variety of individuals. Primary audiences included parents and caregivers, OST leaders, youth, youth program providers, and subject matter experts. Brief descriptions of each method and audience are provided below.

Surveys

MAD developed and administered two online surveys, distributed to parents and youth program providers across Minnesota. For this report, the term “parent” will be used. Both parents and caregivers were invited to participate in the survey.

Parent survey

The online parent survey was distributed through existing contact lists for schools, youth program providers, and parent groups provided by the study’s external advisory committee. To broaden the reach, MAD also used a snowball sampling approach, encouraging recipients to share the survey with other parents and caregivers within their networks. In addition to English, the survey was offered in Hmong, Somali, and Spanish.

The survey included five main categories of questions:

- Family demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, community type, county of residence, grade level, youth disability status, language, family structure, and parental education level)
- Availability of programs
- Challenges families face in getting their children engaged in OST programs
- Areas of investment to improve OST programming
- Families’ perceptions of the importance of OST programs

The survey was open from February 9 through April 3, 2026. At closing, a total of 1,718 parents completed the survey.

Provider survey

The online provider survey was sent to 209 youth program providers across Minnesota using a list provided by the study’s external advisory committee. As with the parent survey, MAD supplemented this distribution with a

snowball sampling approach to expand outreach by encouraging recipients to share the survey with additional providers within their networks.

The survey included five main question categories:

- Organizational information (e.g., organization type, age groups served, location, communities and Tribes served)
- Financial status and funding sources
- Current OST program offerings, including reasons families enroll their children in programs
- Challenges in providing quality OST programs
- Youth program providers' perceptions of the importance of OST programs

The survey was open from February 2 through March 31, 2026. At closing, a total of 116 youth program providers completed the survey.

Interviews

Interviews complemented the surveys and listening sessions by providing additional perspectives on OST programming and addressing gaps in areas that were less represented in the other research methods. Interviews took place from September 2025 to May 2026.

As part of the study, MAD interviewed 19 internal advisory team members and eight external advisory team members to deepen MAD's understanding of the needs and complexities of OST programs in Minnesota. In addition, MAD conducted 21 interviews with 34 subject matter experts from across Minnesota. Participants included a broad range of perspectives, including:

- Advocates and community experts
- OST program administrators and youth program providers
- Youth and families
- School and school district partners
- Tribal, county, and state agency partners
- Other subject matter experts recommended by interviewees or advisory team members

Interviewees were identified through recommendations from the project's internal and external advisory teams, as well as other subject matter experts. Advisory team members also supported outreach efforts throughout the entirety of the project to identify additional individuals with relevant expertise and experience.

The primary purpose of these interviews was to gather stories and contextual insights about OST programs and their impacts on youth, families, and communities. All interviews were conducted online. Facilitators used a standard interview guide and asked follow-up questions to explore emerging topics or seek clarification. Consistent with the surveys and listening sessions, the interviews focused on the availability of OST programs, access to programs, and barriers to participation across Minnesota. A note-taker captured detailed session notes, which were later analyzed to identify themes and patterns across participant groups.

Listening sessions

MAD conducted 13 listening sessions between March and April 2026, engaging a total of 90 participants statewide. The purpose of the listening sessions was to dig deeper into issues raised in surveys and interviews, highlight differences in rural, suburban, and urban communities, and elevate youth perspectives on OST programming.

Like the surveys, the guiding questions focused on program availability and accessibility, while also exploring program quality and desired improvements from the perspective of each group.

Sessions were held with youth, parents and caregivers, youth program providers, and faith leaders. To ensure diversity among perspectives and promote trust and accessibility, participants were recruited and invited through partnerships with trusted community organizations. Internal and external advisory members also supported outreach efforts throughout the entirety of the project. Participants represented rural, urban, and suburban areas as well as immigrant communities throughout Minnesota. For this study, a rural community was defined as a town outside a major city with fewer nearby services or amenities.

Sessions were conducted both in person and online. Families whose primary language was not English were offered interpretation services and the option to participate in their preferred language.

Each listening session followed a semi-structured guide. Facilitators encouraged open discussion and used follow-up questions to explore emerging topics. Youth sessions used a more participatory approach, inviting participants to write or draw about their OST experiences. This approach allowed the team to collect both comparable data across groups and more nuanced, community-specific insights. A note-taker captured detailed session notes, which were later analyzed to identify themes and patterns across participant groups. A \$50 incentive was offered to participants in listening sessions.

VI. Findings

Key findings across the various methods are summarized below. Full detailed findings from each of the methods (surveys, interviews, and listening sessions) can be found in Appendices C through G.

Availability of OST programs: What programs are available around the state?

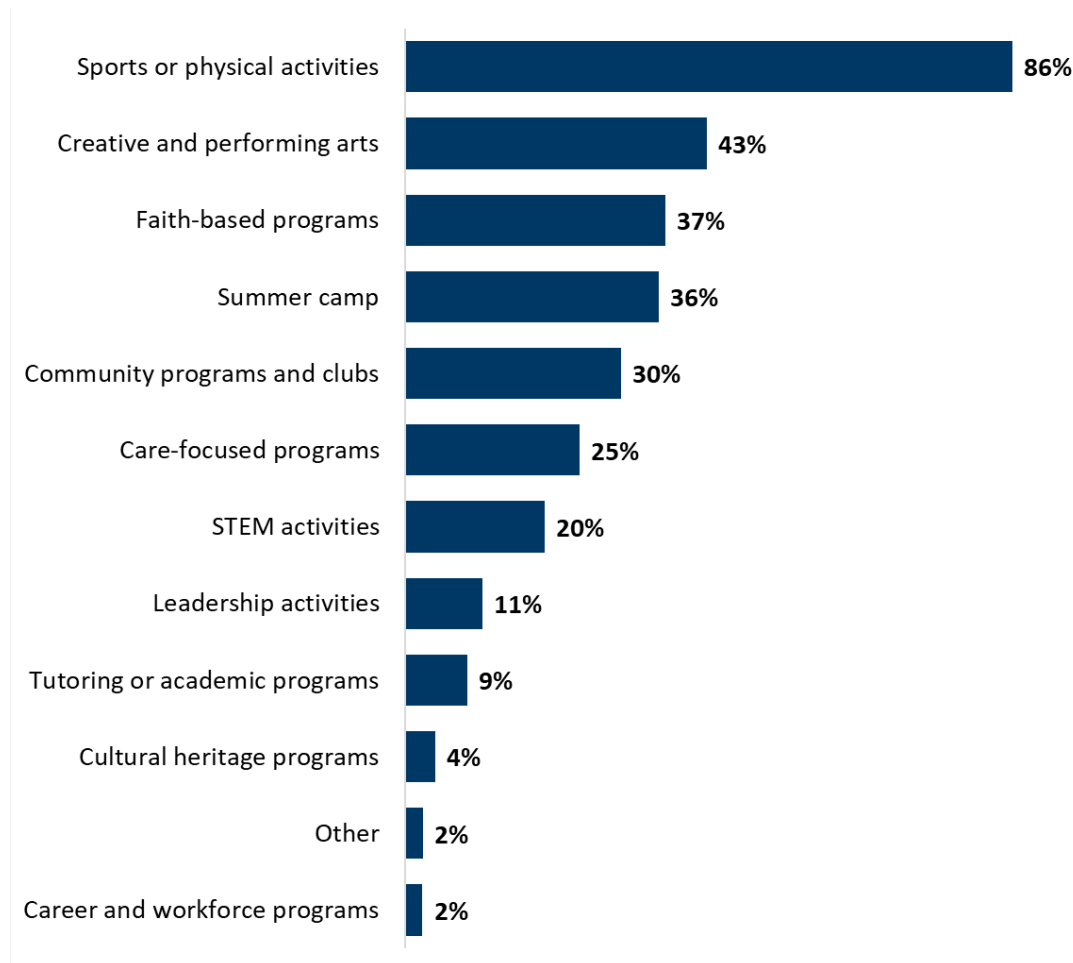
Minnesota's OST landscape includes a wide range of offerings, including sports, arts programming, recreation, and youth leadership opportunities. However, the availability of these programs varies across regions of the state. This section examines how availability differs geographically and across racial groups, highlighting where youth have abundant OST options and where gaps remain. It also explores satisfaction with existing programs and what young people and families want, helping to illuminate statewide needs and opportunities for expanded access.

Awareness and participation

The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) provides one of the best snapshots of what youth are doing around the state. Administered every three years, this survey is typically taken by more than 100,000 students statewide in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11. Multiyear data consistently show that approximately 70% of students report that their school or community offers a variety of programs and activities outside the regular school day (Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team 2025). Overall, approximately 64% of students reported participating in OST activities at least one day each week. Sports and physical activities are by far the most common activities, with roughly nine in ten students engaged in OST reporting participation in such programs.

Findings from MAD's surveys, interviews, and listening sessions aligned with these patterns. Over 90% of parent survey respondents reported awareness of OST opportunities, and 84% indicated that their children participate in OST programming. Consistent with the MSS findings, parents most frequently reported their children participate in sports and physical activities (86%) (Figure 1). Many parents noted that sports were the most selected because they are consistently offered by all school districts. Beyond sports, other commonly reported programs included creative and performing arts (43%), faith-based programs (37%), summer camps (36%), and community programs and clubs (30%).

Figure 1. Types of OST programs in which parents report their children participate (n = 1,324)



The overall variety of OST opportunities remained limited in many areas. Parents in the Twin Cities and surrounding suburbs, for instance, were roughly twice as likely as those in rural areas to report access to summer camps and care-focused programs. In contrast, rural and small-town communities tended to rely more heavily on faith-based programs, with participation more than twice that reported in the Twin Cities urban core. Families in rural areas also appeared more likely than suburban or urban families to rely on sports as their primary OST option.

Differences were also evident across racial and ethnic groups. Although awareness of sports programming was consistently high across all groups, White parents were between 20 and 40 percentage points more likely than parents of color to report awareness of a broader range of program types. The largest awareness gaps between these two groups were concentrated in enrichment and resource-intensive offerings such as arts programs, community clubs, care-focused programs, faith-based activities, and camps. Smaller gaps were observed in career and workforce programs and cultural heritage programming.

While no notable differences in OST participation were observed across geographic community types, disparities were evident by race and ethnicity. Participation rates were highest among families with White parents and lowest among Black parents. When non-White racial and ethnic groups were combined into a single category, parents of color were 27% less likely than White parents to report that their children participate in OST programs.

Satisfaction with the availability of OST programs

Overall, more than three-quarters of parents reported being satisfied with the availability of OST program options in their communities. However, these statewide findings mask deeper geographic and demographic inequities. Parents in the Twin Cities urban core (i.e., Minneapolis and St. Paul) reported the highest satisfaction, followed by those in the Twin Cities suburban communities and regional cities outside the Twin Cities. Satisfaction was lowest among parents in rural and small town areas, where they described having fewer program choices and limited access to high-quality, non-athletic programming.

Differences also emerged across racial and ethnic groups. Satisfaction was highest among parents identifying as Middle Eastern or North African, followed by Hispanic and White parents. Satisfaction was lowest among American Indian, Black or African American, and multiracial parents. Reported satisfaction rates among these groups were as much as 58 percentage points lower than those of Middle Eastern or North African parents, though this estimate should be interpreted with caution given the smaller number of Middle Eastern or North African parent respondents. When non-White racial and ethnic groups were combined into a single category, parents of color were 17 percentage points less likely than White parents to report satisfaction with OST program availability.

Satisfaction with OST program quality

Perceptions of quality were generally positive, with approximately seven in ten parents rating their children's OST programs as good quality. However, perceptions of quality also reflected geographic and demographic disparities. Parents in the Twin Cities and suburban areas were 20 percentage points more likely than those in rural areas to describe their children's programs as good quality. White parents were also 14 percentage points more likely than parents of color to view their children's OST experiences as high quality.

In interviews, the value of "third spaces," or safe and supportive environments outside of school and home where youth can build relationships, develop social-emotional skills, and engage in enrichment activities, was

emphasized. Programs that successfully created these spaces were often perceived as higher quality, regardless of the specific type of programming offered.

In listening sessions, families and youth program providers described what high-quality OST programming looks like. Across both respondent groups, several themes consistently emerged:

- **Safety.** High-quality programs provide physical, emotional, and psychological safety for youth.
- **Staff training and continuous improvement.** Quality programming depends on well-trained staff and ongoing investment in professional development.
- **Youth voice and choice.** Youth should have meaningful opportunities to shape program activities, content, and decision-making.
- **Engagement and meaningful activities.** Youth are most likely to attend and remain engaged in programs that are fun, relevant, foster a sense of belonging, and appeal to their interests. As commonly noted in the OST field, “youth vote with their feet,” meaning they are less likely to participate in programs that they find less interesting or relevant.

Motivation for OST participation

Survey responses from parents and youth program providers reveal both shared motivations for participation and important differences across communities and age groups. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the top reasons parents enroll their children in OST programs from the perspectives of both parents and providers.

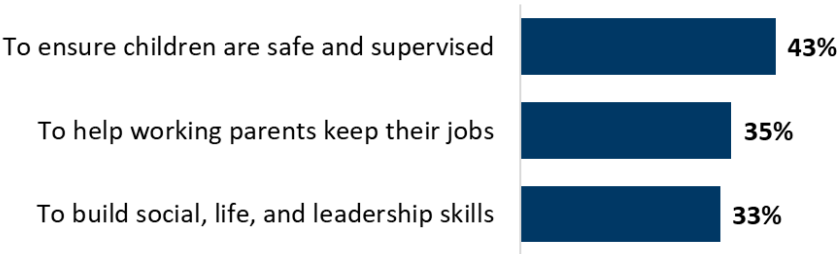
Parents most often reported enrolling their children in OST programs to allow them to explore their interests (59%), followed by building social, life, and leadership skills (46%), and connecting with others and meeting new friends (42%). These responses suggest that many families view OST programs primarily as opportunities for enrichment, social connection, and positive youth development.

Youth program providers, however, described a somewhat different set of priorities among the families they serve. Providers most frequently reported that families enroll their children in OST programs to ensure safety and supervision (43%), followed by supporting working parents (35%) and helping children build social, life, and leadership skills (33%). Compared to parents, providers more often emphasized the role OST programs play in providing stability, supervision, and broader family support.

Figure 2. Top three reasons parents enroll their children in OST programs, as reported by parents (n=1,317)



Figure 3. Top three reasons parents enroll their children in OST programs, as reported by youth program providers (n=108)



These findings were echoed across listening sessions. Parents, youth, and youth program providers talked about the importance of building community—forming relationships, friendships, and connections that help them feel included. Parents also identified reduced screen time and enrichment activities as key reasons they support these programs. Youth program providers named academic support, enrichment activities, and life skills as top reasons youth and families sought their programming.

Patterns also varied by race and ethnicity. White families tend to place greater emphasis on enrichment-oriented motivations, while families of color more often emphasize safety, well-being, and structured support. Overall, families of color were more likely to describe OST participation as providing a protective or stabilizing environment, whereas White families more frequently emphasized enrichment, interest exploration, and skill-building opportunities.

Age related differences were present as well. Many common motivations—such as physical activity, screen time reduction, and interest exploration—were relatively consistent from elementary through young adulthood. Other motivations differed depending on the age of the child. Families of younger children placed greater importance on safety, supervision, and support that enable parents to work; these priorities diminished as youth grew older. By contrast, families of high school students and young adults placed more value on mental health support, leadership opportunities, life skills development, and prevention of risky behaviors.

Interview data reinforced these age-specific patterns. For elementary-aged youth, interviewees emphasized that OST programs often function as a childcare replacement and a stabilizing routine. They added that families valued programs that provided consistent structure, supportive relationships, and exposure to a wide range of activities. Reducing screen time and ensuring positive engagement were recurring priorities for families with younger children.

Middle school youth, by comparison, were described as strongly motivated by peer connection and social belonging. Interviewees noted that youth in this age group often participate in OST programs primarily to spend time with friends, particularly when youth are not connected to sports or formal clubs.

For older youth, the key driver in participation was relevance to future goals. According to interviewees, high school students were motivated by tangible benefits such as résumé-building experiences, interview practice, internships, and paid work opportunities. Industry exposure and credential building activities were seen as especially influential in engaging teens.

What do youth and families want?

When asked what types of OST programs they would like to see in their communities, parent survey respondents expressed interest in a wide range of opportunities. The top three desired program types were STEM activities (60%), sports or physical activities (59%), and creative and performing arts (56%).

Differences by race and ethnicity were generally small for the most desired programs. All parents showed nearly identical levels of interest in STEM activities, leadership programs, and career and workforce programs. More notable differences emerged in other areas, with differences ranging between 5 and 12 percentage points.

- Parents of color reported greater interest in sports and physical activities, cultural heritage programs, faith-based programs, and tutoring or academic support.
- White parents reported greater interest in creative and performing arts, summer camps, care-focused programs, and community programs and clubs.

These differences suggest that parents of color may place greater value on programs that foster cultural identity, belonging, and structured opportunities for support and connection. In contrast, White parents showed somewhat greater interest in enrichment and experiential learning opportunities, as well as programs that align with family schedules and summer engagement needs.

Wants were different by age group, though less pronounced for many core program types.

Families with older youth tended to prioritize future readiness, independence, and academic or career preparation, while families with younger children more often emphasized enrichment, structured supervision, and opportunities for creative expression and recreation (see [Appendix C](#) on page 49 for more information).

Insights from youth and family listening sessions and interviews with youth program providers and OST experts point to consistent priorities for meaningful OST participation. Both youth and youth program providers emphasized that engagement is strongest when programming aligns with youth interests—such as gaming, coding, media production, culturally specific learning, and other creative, hands-on activities that support identity exploration and skill-building.

Youth program providers stressed that families deeply value safe, welcoming spaces where youth can build relationships with peers and trusted adults. One youth program provider interviewee noted that “a lot of work is rooted to anchoring youth in their neighborhood and community.” They emphasized the importance of OST programs building trust with families and being seen as a part of the community.

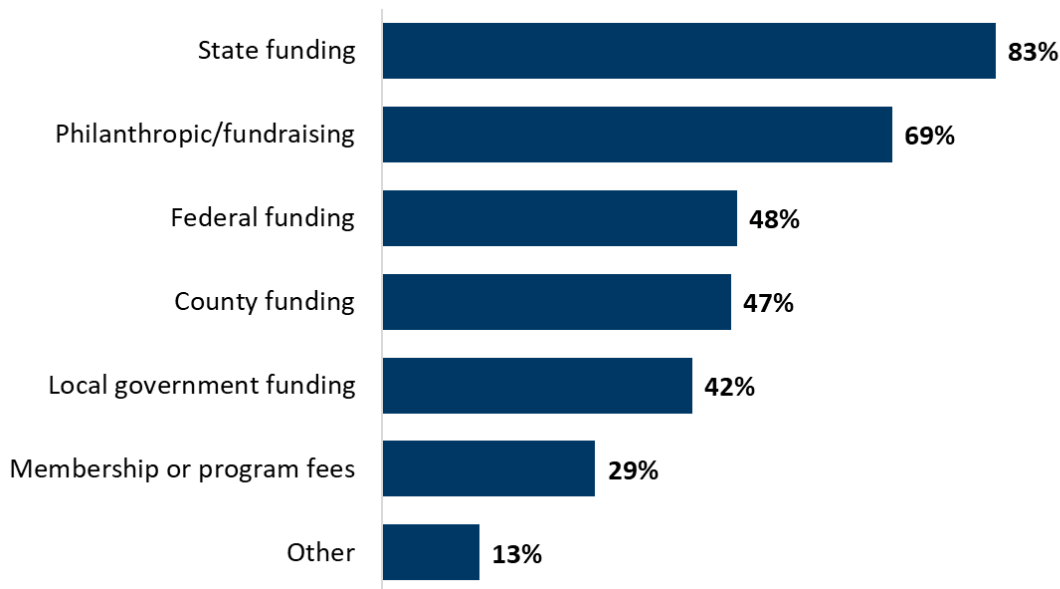
Supportive, community-like environments were described as especially important for youth experiencing trauma, social isolation, or major life transitions. Many interviewees framed OST programs as spaces of belonging and affirmation, where youth are valued for who they are rather than for academic or behavioral outcomes.

A strong theme across interviews and listening sessions was the importance of inclusivity and co-created programming. Providers described intentionally involving youth and families in shaping activities and program design, a practice they viewed as critical for sustaining participation and building long-term trust.

Funding: How are OST programs funded?

Survey responses from youth program providers show that OST programs rely on a diverse and often unstable mix of funding sources (Figure 4). More than four in five organizations (83%) reported receiving state funding. Philanthropic support and fundraising also play a major role, supporting 69% of responding organizations. About half of providers receive federal funding (48%), or county funding (47%), and 42% receive support from local government, such as cities or townships. Membership or program fees contribute to the budgets of 29% of the organizations, and 13% reported other sources of support.

Figure 4. OST funding sources, as reported by youth program providers (n = 115)



Providers consistently described these funding streams as fragmented, unstable, and administratively burdensome. Providers shared that they often operate on braided funding models with limited flexibility and significant reporting requirements. Sustainable or ongoing long-term funding was identified as the most significant challenge facing OST programs, with 94% of surveyed providers reporting that funding instability affects their ability to deliver high-quality programming.

Fewer than four in ten providers reported having stable funding. Approximately 10% described their organizations as struggling financially, while another 40% said they were “just maintaining” current funding levels.

When asked what improvements they most wanted to see in state funding, nearly nine in ten providers identified stable, multi-year funding as their top priority. Providers also emphasized the need for increased funding levels to meet current demand (77%) and simpler reporting, auditing, and compliance requirements (55%). Additional suggestions included quicker release of funds at the start of the fiscal year (37%) and clearer or more consistent guidance from the state (22%).

Interviewees reinforced these findings, describing a funding system that many felt was unsustainable. Several state-funded providers expressed concern that Minnesota’s youth development funding has not significantly increased since 2003, despite rising costs associated with staffing, transportation, food, supplies, and administrative operations. Programs reported that limited reserves, anticipated reductions to long-term

government funding, and challenges in hiring full-time staff with benefits have increased concerns about long-term sustainability.

As one external advisory team member explained:

“The [funding system] is way out of balance. There isn’t one player that is saying the current funding model is working. The [OST] programs are being hurt by this.” – External advisory team member

Many interviewees also described the administrative burden associated with managing multiple funding streams. Providers shared that grant requirements are often complex, overlapping, or even contradictory, forcing organizations to spend significant time navigating compliance, reporting, and reimbursement processes. Several interviewees noted that they must carefully evaluate which grants to pursue because the administrative requirements may outweigh the potential benefit. Others explained that time spent applying for and managing grants reduces the time available for program development and direct service delivery.

Interviewees working with targeted services funding described their programs as “grossly underfunded,” with funding often covering only teacher salaries. Targeted services are school-based academic and enrichment programming designed to support students identified as at risk of academic failure or in need of additional educational support. Targeted services funding provides more comprehensive supports such as transportation, meals, and nursing services. Programs reported combining multiple funding sources, including Title I federal funding, 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, and federal Full-Service Community School grants. Interviewees described the current grant environment as highly competitive and resource-intensive, with some school districts hiring dedicated grant managers to manage applications and compliance requirements.

OST providers and advisory team members also expressed concern that increasing administrative scrutiny related to waste, fraud, and abuse has created additional burdens, particularly for smaller grassroots organizations serving youth with the greatest needs. Several interviewees felt that political shifts and changing funding priorities have contributed to uncertainty within the OST system. They noted that, following the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a greater emphasis on trust-based philanthropy and equity-focused investments, but that many programs now perceive a shift away from those approaches.

Many OST programs also rely on fundraising and philanthropy to keep membership fees affordable or eliminate them for youth and families. However, interviewees reported that private funding can also be unstable, noting

that donors often prefer funding new initiatives rather than ongoing programming, scholarships, staffing, or administrative costs. As a result, organizations continue to face challenges in securing sustainable operational support.

The effects of funding instability were described as extending beyond organizational operations and directly impacting staffing, program quality, and youth experiences. Listening session participants, particularly youth program providers and faith leaders, described ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Many programs rely on volunteers, part-time workers, or informal staffing arrangements, such as teachers working outside regular school hours, to offset costs. Participants explained that these staffing models contribute to high turnover, inconsistent training, and limited long-term relationship-building with youth.

“For us, staffing challenges often show up as inconsistency, limited training, and a lack of relatable mentorship. Many programs rely on volunteers who care deeply but may not have the tools or time to fully support youth needs, making it harder to build trust, address real-life challenges, and keep youth meaningfully engaged.” – Youth program provider

Interviewees emphasized that staffing instability ultimately affects program quality and limits organizations’ ability to provide culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and inclusive programming. Several programs also reported using fee-based models to help offset operational costs, particularly within community education programs. These organizations often provide scholarships tied to free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, but participants noted that demand for scholarships continues to grow.

Youth and families also recognized the fragility of OST funding. Participants shared concerns that program cuts and unstable funding reduce opportunities for young people and undermine long-term program consistency.

*“The government says they want us to succeed and then they cut the funding.”
– Youth leader*

The reimbursement structure used by some funding programs was identified as another significant challenge. Interviewees explained that reimbursements are often delayed by nearly a year and are based on actual attendance (“seat time”) rather than enrollment. Programs reported that fluctuations in attendance caused by

transportation barriers and community disruptions can create significant budget shortfalls after staffing and operational decisions have already been made.

Across interviews, listening sessions, and advisory team discussions, participants consistently identified funding as the single greatest barrier to OST program growth and sustainability. Advisory team members universally emphasized the need for a dedicated and stable state funding stream for OST programs. Several participants also pointed to evidence demonstrating the value of sustained investment in OST programming. One organization reported finding a ten-to-one return on investment in its financial analysis, estimating that every dollar invested by the state generated approximately ten dollars in social and economic benefits. Participants argued that these findings reinforce the need for increased, stable, and long-term investment in OST programs across Minnesota.

Accessibility: What prevents youth and families from participating in programs?

Equitable access to OST programs emerged as a central focus of this study, with youth, parents, and providers underscoring the importance of ensuring all young people can participate. In the parent survey, families shared the obstacles they encounter when trying to participate in OST programs. Cost (54%), transportation (37%), and family responsibilities such as work or caregiving (34%) emerged as the top barriers to access. Interviews and listening sessions provided further insights, illustrating how these challenges intersect with issues like program availability, safety, and communication. The following section explores the ways in which access barriers affect youth, families, and the programs working to meet their needs.

Cost

“Cost and transportation prevent many youth from joining programs they would otherwise participate in.” – Older youth

Cost was consistently identified as a top barrier to accessing OST programs. Families noted that the cost of participation in sports—equipment, travel, and lessons—quickly adds up and makes participation in sports cost-prohibitive for low-income families. Rural families face additional compounding costs, including fuel for longer commutes, time lost from work, and affordability challenges, even when scholarships are offered. One parent explained that, while their local YMCA offered great programs, the fees were out of reach for their family of

seven. Even low-cost OST programs can become unaffordable when expenses are multiplied across several children, limiting access and forcing parents to make difficult choices.

“I have six kids. My older two are in a drumming program that I found out about through a flyer. I chose it for them to have something safe to do, and I come from a background of drumming, and it was free. I do have to pay for uniforms and trips. My 9-year-old has wanted to play football and I couldn’t afford it [but] this year I can finally afford it. It’s costly, but it’s time to build his skills. My 8-year-old is doing a dance program with the church. She loves that. My five-year-old says she wants to do karate, but I can’t afford that right now.”

– Parent

Youth program providers in listening sessions were asked to respond to the cost barriers, as many of the interviewed programs offered low-cost or no-cost options. Many said they offset expenses by reducing program hours, using volunteers or part time staff, or reducing staffing or compensation. Others described being unable to offer certain experiences—such as field trips or outings—because of costs.

“In our community, the neighborhood we are in is an affordable housing community. It’s a lower income and immigrant community. [The] things we see them needing is low cost or free programming (our program is free). But we have challenges with staff availability to meet the need. A lot of our families really need...childcare during working hours, which is something we are trying to support, especially during the summer. Pre-Covid, we [were open] 8am-4pm but had to scale back dramatically.” – Youth program provider

Older youth also emphasized the high cost of summer programs, sports, and college prep opportunities, noting the inequities between peers who can afford them and those who cannot.

Interviewees reflected on broader policy opportunities as well, drawing parallels to Minnesota’s free school lunch program and envisioning a future in which OST programs could be fully funded and free for all children. One advisory team member emphasized that OST programs should be viewed as a “right, not a privilege.”

Transportation

Transportation was another top challenge identified by interviewees, shaped by factors such as affordability, distance, staffing needs, unsafe walking routes, limited availability, liability concerns, and added costs for special activities. Among youth program providers surveyed, 86% identified transportation as a major issue. OST programs struggle with logistics such as rising fuel costs and difficulty licensing staff or hiring bus drivers.

Youth program providers and other subject matter experts agreed that transportation was one of the largest barriers to participation in OST programs. Some OST programs reported prioritizing transportation, but when youth program providers themselves provide transportation, it reduces the time they can spend delivering programming. One interviewee shared that even though their staff has appropriate driving licenses, they do not have enough buses or busing capacity to transport all the youth who want to participate in their rural area to their OST program.

Some communities, like Duluth, have identified promising approaches, including running limited bus routes to neighborhood hubs. Other locations have instituted “walking school bus” models, offering safe routes to school initiatives, providing bus passes, and forming ride-share partnerships.

Geographic variation played a significant role in shaping transportation barriers, with challenges differing across communities. In rural Minnesota, transportation barriers such as distance and time to drive to programs and activities are prevalent. With fewer program options, rural Minnesotans need to balance driving distance with family schedules. For single parents or one-car families, logistics can make participation nearly impossible.

“Many events are at 5 or 5:30 p.m., but as a single parent working 8 to 5 and living 15 miles away, we miss the first hour or the whole thing.” – Parent, rural Minnesota

In metro areas, transportation barriers included concerns about safety with public transit. Youth discussed challenges in finding safe and accessible transportation options, sharing stories of traveling late at night to and from programs and the lack of safety they felt in those moments.

In suburban areas, community education programs spoke about the crippling costs of busing youth after school. In many cases, programs shut down because fees could not support the rising transportation costs. In other cases, families were responsible for all transportation, which created disparities in who could access programs.

Facility and safety concerns

Facilities and safety were additional concerns raised during listening sessions. Participants expressed worries about safety in local parks and emphasized the need for stronger collaboration between park programs and schools. One parent suggested making better use of existing spaces so families could take advantage of park facilities that appear underused and could better serve families.

“I just want to say that sometimes programs don’t need more money. They just need better use of existing resources. For example, during the summer many schools close, but they still have gyms and swimming pools. How can we utilize those? Create programs that use those facilities so families who cannot afford expensive options can still participate... Sometimes it’s just about using the resources already available...to make sure families have access to the programs they need.” – Parent

One program leader described significant challenges in establishing a rural OST program that would address identified community needs. While awaiting a permanent site, the program cycled through several temporary facilities—some with burst pipes, heating failures, or mold—which increased costs, created transportation barriers, and placed extra strain on staff and families. Ultimately, these disruptions led many families to withdraw or not return once the new facility was completed.

In some rural communities, programs are operating at or above facility capacity. Safety concerns were also highlighted. One interviewee described youth walking long distances over railroad tracks or through unsafe areas to reach their program, and others noted that OST facilities often lack essential safety features such as tornado shelters.

Program awareness

OST program provider survey results indicated that awareness and availability remain moderate barriers to OST participation: 78% of respondents cited lack of communication about programs, and 71% cited limited program availability. These themes were consistent with listening sessions, in which older youth and youth program providers noted that many youth and families simply do not know what programs exist or where to look for information. One youth noted a mismatch between program advertising channels and the places where they typically seek information:

“Programs aren’t advertised where young people look; Facebook doesn’t reach teens.” – Youth

Several providers shared that program awareness is especially difficult to build in rural or underserved communities, where families often lack clear, consistent access points for information about OST opportunities. Interviewees described fragmented communication channels as a persistent barrier to participation.

Youth stressed that supportive relationships are essential for building awareness. One youth interviewee explained that teachers, peers, and community members play a critical role in helping students learn about and feel comfortable joining programs. She noted that youth are more likely to participate when they understand what opportunities are available, can see what’s possible, and feel encouraged by trusted adults and friends. An external advisory member highlighted the importance of belonging and a sense of community for OST program participants. They said that “connection to community” is foundational to a successful OST program and youth participation. Providers agreed that stronger partnerships with schools could significantly improve outreach and help connect more youth to OST programs.

Limited availability of programming

Parents, particularly those who rely on OST programs as a safe place for their children while they work, expressed frustration with the fragmented and limited availability of programs. Youth program providers shared this concern and added that growing waitlists and staffing shortages limit program capacity. One parent reflected:

“There is a limit to the amount [of programs that are] offered. We are fighting for spots in a program, [even when we] have capacity to take the child or have the funds.” – Parent

Limited availability was one of the biggest challenges facing families in rural Minnesota. Parents shared that while programs are consistent in some places, other rural communities may offer programming only during the summer, with fewer options during the school year.

For rural children who have disabilities, finding programming that accommodates specific routines, sensory needs, and behavioral supports can be particularly challenging. Several parents described avoiding programs altogether because they were concerned their child would be seen as a burden or that inexperienced staff would not be equipped to support them safely.

Trends: What are current trends in OST programs?

OST programs are continuously adapting to community needs, workforce challenges, and broader social and economic conditions. This section outlines key trends from the research and draws from surveys, interviews, and listening sessions to show how trends shape experiences for youth and families.

OST programs matter

“OST programs reinforce learning through tutoring, homework help, STEM activities, and literacy support. They help close achievement gaps, boost school engagement, and improve graduation outcomes, especially for students who may not get that support at home.” – Youth program director

OST programs provide valuable opportunities for connection, collaboration, and creativity. Demand for these programs remains high across Minnesota. Nearly 90% of Minnesotans favor public funding for OST programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2025).

When asked, “Why are OST programs important for youth?” 92 of the 116 youth program providers offered open-ended responses. They described numerous benefits, emphasizing how OST programs complement the experiences young people have at school and at home. Top themes included safety and supervision, connection

and community, exploration and enrichment, holistic support, personal growth and life skills, and academic advancement. [Appendix D](#) on page 76 provides further detail and illustrative quotes for each category.

Likewise, in listening sessions, youth, families, youth program providers, and faith leaders consistently pointed to OST as a space where young people should be able to grow, connect, and explore who they are. Youth prioritized their experiences in exploring interests and building skills. Families emphasized community connection and reducing screen time. Youth program providers brought a more systemic lens, naming academic support and wraparound connection as important aspects of their work. While the specific priorities varied by group, development of life skills, interest exploration, enrichment, and community building emerged as the most common desires for programming overall.

“Our programming really makes a difference in these kids’ lives. In the bureaucracy, the ‘why’ can get lost—but the why is that these programs really do matter in shaping good people.” – Youth program provider

One interviewee emphasized that addressing the mental health crisis requires “increasing the connections and communities of support.” OST programs help address this need by providing safe, supportive spaces where youth feel valued and can strengthen their mental and emotional well-being.

“Young people deserve caring ‘third spaces’ where they can learn, grow, make mistakes, and be themselves.” – Youth program provider

One youth leader emphasized how vital OST programs are for young people. She explained that these programs help students discover their passions, stay engaged before and after school, and avoid risky situations such as drug use or other unsafe behaviors. She also shared that her school integrates extracurricular opportunities into the school day by bringing in community partners and guest speakers. This approach, she said, helps students learn about available OST programs and envision potential career paths.

Youth programs navigate disruption and instability

Many interviewees noted a significant shift in OST participation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared that youth and families were slow to return or, in some cases, never returned, especially when virtual

learning was still in place. Overall, interviewees reported a substantial decline in OST engagement in the post-COVID period.

In addition to the hardships youth have experienced, programs have also suffered. Many programs cut or drastically reduced their offerings. Post-COVID reductions in program availability have made it harder for families to find opportunities, with large differences between well-resourced and less resourced districts.

“As I/we work to support youth of this generation, which has faced COVID, other crises... [we see them] struggling to find “third spaces” which are so important for personal development. It’s a separate space from school and home, or home and work. A place where there is a feeling of community.”

– Faith leader

Youth program providers also described how broader community events can significantly impact OST participation. Several interviewees and listening session attendees recounted the impact of the increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement presence in Minnesota in early 2026, noting that many families stopped attending school, work, and OST programs during that time. A program provider explained that they had to mobilize quickly to ensure families’ basic needs were met, as many were afraid to leave their homes. They described relying on partnerships with food banks, nonprofits, schools, book fairs, and dental services to support youth and their families, especially over weekends and school breaks. Interviewees emphasized that OST programs are still working to build and maintain a sense of trust with families following this period of community turbulence.

“It’s essential [that] we have these programs. Life has been altered since COVID and ICE. Kids are online [more]. It has created distance and loneliness. It’s created domestic situations. The programs [can offer] counseling, and togetherness, a sense of belonging, interaction and social ties...it takes a village.” – Parent

Similarly, listening session participants emphasized the importance of culturally affirming, safe spaces to support recovery. As a youth program provider shared, “[We need] culturally affirming and healing spaces. A lot of aftermath support. What does it look like when the crisis feels like it has ended but you still feel in crisis?”

In reflecting on these community disruptions, youth program providers in listening sessions also described the significant toll it took on their own well-being. They emphasized the difficulty of meeting families’ needs while simultaneously coping with the same pressures themselves.

“The last few months have been challenging and exhausting as we try to serve families and youth as best we can but that is also hard when we are going through these things ourselves. You feel like you can’t take a day off because then it will be compounded on the families and youth so then you have to show up even though you don’t feel like your best self.” – Youth program provider

Mental health and disability supports are needed

Minnesota Department of Education data shows that nearly 20% of students receive special education services, a number that has grown every year since 2023. Special education and mental health supports that students rely on during the school day are often unavailable after school. This strains youth program staff and diminishes the experience for young people. Youth organizations felt overextended and underfunded. Many recommended embedding supportive services within OST programs to relieve pressure on both Youth program providers and schools while strengthening community access to needed resources.

*“As you extend the school day, you have to extend the mental health care.”
– External advisory team member*

Mental health support and disability inclusion were areas of focus from the listening sessions. Youth program providers noted that mental health was an increasingly present reality in OST spaces. Staff who build trusted relationships with youth find that young people sometimes need to step away from programs to address their mental health. Participants framed this not as disengagement, but as a signal that OST programs must be equipped to respond with flexibility and care, not just with structured activities. From the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth social development to the fear and instability generated by immigration

enforcement actions, many young people are carrying trauma into every space they occupy, including OST programs. For participants, this underscores the importance of providing responsive, trauma-informed programming to support Minnesota youth.

Families of youth with disabilities shared concerns that their children will be seen as a burden, that staff would lack the training to support them safely, and that program structures designed for youth without additional support needs would leave their children without a viable OST option.

Interviewees also emphasized that psychological safety is central to effective OST programming. Several providers described their efforts to create open, identity-affirming environments and stressed that youth mental health should be prioritized in both funding and staffing. Many expressed a desire for dedicated onsite mental health counselors, noting that current grant structures often do not fund these roles.

The importance of mental health support was particularly clear for youth who have experienced trauma, are in foster care, or have behavioral, neurodiverse, or disability-related needs. One interviewee described the lack of mental health staffing as a “wicked problem” with no single solution, citing both the shortage of providers and the limited capacity of OST programs to offer specialized support. This gap has real consequences: some youth with higher needs are asked to leave programs simply because staff lack the training or resources to support them. Interviewees were clear that basic mental health and trauma-informed training should be considered essential for all OST staff.

Despite these challenges, there are promising examples of OST programs adapting to meet the mental health needs of youth. One interviewee described a successful program in which middle and high school girls work with counselors to identify and address the issues most important to them; participating schools have reported positive outcomes tied to the program. Another interviewee shared how local libraries are incorporating mental health professionals into their OST offerings, providing therapy informed activities such as group sharing and “smash therapy,” where youth can safely release stress by breaking objects in a designated space.

Some programs have been able to embed this support even more deeply. An interviewee noted that their OST sites each have an on-site social worker and a partnership with a local mental health provider. Despite these successes, interviewees emphasized that most mental health funding still flows to schools rather than OST programs. They stressed that youth want spaces where they can connect with peers, talk about how they are doing, and receive support from trusted adults.

OST program provider networks are lacking

Advisory team members identified a great need for state infrastructure and system coordination. A repeated theme in many interviews was the concept of a fragmented system. Minnesota is home to a great number of nonprofits, OST programs, and other organizations supporting youth, but these efforts remain uncoordinated. One advisory team member pointed to DCYF's early childcare infrastructure as a model. They called for a "central clearinghouse" to help families navigate and access OST programs.

"We don't pretend to be the only program in town. We try to partner and be part of the youth work community." – External advisory team member

OST advisory team members emphasized the need for a statewide champion to elevate OST programs and create opportunities for programs to connect, collaborate, and support one another. They noted that such coordination could strengthen program sustainability and support growth across the state. Interviewees emphasized that achieving the right balance of flexibility and support is essential for OST programs to remain sustainable, respond to changing community needs, and maximize their impact. Programs do not want flexibility alone; they want it paired with clear structures, guidelines, and policies that enable collaboration and adequate funding.

"There is something lost when we are all trying to do it on our own." – Youth program director

Supports are needed to build careers in youth work

Youth program providers stressed that youth work must be treated as a viable and respected career path. Many programs cannot offer full-time positions or benefits, creating instability that impacts program quality and relationships with youth and families. Despite these challenges, youth program providers expressed pride in their work and identified it as a long-term profession, but noted that compensation does not reflect the expertise, specialized skills, and significant responsibilities required to effectively support youth. Providers emphasized that the field must be better recognized, valued, and supported as an essential component of Minnesota's youth development infrastructure. Thirty-seven percent of youth program providers surveyed cited workforce development, recruitment, and retention as top areas in which further investment would strengthen their programs. Providers also identified a need for additional structural and administrative support, including more

coordinated application and reporting processes across funding streams (27%) and improved or expanded facilities and program spaces (25%).

Staffing challenges and program quality directly connected to funding

Interviewees connected staffing challenges to broader funding limitations within the OST system. Limited and inconsistent funding prevents programs from offering competitive salaries and benefits that attract and retain experienced youth program providers. One interviewee stated that “the biggest challenge [in youth work] is the training and pay scale.” Others noted that while grant funding may support staff salaries, it has not kept pace with inflation or rising operating costs, creating financial strain and limiting salary growth. As a result, workforce instability has become a significant operational challenge. Low wages and limited advancement opportunities drive high turnover and a continual influx of entry-level staff who require substantial onboarding and training. This cycle reduces the time and capacity available for direct youth engagement and program development.

"For us, staffing challenges often show up as inconsistency, limited training, and a lack of relatable mentorship. Many programs rely on volunteers who care deeply but may not have the tools or time to fully support youth needs, making it harder to build trust, address real-life challenges, and keep youth meaningfully engaged." – Youth program provider

Interviewees noted that even when programs invest in staff development and internal career pathways, retention remains difficult. Youth program providers often leave for higher-paying or more stable positions. Together, these staffing dynamics create persistent workforce gaps that undermine program continuity, relationship-building, and the long-term stability of OST programs.

Professional development for youth program providers is insufficient

Participants also highlighted the lack of a strong educational and professional pipeline for youth program providers in Minnesota. The discontinuation of the University of Minnesota’s Master of Education program in Youth Development Leadership was a significant loss for the field, leaving those seeking advanced training with few in-state options. Interviewees emphasized that without dedicated preparation programs, clearer career pathways, and stronger state-level investment, OST programs will continue to face challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Systems-level investment needed to build a stable OST workforce

Programs described ongoing staffing shortages—particularly during summer months—and reported relying heavily on temporary workers, part-time staff, or volunteers to meet basic program needs. Many participants suggested that Minnesota could strengthen the OST workforce through targeted investments in youth program provider pipelines, including training programs, recruitment initiatives, scholarships, and dedicated workforce development funding. Participants emphasized that building a more stable, professional youth program provider labor force is essential not only for retention but for maintaining high-quality programming and strong relationships with youth and families.

VII. Recommendations

Understanding the needs of OST programs requires listening directly to the people most affected by them. Throughout this study, youth, parents, and youth program providers offered insights that reveal where current policies support access and where gaps remain. Their experiences provided essential context for interpreting the broader OST landscape and pointed to the areas where action can make a difference. Based on the research findings and discussions with the external and internal advisory teams, MAD provides the following seven recommendations to strengthen OST programs across Minnesota. These recommendations need state agency review for level of investment and prioritization within the current environment. In most places, MAD does not name a specific state agency to lead the work, recognizing that this work requires cross-agency support and investment.

Establish a statewide priority for OST programs

Effective solutions for OST programs will require strong collaboration across state agencies and meaningful engagement with local partners. To support this work, the State of Minnesota should adopt a coordinated, cross-agency approach to OST programming. A unified strategy would align funding, data, quality standards, and statewide priorities, giving statewide partners a clear foundation for strengthening OST opportunities across Minnesota.

The state should also play an ongoing leadership role in identifying and elevating promising practices from across the country. By monitoring emerging research, policy developments, and successful models implemented in other states, Minnesota can continuously strengthen its approach to OST programming and ensure that local communities benefit from innovative and effective strategies. In addition, the state should actively advocate for sustained investments that expand the capacity of the OST field, support workforce development, improve program quality, and increase access for youth and families across Minnesota.

The state could draw from best practices from early childhood systems like [Parent Aware](#), including creating tools for families to find programs and promoting strategies that support high-quality programs. Moving to a more cohesive system will require an investment of time and financial resources, enabling state agencies to shift from distributing funds to actively supporting communities and building a sustainable statewide infrastructure.

A coordinated approach could also include a statewide system for tracking participation, quality indicators, and continuous improvement. Rather than relying on checklist-based ratings, this system would center learning and growth. It could also incorporate a statewide program finder that highlights programs engaged in continuous improvement without requiring highly detailed scheduling information that is difficult to maintain. This tool would offer families a single access point to learn about program options in their communities. A clear, consistent statewide communications strategy will be essential to ensuring families are aware of and can access these resources.

Increase sustainable and recurring funding

OST programs rely on a complex mix of funding sources, and funding emerged as the top concern in our research. To strengthen the sustainability of these programs, one-time appropriations need to be replaced with stable, ongoing funding across the state.

Rules that restrict braided funds—such as the separation of certified center programs from those funded through 21st Century or Afterschool Community Learning Grants—should be addressed. A comprehensive map of all statewide OST funding streams is needed, along with clear guidance on allowable uses, including whether special education funds can support accommodations in OST programs.

Outdated funding formulas, including those for community education allocations and targeted services reimbursements, should be increased, as some have not changed in twenty years. Funding structures must account for the true cost of delivering high-quality OST programs, including sufficient staffing levels and competitive compensation. Funding must also allow for regional cost adjustments to reflect higher transportation and staffing expenses in Greater Minnesota.

Strengthen coordination of OST programs through investments in intermediaries

The State of Minnesota should provide dedicated state funding for youth program intermediaries at the state, regional, and community levels to support partnership building, data sharing, continuous improvement, and capacity development. Intermediaries are essential to strengthening the youth work field, creating resilience through partnerships, and helping communities meet the evolving needs of young people.

A coordinated investment would also include support for asset mapping, gap analysis, and joint applications for funding. This could further expand opportunities for an annual statewide convening and sustain ongoing communities of practice that reinforce shared learning and collaboration.

Improve accessibility and affordability by addressing transportation barriers

State, regional, and local investments in transportation solutions could help to meet the needs of all Minnesotans. Transportation barriers differ significantly depending on where youth live. Any transportation strategy must ensure that accessibility and mobility align with commitments under Minnesota's Olmstead Plan. In rural areas, limited transportation options, long driving distances, geographic boundaries, and unsafe walking routes account for the biggest challenges. In metro areas, barriers include youth program providers spending valuable program time providing transportation, as well as concerns about the safety of public transit and walking routes.

Creative ideas are needed to improve access to youth programs. Solutions should build on existing transportation systems, identify ways to supplement or reduce the costs of transportation, and account for differences across the state.

Strengthen support for youth with disabilities and mental health needs

State agencies should clarify the allowable uses of special education and waiver funding to ensure they can effectively support youth participation in OST programs. Greater alignment and shared understanding are needed so youth program providers can fully support youth with disabilities and ensure equitable access to programming.

There is also a need to expand mental health supports within OST settings. This includes training, capacity building, and other strategies that strengthen programs' abilities to support the mental health needs of young people.

Build and sustain Minnesota's youth work workforce

The youth work workforce experiences significant capacity challenges and high turnover, driven in part by insufficient funding for adequate staffing levels and competitive compensation. More research and direct

engagement with youth program providers are needed to understand how to best support long-term careers in the youth development field. Strengthening retention will require sustained, long-term strategies. A statewide professional development and continuous improvement system could expand pathways into the field, including apprenticeships, while providing opportunities for youth program providers to strengthen and build upon their existing expertise through training in areas such as mental health, first aid, and other specialized topics. Continued investment in building this career pipeline will ultimately benefit youth and their communities.

Center youth and family voice in system design and funding decisions

Last but certainly not least, this research underscored the importance of elevating youth and family voices from across Minnesota. Investments going forward should encourage meaningful participation. The experiences shared by youth and parents—like those captured in this report—should directly inform statewide policy and funding decisions.

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IX. Appendix A: Legislative charge

SCAN OF AND REPORT ON OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND YOUTH PROGRAMMING (Laws of Minnesota, 2025 First Special Session, [chapter 3](#), article 11, section 7).

- (a) The commissioner of children, youth, and families must conduct a scan of out-of-school and youth programming for youth under 21 years of age. The scan may include a review of existing reports, targeted interviews, surveys, and other methodologies, as determined by the commissioner.
- (b) When conducting the scan, the commissioner must collaborate with community organizations and programming providers who provide out-of-school and youth programming; parents, youth, and families who participate or have participated in out-of-school and youth programming; and other individuals with expertise in out-of-school and youth programming in order to:
 - 1) identify different avenues for gathering information; and
 - 2) collaborate in the outreach and facilitation of focused community engagement.
- (c) By July 1, 2026, the commissioner must prepare and submit a final report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over children, youth, and families. The commissioner may contract with consultants to help with the development of the report. The report must include:
 - 1) information on current federal, state, Tribal, county, and city out-of-school and youth programs;
 - 2) school districts that offer enrichment activities;
 - 3) information on availability and amount of funding sources, the costs to provide the out-of-school and youth programs, and the costs of the programs for families;
 - 4) any barriers and gaps for families to participate in the out-of-school and youth programming, as identified by findings from the scan under paragraph (a) and in discussions with community members and program providers;
 - 5) information on the populations participating in out-of-school and youth programming;
 - 6) differences in programming needs, opportunities, and accessibility between different demographics and different regions of Minnesota; and
 - 7) recommendations on policy and funding needs, including recommending potential partners for program delivery to expand access to quality out-of-school and youth programming.
- (d) By July 1, 2026, the commissioner must present the final report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over children, youth, and families.

X. Appendix B: Advisory team members

External advisory members

Name	Organization
Ali Abel	Minnesota Youth Council
Kari Denissen Cunnien	Ignite Afterschool
Matt Dickhausen	Minnesota Community Education Association
Bryan Donaldson	Boys and Girls Clubs of Minnesota
Brian Fullman	ISALAH
Hasini Guntipalli	Minnesota Youth Council, youth member
Marcus Pope	Youthprise
Erik Skold	Sprockets
Kate Walker	University of Minnesota Extension
Emanuel Willams	Children's Defense Fund
Jenny Wright Collins	YMCA of the North (Beacons Network)

Internal advisory members

Name	Agency
Thomas Delaney	Minnesota Department of Education
Jo Daggett	Department of Labor and Industry
Chrissy Dornon	Children's Cabinet
Jessica Fisherman	Department of Children, Youth, and Families
Mariah Geiger-Williams	Minnesota Department of Health
Jon Lewis	Department of the Army
Jenny Moses	Children's Cabinet
Sheila Oehrlein	Minnesota Department of Education
Angelina Szuberski	Department of the Army

XI. Appendix C: Parent survey findings

Methodology

The online parent survey was distributed through existing contact lists for schools, youth program providers, and parent groups as provided by the study's external advisory committee. To broaden the reach, MAD also used a snowball sampling approach, encouraging recipients to share the survey with other parents and caregivers within their networks. In addition to English, the survey was offered in Hmong, Somali, and Spanish.

The survey included five main categories of questions:

- Family demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, community type, county of residence, grade level, youth disability status, language, family structure, and parental education level)
- Availability of programs
- Challenges families face in getting their children engaged in out-of-school time (OST) programs
- Areas of investment to improve OST programming
- Families' perceptions of the importance of OST programs

The survey was open from February 9 through April 3, 2026. At closing, a total of 1,718 parents completed the survey.

Response counts varied for each question as respondents could choose multiple responses on several questions. MAD categorized and quantified open-ended responses to identify key themes. Quotes from open-ended responses are included as bulleted lists and emphasized in italics. These statements reflect the participants' perceptions and experiences, but MAD may have edited them for privacy, spelling, clarity, and length.

Where possible, MAD also examined differences across key demographic characteristics to identify more nuanced patterns in families' experiences.

Findings

Profile of respondents

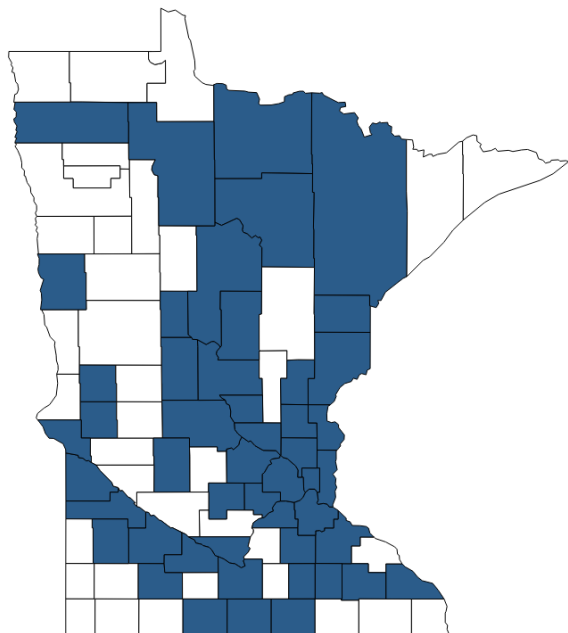
Geographic distribution

Respondents came from 51 Minnesota counties and Tribal communities, with over 60% of responses coming from the Twin Cities metro area (Figure 5). Hennepin County accounted for the largest share (35%), followed by Ramsey County (10%) and Dakota County (7%).

Other counties with notable participation included Rice (6%), Clay (5%), and Lac qui Parle Counties (3%). Most rural counties accounted for less than 1% each, indicating broad geographic reach but a strong concentration of participation in more densely populated metropolitan areas.

It is important to note that this question was optional, and fewer than half of the respondents (48%) answered this question. As a result, the overall geographic distribution of respondents is likely broader than shown here.

Figure 5. Respondents' county of residence (n = 820)



Community type

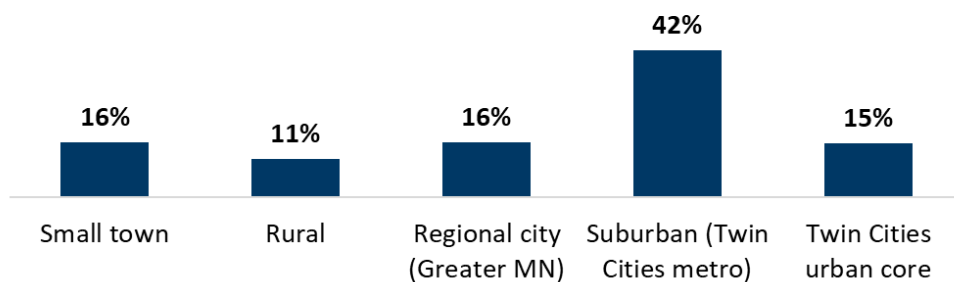
Respondents were asked to identify the type of community in which they live. The survey defined community types as follows:

- **Rural** – Under 2,500 residents, typically low-density and agricultural

- **Small town** – 2,500 to 10,000 residents
- **Regional city** – Larger cities outside the Twin Cities metro area
- **Suburban** – Communities within the metro area but outside Minneapolis and Saint Paul
- **Twin Cities urban core** – Minneapolis or Saint Paul

Most respondents lived in suburban areas of the Twin Cities metro (42%) (Figure 6). The remaining respondents were fairly evenly distributed across small towns (16%), regional cities in Greater Minnesota (16%), and the Twin Cities urban core (15%), with a smaller share living in rural areas (11%).

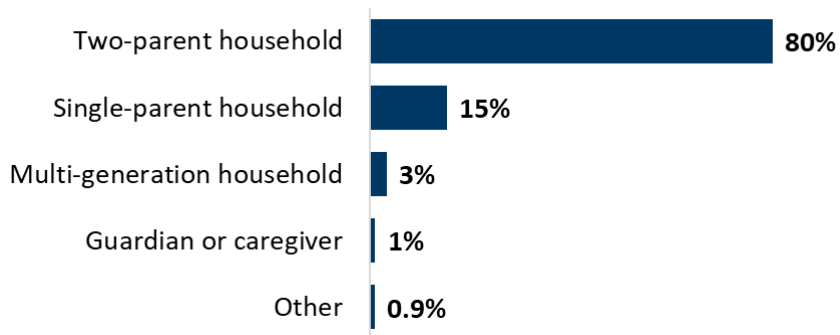
Figure 6. How would you describe your community type? (n = 1,691)



Family status

Most respondents reported living in two-parent households (80%) (Figure 7). Smaller shares identified as single-parent households (15%), multi-generational households (3%), or guardians/caregivers (1%). Fewer than 1% selected another family status.

Figure 7. Which of the following best describes your family status? (n = 1,704)

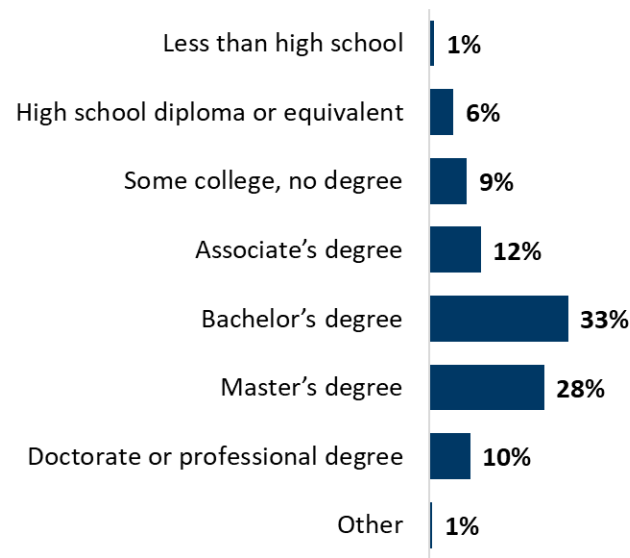


Education level

Most respondents reported high levels of education in their household (Figure 8). About one-third reported a bachelor’s degree as the highest level of education attained in their household (33%), while over one-quarter reported a master’s degree (28%). An additional 10% reported a doctorate or professional degree as the highest level of education attained.

Smaller shares reported an associate’s degree (12%), some college with no degree (9%), or a high school diploma or equivalent (6%) as the highest level of education attained in their household. Very few reported less than a high school education or another level (1% each).

Figure 8. What is your highest education level in your household? (n = 1,708)



Primary language(s) spoken at home

English was by far the most reported language spoken in respondents’ homes, with 96% selecting it (Figure 9). Smaller shares of respondents reported speaking other languages. Somali and Spanish were each reported by 5% of respondents, while 4% indicated another language spoken in the home. Respondents could select more than one language for this question. As a result, percentages do not sum to 100%.

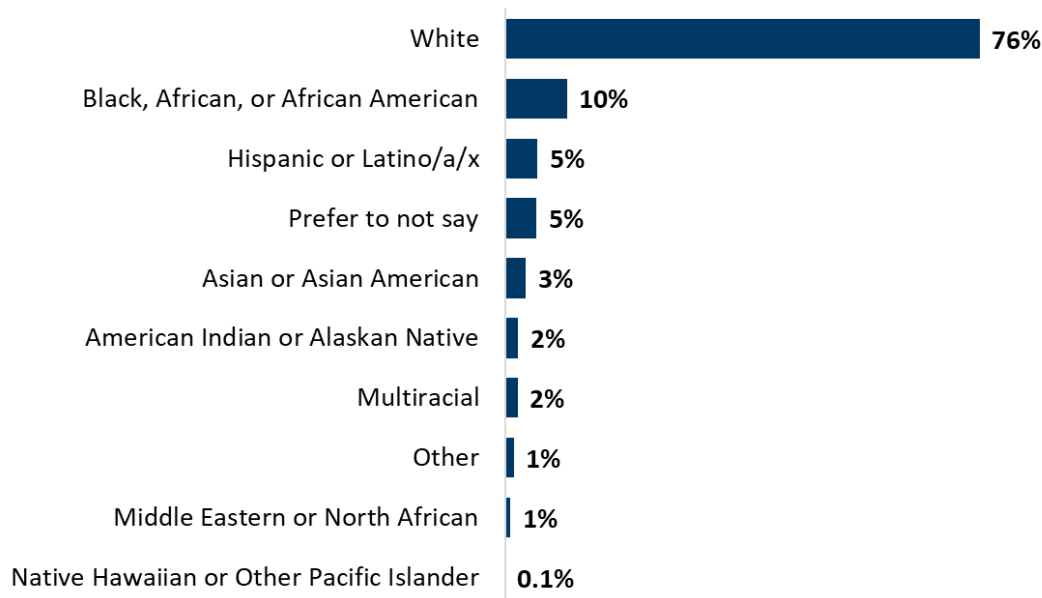
Figure 9. What is the primary language(s) spoken in your home? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,706)



Race and ethnicity

Most respondents identified as White (76%) (Figure 10). The next largest group identified as Black, African, or African American (10%). Smaller shares of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/x (5%) or Asian or Asian American (3%). Two percent each identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native and as Multiracial. One percent identified as Middle Eastern or North African, and 1% selected Other. Less than 1% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. An additional 5% preferred not to say.

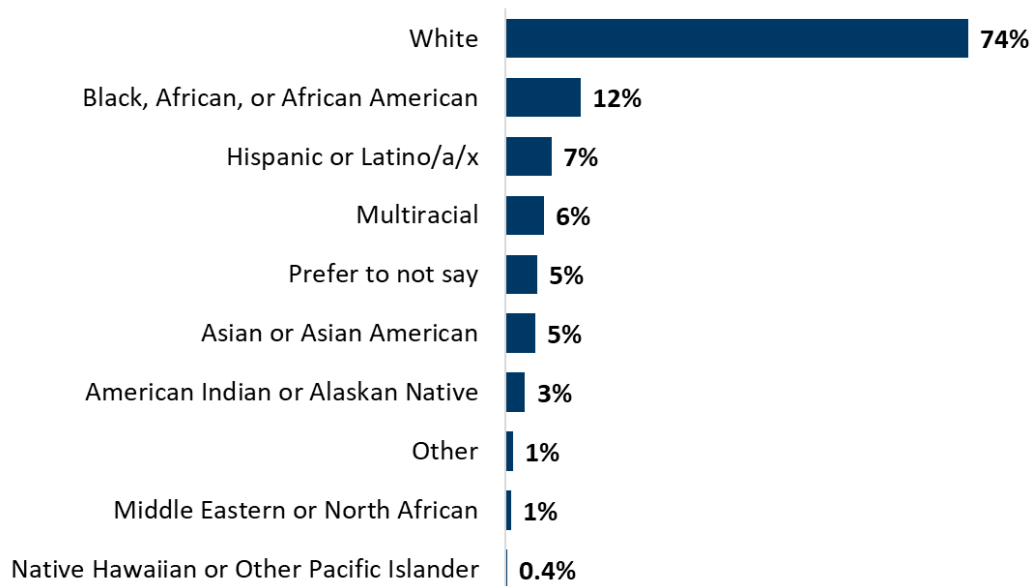
Figure 10. What is your race/ethnicity? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,709)



Respondents reported similar characteristics for their children (Figure 11). Nearly three-quarters of children were identified as White (74%). The next largest group identified as Black, African, or African American (12%). Smaller shares identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/x (7%), Multiracial (6%), and Asian or Asian American (5%). Five percent

preferred not to say. Three percent identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, while 1% each identified as Other and Middle Eastern or North African. Less than 1% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

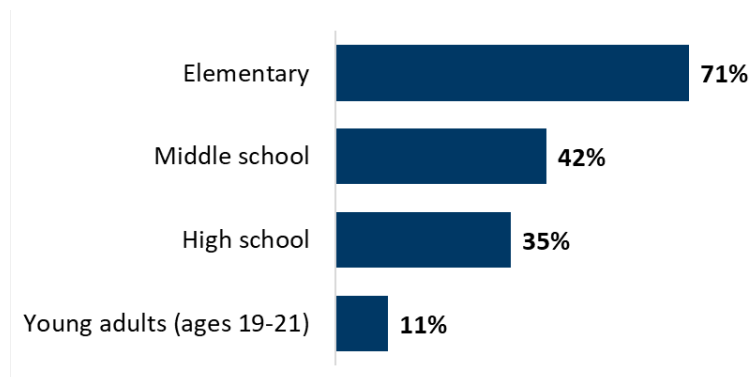
Figure 11. What is the race/ethnicity of the child/children in your household? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,691)



Children's grade level

Most respondents had children in elementary school (71%) (Figure 12). Smaller shares had children in middle school (42%) or high school (35%). About one in ten respondents reported having young adults ages 19 to 21 in the household (11%).

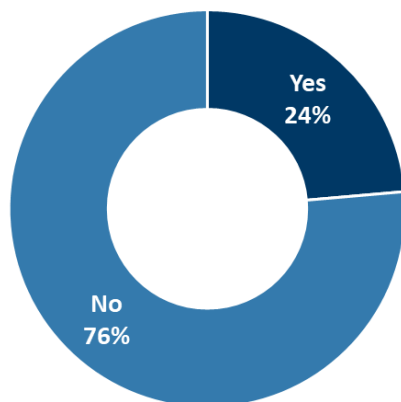
Figure 12. What is the grade level(s) of the children in your household? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,707)



Children's special needs status

Most respondents (76%) reported that their children did not have special needs (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Do any of your children have special needs? (n = 1,702)



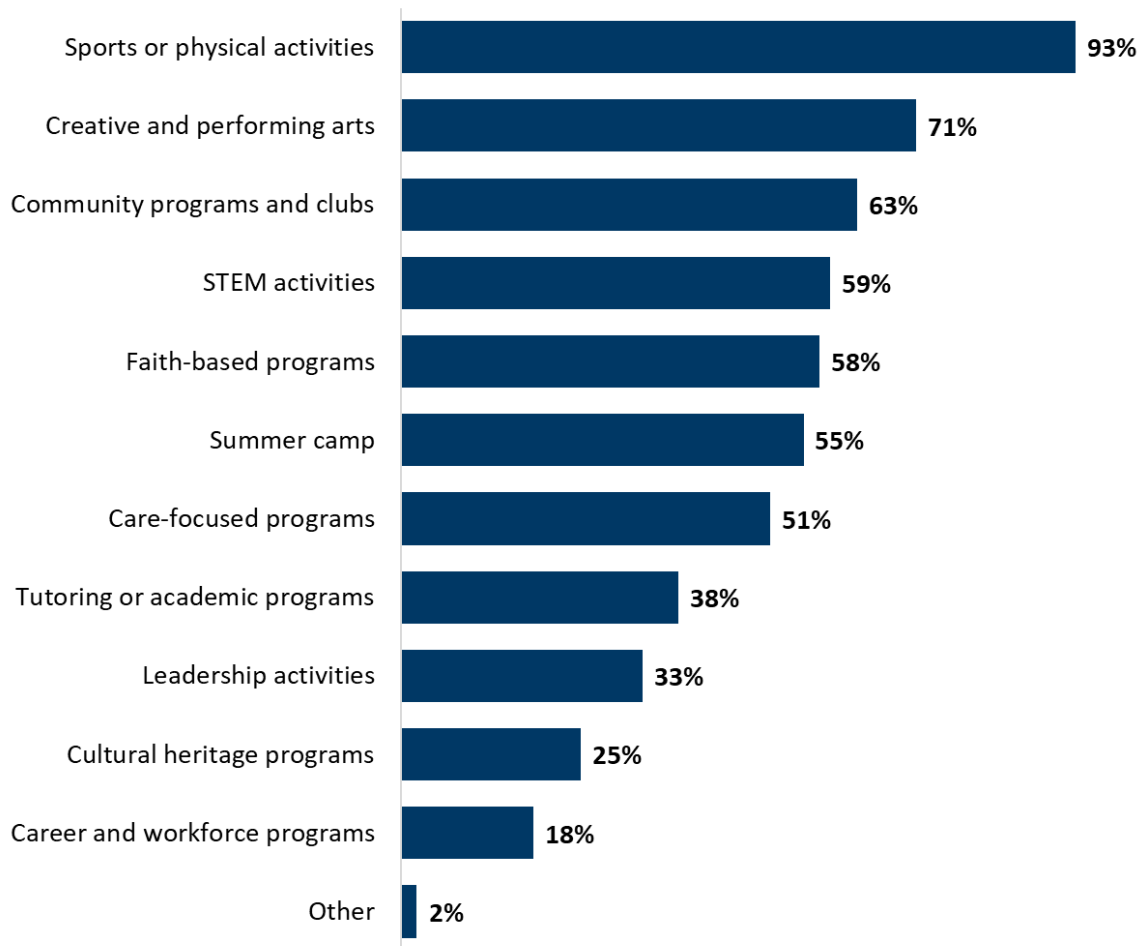
OST program availability

Types of available OST programs

Respondents were asked which types of OST programs they know exist or are offered in their communities (Figure 14). Sports or physical activities were by far the most reported (93%), followed by creative and performing arts programs (71%), community programs and clubs (63%), STEM activities (59%), and faith-based programs (58%).

Just over half of respondents were aware of summer camps (55%) and care-focused program offerings (51%). Smaller shares identified tutoring or academic programs (38%), leadership activities (33%), cultural heritage programs (25%), or career and workforce programs (18%). About 2% selected "Other."

Figure 14. What types of programs are you aware of in your community? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,678)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Across demographic groups, parents consistently reported high awareness of sports/physical activities, creative arts programs, and community programs and clubs. However, notable differences emerged across community type and education level.

Community type

- Parents in suburban and urban areas were roughly twice as likely as those in rural and small towns to report that summer camps and care-focused programs are available.
- Faith-based programs showed the opposite pattern, with higher perceived availability in rural areas and small towns than in urban areas.

- Perceived availability of cultural heritage programs, STEM activities, and tutoring increased steadily along the rural-to-urban continuum, with the lowest reported availability in rural areas and the highest in suburban and urban communities.
- Leadership activities and career or workforce programs were among the least commonly perceived as available across all community types.

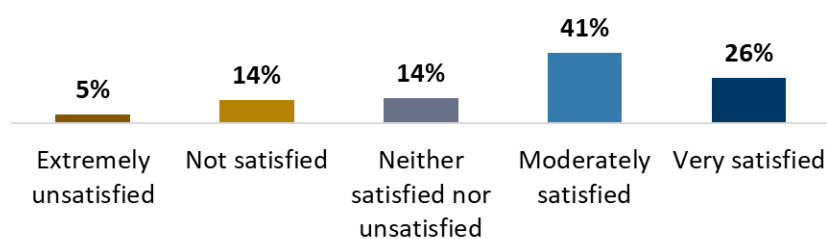
Parents' education level

- Families with higher levels of education reported awareness of a wider variety of OST programs than parents with less education.

Satisfaction with OST program availability

When asked about their satisfaction with the availability of OST programs in their communities, most respondents reported positive views (Figure 15). Approximately 40% said they were moderately satisfied, and 26% were very satisfied. Fourteen percent indicated they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. On the other hand, 14% reported being not satisfied, and 5% said they are extremely unsatisfied.

Figure 15. How satisfied are you with the availability of OST programs in your community? (n = 1,653)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Community type

- Parents in the Twin Cities urban core reported the highest satisfaction with OST program availability, followed by those in regional cities and the Twin Cities suburbs.
- Satisfaction was lowest among parents in rural or small-town communities—18 percentage points lower than among parents in the Twin Cities urban core.

Parents' race and ethnicity

- Satisfaction levels varied substantially across racial and ethnic groups. Parents identifying as Middle Eastern or North African reported the highest satisfaction, followed by Hispanic or Latino/a/x and White parents.
- Satisfaction was the lowest among American Indian parents, Black, African, or African American parents, and multiracial parents—whose rates were 58 percentage points lower than Middle Eastern or North African parents.
- When all non-White racial and ethnic groups were combined into a single category, parents of color were 17 percentage points less likely than White parents to report satisfaction with OST program availability.

Parents' educational level

- Parents with less than a high school education reported the highest satisfaction with OST program availability, followed by those with a doctorate or professional degree, a master's degree, and a high school diploma.
- Satisfaction was the lowest among parents with some college but no degree and those with an associate degree. Their satisfaction rates were more than 30 percentage points lower than among parents with less than a high school education.

OST program participation

A vast majority of the respondents (84%) reported that their children participate in at least one OST program.

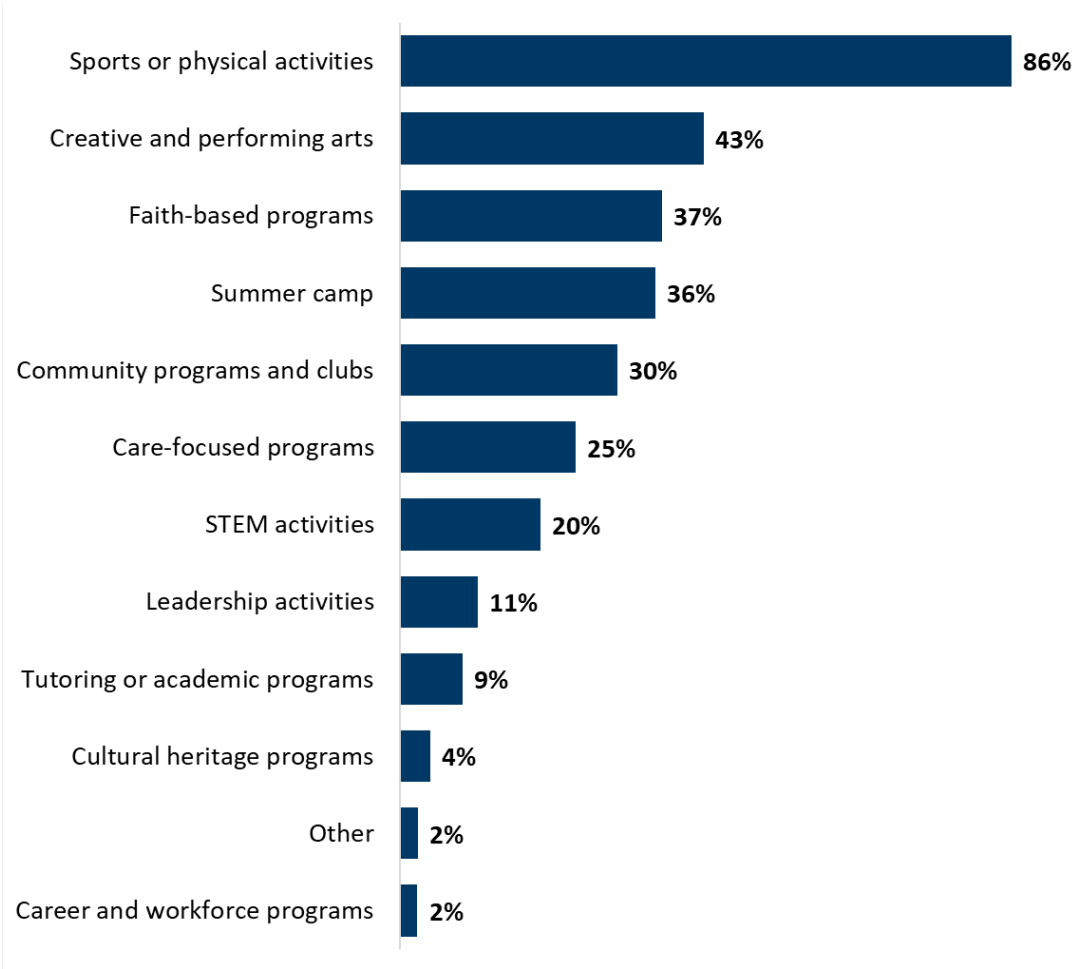
Participation rates did not differ notably by community type, but substantial differences emerged by parents' educational attainment and race and ethnicity.

- Participation increased with parents' educational attainment. Nearly all parents with a bachelor's degree or higher reported that their children participate in OST programs, compared with just over half of parents with a high school diploma.
- Significant differences also appeared across racial and ethnic groups. Participation was highest among families with White parents and the lowest among those with Black, African, or African American parents—a 46 percentage point difference between the two groups.
- Overall, White parents were 27 percentage points more likely than parents of color to report having their children in OST activities.

Parents most frequently reported their children participate in sports or physical activities, selected by 86% of respondents (Figure 16). Creative and performing arts were the next most common (43%), followed by faith-based programs (37%) and summer camps (36%).

Smaller shares reported participation in community programs and clubs (30%), care-focused programs (25%), or STEM activities (20%). Fewer respondents indicated that their children participate in leadership activities (11%), tutoring or academic programs (9%), cultural heritage programs (4%), career and workforce programs (2%), or other types of programs (2%).

Figure 16. What program(s) does your child/children participate in? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,324)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Sports and physical activities were by far the most common form of participation across all demographic groups.

Community type

- Participation in summer camps increased steadily with urbanization. Only 15% of rural families reported having their children in summer camps, compared with 44% in the Twin Cities urban core.
- Engagement in creative and performing arts programs was moderate across all community types, with slightly higher participation in regional cities and the Twin Cities urban core.
- Participation in faith-based programs was more than twice as high in rural and small-town communities as in the Twin Cities urban core.

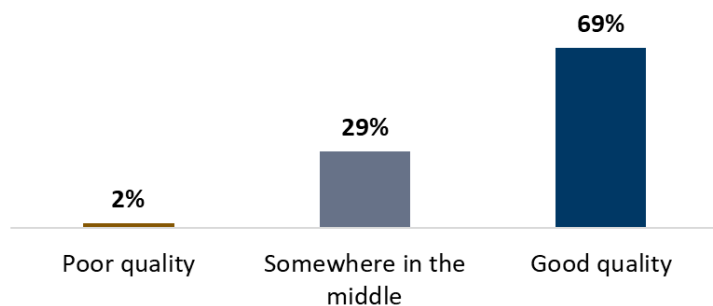
Parents' education level

- Parents with a master's degree or higher were more than twice as likely as parents with a high school diploma to report having children in creative or performing arts programs and summer camps.
- Parents with higher levels of education attainment reported participation in a broader range of OST activities, while parents with less education tended to rely more heavily on sports as their primary OST option.

Quality of OST programs

Most respondents rated their child or children's OST programs positively (Figure 17). Nearly seven in ten (69%) said the programs are of good quality. About three in ten (29%) rated the quality as average or "somewhere in the middle." Only 2% rated their programs as poor quality.

Figure 17. How would you rate the quality of your child/children's OST programs? (n = 1,321)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Across all demographic groups, parents generally rated their children's OST programs positively, with only 0% to 3% describing them as poor quality. However, perceptions of program quality varied somewhat across groups.

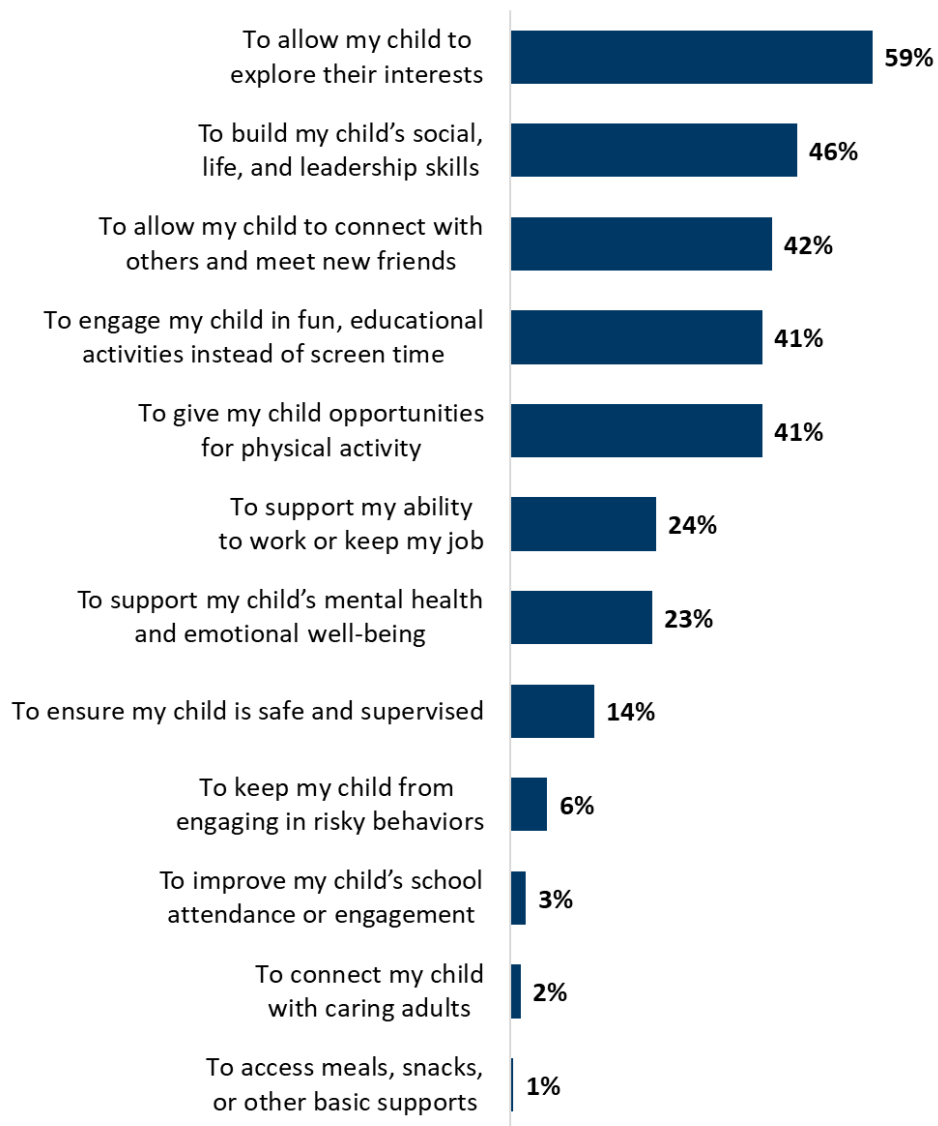
- Parents in the Twin Cities urban core and suburbs were 20 percentage points more likely than parents in rural communities to report their children’s programs as good quality.
- White parents were approximately 20 percentage points more likely than multiracial and American Indian parents to report their children’s programs as good quality.
- Parents with a master’s degree or higher were 20 percentage points more likely than parents with some college to rate their children’s programs as good quality.

Reasons for choosing OST programs

When asked to identify the three biggest reasons they choose OST programs, respondents frequently emphasized opportunities for personal growth and meaningful engagement (Figure 18). The most commonly selected reason was allowing children to explore their interests (59%). Many also selected building social, life, and leadership skills (46%) and helping children connect with others and make new friends (42%). A similar share selected engaging children in fun, educational activities instead of screen time (41%) and providing opportunities for physical activity (41%).

Other common reasons included supporting parents’ ability to work or maintain employment (24%) and supporting children’s mental health and emotional well-being (23%). Smaller shares selected ensuring children are safe and supervised (14%), preventing risky behaviors (6%), improving school attendance or engagement (3%), connecting children with caring adults (2%), or accessing meals or basic supports (1%).

Figure 18. What are the THREE biggest reasons you choose OST program(s)? (n = 1,317)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Community type

- Across all community types, the most common reasons parents send their children to OST programs were to allow children to explore their interests, build social, life, and leadership skills, and participate in fun educational activities instead of screen time.

- Parents in the Twin Cities urban core and suburbs were more than twice as likely as parents in rural areas, small towns, and regional cities to enroll their children in OST programs to support their ability to work or maintain employment.
- Parents in rural areas, regional cities, and Twin Cities suburbs were 13 percentage points more likely than parents in the Twin Cities urban core to select OST programs to provide physical activity opportunities.

Parents' educational level

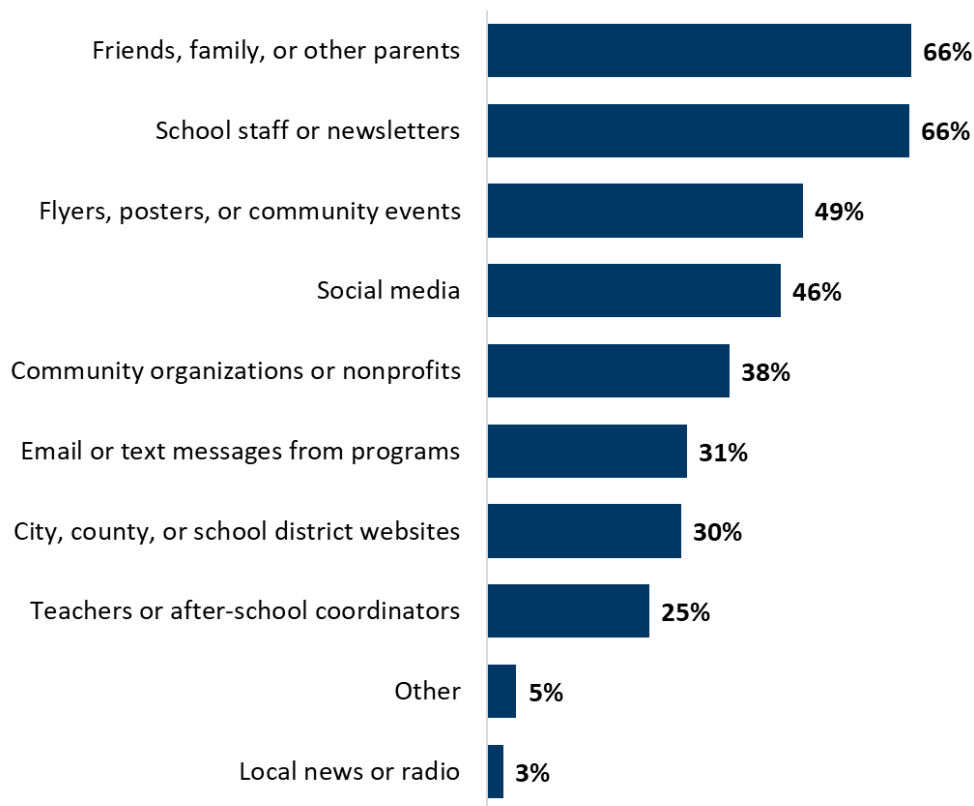
- Parents with higher educational attainment most often selected allowing children to explore their interests and build social, life, and leadership skills as their primary reasons for choosing OST programs.
- Parents with no college degree were more likely to select engaging children in educational activities instead of screen time and helping children make new friends.
- Parents with doctorate degrees were at least 10 percentage points more likely than all other educational groups to report enrolling their children in OST programs to support their ability to work or maintain employment.

How families learn about OST programs

Respondents reported using a variety of sources to learn about OST programs in their communities (Figure 19). The most common sources were friends, family, or other parents (66%) and school staff or school newsletters (66%), underscoring the central role of personal networks and school communication channels.

Nearly half of respondents also reported learning about programs through flyers, posters, or community events (49%), while a substantial share used social media (46%). Community organizations or nonprofits were another common source (38%), followed by email or text messages from programs (31%) and city, county, or school district websites (30%). Teachers or after-school coordinators, though less common, remained notable sources (25%). Smaller shares reported using other methods (5%) or local news or radio (3%).

Figure 19. How do you find out about OST programs in your community? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,296)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

No notable differences emerged by parents' educational level. However, differences were evident across community types.

- Parents in rural areas and small towns most often relied on school staff/newsletters and social media for OST program information.
- Parents in urban communities relied more heavily on friends, family, other parents, and school staff or newsletter.

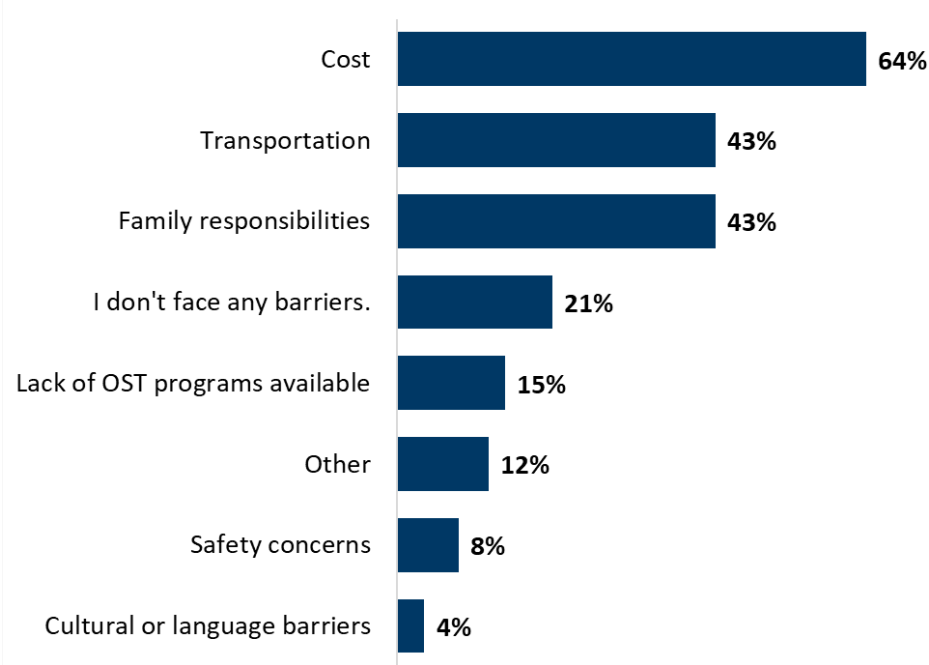
Barriers to OST participation

Types of barriers

Families reported a range of challenges to accessing or participating in OST programs overall (Figure 20). Cost emerged as the most common challenge, selected by nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%). Transportation barriers and family responsibilities were also common, each selected by 43% of families.

About one in five respondents (21%) indicated they face no barriers. Smaller shares reported a lack of available OST programs in their community (15%), other unspecified challenges (12%), safety concerns (8%), or cultural or language barriers (4%).

Figure 20. What challenges, if any, does your family face with OST programs? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,296)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

This pattern was generally consistent across demographic groups, though the frequency of specific challenges varied somewhat.

- Nearly 60% of parents in regional cities and Twin Cities urban core and suburban areas identified program costs as a challenge, compared with 41% of rural parents.
- More than 60% of parents with an associate degree or less identified cost as a challenge, compared with 37% of those with a doctorate or professional degree.

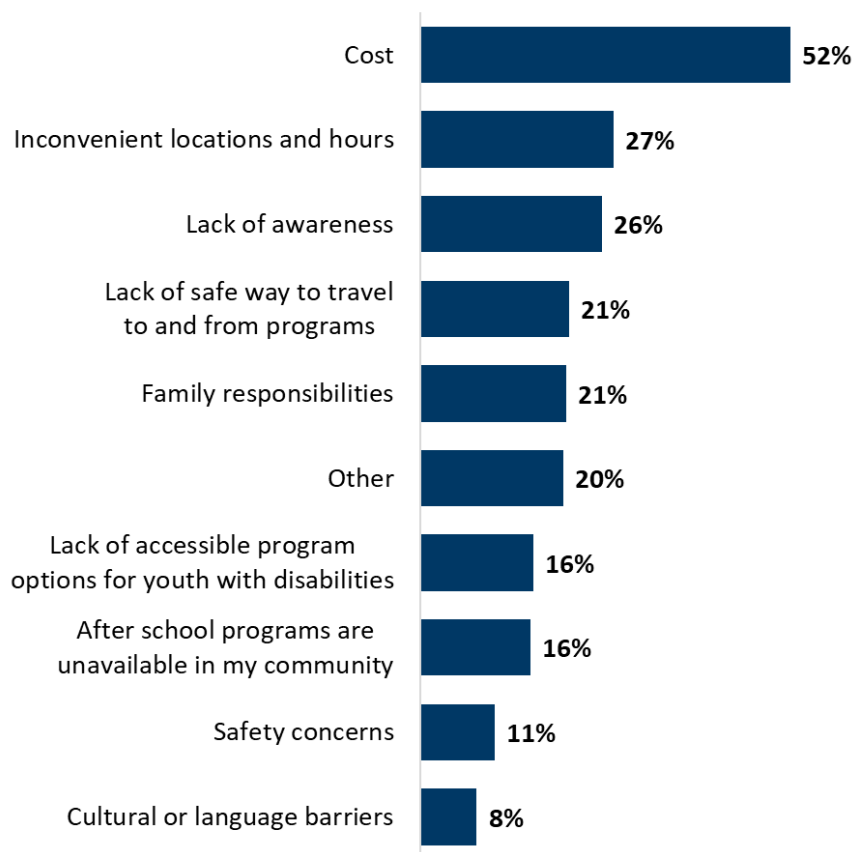
Why parents don't send their children to OST programs

Of the surveyed parents, 237 responded that their children do not participate in OST programs. Some of the reasons they shared for their lack of participation were similar to the barriers that participating families face. The most frequently cited barrier was cost (52%) (Figure 21). Other common challenges included inconvenient

program locations or hours (27%), lack of awareness about available programs (26%), lack of safe transportation to and from programs (21%), and family responsibilities (21%).

Additional barriers included other unspecified reasons (20%), lack of accessible program options for youth with disabilities (16%), and the unavailability of after-school programs in respondents' communities (16%). Smaller shares cited safety concerns (11%) or cultural or language barriers (8%).

Figure 21. What is the reason(s) your child/children does not participate in OST programs? Please select all that apply. (n = 237)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Cost and lack of awareness were the most common reasons cited across demographic groups, with these barriers especially prevalent among families in small towns and the Twin Cities urban core and suburban areas, and among parents with lower educational attainment. Other notable differences include:

Community type

- Parents in rural communities were 20 percentage points more likely than other community types to report inconvenient program locations and hours as a barrier.
- Parents in regional cities were the most likely of all community groups to report a lack of accessible program options for youth with disabilities.
- Parents in the Twin Cities urban core were 10 percentage points more likely than parents in other community types to report transportation challenges and family responsibilities—such as work or caregiving—as barriers.

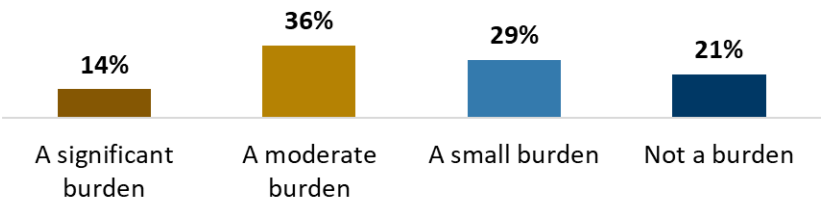
Parents’ educational level

- Parents with a high school diploma or lower cited transportation challenges more frequently than any other educational group.

Cost burden of OST programs

Among families whose children participate in OST programs, many reported that program costs present at least some level of burden (Figure 22). Fourteen percent described costs as a significant burden, while 36% reported a moderate burden. Another 29% said costs are a small burden. Just over one in five families (21%) reported that OST program costs are not a burden.

Figure 22. To what extent are OST program costs a burden for your family? (n = 1,280)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

Community type

- About half of parents in regional cities, the Twin Cities metro, and small towns rated program costs as a moderate or significant burden for their families, compared to 35% in rural areas.

Parents' race and ethnicity

- About three-quarters of multiracial, Black, African, or African American, and Asian or Asian American parents rated program costs as a moderate or significant burden for their families, compared to 47% of White parents and 41% of American Indian or Alaskan Native parents.
- When combined as a single category, parents of color were 19 percentage points more likely than White parents to say program costs are a burden.

Parents' educational level

- By educational level, parents with lower levels of formal education were more likely to report program costs as burdensome. About 65% of parents with a high school diploma rated OST costs as a moderate or significant burden, compared with 39% of parents with a doctorate or professional degree.

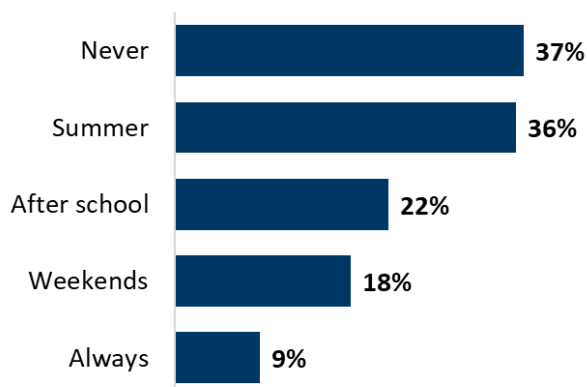
When parents struggle to find OST programs

Responses varied widely about when it is difficult for parents to find OST programs (Figure 23). Over one-third of respondents (37%) said they never experience difficulty. However, a nearly equal share (36%) said summer is the most challenging time to find programs.

Smaller but notable shares selected after school (22%) and weekends (18%). Nine percent of respondents said it is always challenging to find OST programs.

No notable differences were observed across demographic groups.

Figure 23. When is it challenging for you to find OST programs? (n = 1,552)



Desired OST program offerings and improvements

Desired OST program offerings

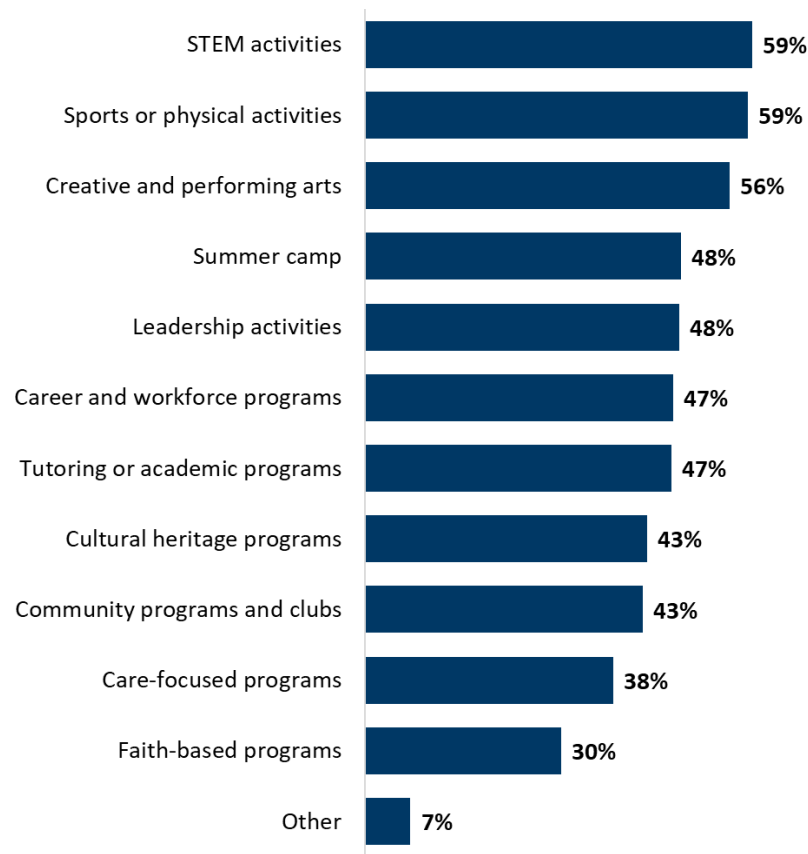
When asked what types of OST programs they would like to see available in their communities, respondents expressed strong interest in a wide range of opportunities (Figure 24). STEM activities and sports or physical activities were the most frequently selected, each chosen by 59% of respondents. Creative and performing arts programs were also highly desired (56%).

Nearly half of respondents indicated interest in summer camps (48%), leadership activities (48%), career and workforce programs (47%), and tutoring or academic programs (47%). Cultural heritage programs and community programs and clubs were each selected by 43% of respondents.

Smaller shares expressed interest in care-focused programs (38%), faith-based programs (30%), or other types of offerings (7%).

No notable differences were observed across demographic groups.

Figure 24. What kind of OST programs would you like to see in your community? Please select all that apply. (n = 1,415)



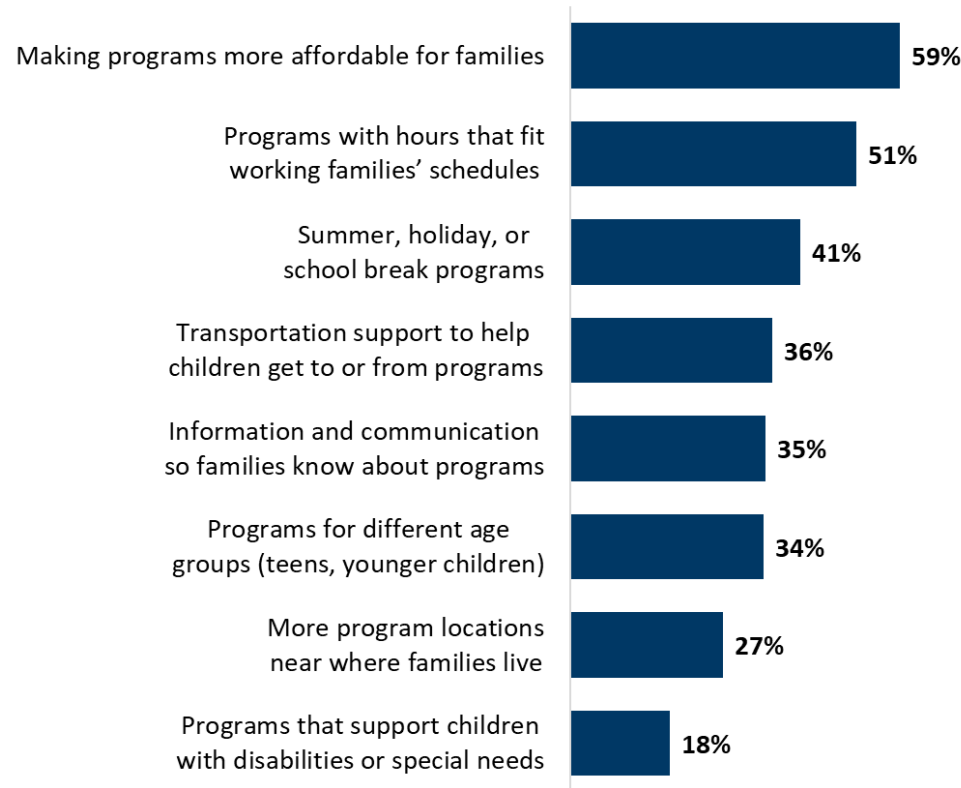
Desired OST program improvements

When asked to identify the three improvements they would most like to see in OST programs, respondents most frequently selected making programs more affordable for families (59%) (Figure 25). Over half also prioritized programs with hours that better fit working families’ schedules (51%).

Other commonly desired improvements included expanding summer, holiday, and school-break programming (41%), increasing transportation support to help children get to and from programs (36%), improving information and communication so families are more aware of available programs (35%), and more programs tailored to different age groups (34%).

Approximately 27% wanted more program locations closer to where families live. Fewer respondents prioritized expanded programming for children with disabilities or special needs, though nearly one in five still selected this option (18%).

Figure 25. If you could pick THREE improvements to OST programs, which would you pick? (n = 1,461)



Notable differences across demographic characteristics

No notable differences were observed across community types; however, differences emerged by parents' educational attainment.

- Most parents, except those with a doctorate or professional degree, identified making programs more affordable as the most important improvement.
- Parents with a doctorate or professional degree prioritized program hours that align with their work schedules, followed by summer, holiday, or school-break programming.
- Parents with less than a high school education were twice as likely as parents with a doctorate to want improved transportation support.

Parent perception of OST programs

The survey ended by asking parents the open-ended question, “Last but not least, why are out-of-school time programs important for your family?” Of the 1,718 parents who responded to the survey, nearly 60% responded to this open-ended question.

Parents' responses centered around several themes related to the perceived benefits of OST programs. Many answers underscored that OST programs provide important benefits not only to youth in the programs but also to the broader family unit. MAD grouped individual themes that represented similar concepts into overall themes to provide a clearer picture of these perspectives. Comments could be counted in multiple themes, meaning themes were not mutually exclusive. Themes are described below. Table 3 presents the counts of responses by overall and individual themes, with individual themes sorted in order of frequency.

Table 3. Themes for open-ended response question, “Last but not least, why are out-of-school time programs important for your family?”

Overall theme	Individual themes	Response count
Exploration and enrichment	Enrichment, explore interests, exposure to a variety of activities, physical activity	608
Connection and Community	Connection, community	386
Safety and supervision	Safety, youth engagement, reduced screen time, prevention of risky behaviors	345
Personal growth and life skills	Development of life skills, cultural development	252
Necessity for working parents/caregivers	Necessity for working parents/caregivers	162

Overall theme	Individual themes	Response count
Academic support	Academic support	17

Exploration and enrichment

About 60% of respondents noted that OST programs are important because they provide youth with enrichment, opportunities to explore their interests, exposure to a variety of activities, and physical activity.

Many parents described OST programs as enriching because they provide fun, engaging outlets for youth to do things they love outside of the school day.

- It allows students to learn more social skills and improve their mental health by being with their peers in a more "fun/relaxed" environment than a normal "classroom" environment.
- [OST programs are] spaces where my kids can try new things, learn, engage, meet new people, and do things they love while growing.

Parents also mentioned that OST programs expose children to a wider range of activities than they may otherwise encounter during the school day or at home. Respondents noted that this exposure helps children discover and deepen interests that may shape future hobbies, passions, or career aspirations.

- [OST programs] also let kids explore interests—like sports, arts, STEM, or volunteering—that they may not get to try during the school day. Having these opportunities helps them grow confidence, learn teamwork, and discover what they enjoy. Over time, that mix of friendships and new experiences supports them in becoming well-rounded individuals.
- More opportunities for my kids to find out what they're interested in and more opportunities for their future.

Lastly, several parents underscored the value of physical activity through OST programs, including non-sports-based, which helps to keep youth healthy and develop an active lifestyle.

- My younger son is not a sports person, but we did find two activities that he does enjoy. They are not easily done at home. He has aged out of one of the activities and the other gets cancelled due to lack of kids. He needs these programs to increase his physical activity.

Connection and community

Nearly 40% of respondents pointed out that OST programs are places where youth can experience social connections and community. Parents noted that OST programs help youth build new friendships and strengthen

peer relationships. In addition, respondents emphasized that OST programs allow youth to build trusting relationships with program staff who can serve as mentors and provide opportunities to interact with supportive adults outside of their family and school environments.

- I love that my kids get to explore their interests and spend time with friends and peers.
- Kids need a village outside of their family and the school setting. This is where they build real connections and receive mentorship.
- I think it's really important for my kids to engage with other kids of similar ages outside of the school setting. I also want my kids to practice listening to/respecting/engaging in conversations with other adults than family members and family friends.

In addition to fostering connections, parents also described OST programs as opportunities to build community for both youth in the programs and their families. They noted that OST programs can help youth become more involved in and contribute to their communities.

- It's important to get involved in the community, not just the community at school. Gives kids and parents opportunities to meet new people, try new activities, and find like-minded people.
- I want to continue to build and strengthen the community that I live in, I want my kids to have a positive impact in and with this community.
- It means that my children are not just stuck at home, and they are able to enrich their lives and their community.

Safety and supervision

One-third of respondents stated that OST programs provide important safety and supervision for youth during the hours between the school day and the end of parents' workdays.

- They provide a safe and supportive place for children when school is not in session.
- We value knowing that our child is safe and secure, and that she is engaging with friends and caregivers that she trusts.

Parents also noted that OST programs keep youth actively engaged during out-of-school hours, reducing idle time spent on electronic devices and social media. Parents describe OST programs as a way to keep kids busy and actively involved in constructive activities.

- Kids spend far too much time on screens and don't just "go out and play" without friends. It's nice to know that my child is spending time with friends, in a safe environment, and either learning, or being active when I have to work, instead of just being on a screen.
- [OST programs are] very important to keep kids engaged and off of screens!
- My kids can go and learn something instead of staying home and watching TV.
- [OST programs] keep my children active, productive, and improve their education.

Further, some parents viewed OST programs as helping prevent risky behaviors by keeping youth engaged in structured, supervised activities.

- They're a form of prevention and keep my children busy and entertained.
- Research has demonstrated that teens' and children's involvement in activities is a protective factor for preventing issues such as substance use, challenges with mental health, and/or safety and support for increased social connection and leadership.
- They are important to keep kids busy, so they don't get into trouble and have people looking out for them.

Personal growth and life skills

About a quarter of parents stated that OST programs foster the development of critical life skills, personal growth, and cultural development. In particular, parents noted that many of the life skills that youth can gain from OST programs can both complement the developmental opportunities available during the school day by helping youth build teamwork, leadership, time management, commitment, and social skills.

- Travel sports teach valuable life lessons about winning, losing, working as a team, never giving up, the list could go on for hours.
- My children have grown immensely by participating in both sports and youth organizations (scouting). Leadership, fair play, respect, and physical activity are just a few of the many reasons we appreciate opportunities to get/keep our kids involved.
- [OST programs] help the kids learn leadership, commitment, and time management.

Parents also mentioned that OST programs can foster cultural development and further contribute to the development of life skills such as self-confidence. Similarly, OST programs can help expose youth to different cultures and the diverse populations within their communities.

- They are important for kids to interact, succeed academically and socially, and to be active not become couch potatoes, as well as also being engaged in culturally appropriate programs that support their language and culture which are important to build kids who are proud with high self-esteem and confidence.
- Out-of-school programs provide families with safe supervision, cultural enrichment, and a deeper connection to community heritage.
- Our children can interact with, learn from, and develop friendships with a more diverse group of individuals while exploring their interests.

Necessity for working parents/caregivers

Beyond the aspirational and developmental benefits of OST programs, respondents emphasized that OST programs are a practical necessity for many working families. Parents noted that OST programs provide safe, supervised care during times when school is not in session but caregivers are working.

- [OST programs] ensure my child has fun in a safe, learning environment, during the times when I must be at work.
- I would not be able to keep my job without our public-school-based OST program. My child is too young to get himself to or from school, and the school hours conflict with our working hours. But I do think he benefits from his program, in that he is engaging in stimulating non-screen activities with peers and supportive adults. It helps him transition in and out of the school day as well.
- It is not feasible for most parents to work a full-time job and take care of kids at the same time. Out-of-school programs allow kids to play more, make connections/ friendships, and be more active vs being home on screens to keep them busy while parents are working.

Academic support

Academic support was the least frequently mentioned theme, with only 17 responses. Although less common, some parents noted that OST programs can help boost academic performance by reinforcing classroom learning, providing tutoring, and helping ensure homework completion.

- After school programming is important for helping get homework done with supervision.
- [OST programs] reinforce what is being taught in class.
- [OST programs] will keep momentum in their knowledge of academics from school.

XII. Appendix D: Program provider survey findings

Methodology

The online out-of-school time (OST) program provider survey was sent to 209 youth program providers across Minnesota using a list provided by the study's external advisory committee. As with the parent survey, MAD supplemented this distribution with a snowball sampling approach to expand outreach by encouraging recipients to share the survey with additional youth program providers within their networks. Youth program providers were instructed that only one representative from each youth-serving organization in Minnesota should complete the survey, preferably someone in a leadership role familiar with program trends, funding, and organizational needs.

The survey included five main categories of questions:

- Organizational info (e.g., organization type, age groups served, location, communities and Tribes served)
- Financial status and funding sources
- Current OST program offerings, including reasons families enroll their children in programs
- Challenges in providing quality OST programs
- Youth program providers' perceptions on why OST programs are important for youth

The survey was open from February 2 through March 31, 2026. At closing, a total of 116 youth program providers completed the survey.

Response counts varied for each question as respondents could choose multiple responses on several questions. MAD categorized and quantified open-ended responses to identify key themes. Quotes from open-ended responses are included as bulleted lists and emphasized in *italics*. These statements reflect the participants' perceptions and experiences, but MAD may have edited them for privacy, spelling, clarity, and length.

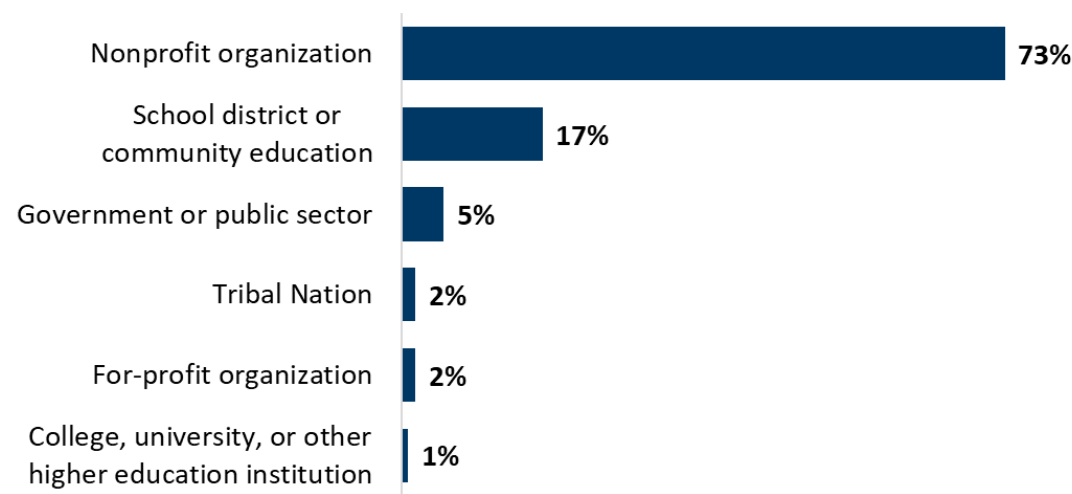
Findings

Profile of respondents

Organization type

Nearly three-quarters of responding youth program providers (73%) were nonprofits (Figure 26). School districts and community education organizations comprised the next largest segment at 17%, while government or public-sector entities represented 5%. Smaller shares of respondents came from Tribal Nations (2%), for-profit organizations (2%), and higher education institutions (1%).

Figure 26. Which of the following best describes your organization? (n = 116)



Age groups served

Most responding youth program providers reported serving students across multiple age groups (Figure 27). A large majority work with high school students (88%) and middle school students (86%), and nearly three-quarters (74%) serve elementary-aged students. A smaller share served young adults ages 19–21 (63%).

Figure 27. Which of the following school age groups do you serve? Please select all that apply. (n = 116)



Location

As part of the survey, respondents identified their organization's location by selecting from a predefined list of regions. Table 4 shows the counties included in each region.

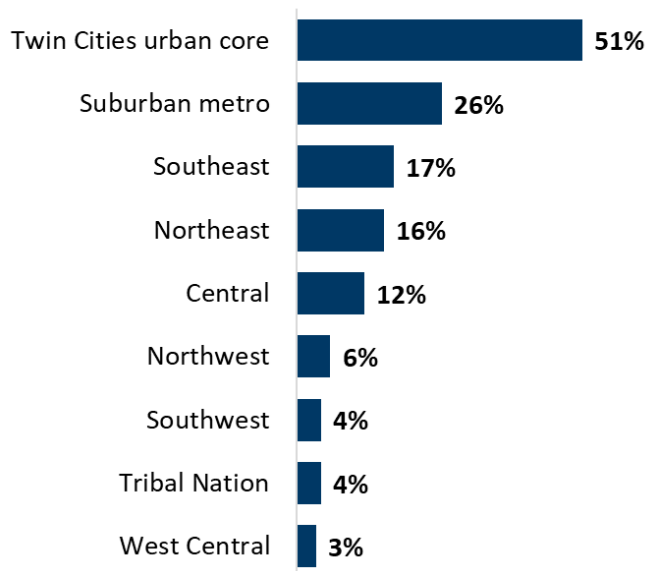
More than three-quarters of responding providers are located in the Twin Cities metro area (Figure 28). Over half (51%) are based in Minneapolis and St. Paul. An additional 26% are located in the surrounding suburbs.

Outside the Twin Cities metro area, respondents represent a broad geographic spread across Greater Minnesota. The largest shares come from the Southeast (17%) and Northeast (16%) regions, followed by the Central region (12%). In addition to the other regions represented, 4% of respondents were from Tribal Nations.

Table 4. List of counties in each region

Region	Counties and/or Cities
Central	Benton, Cass, Chisago, Crow Wing, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Pine, Sherburne, Stearns, Todd, Wadena, and Wright
West Central	Becker, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Wilkin
Northeast	Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis
Northwest	Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Mahnommen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, and Roseau
Southeast	Blue Earth, Brown, Dodge, Faribault, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Le Sueur, Martin, Mower, Nicollet, Olmsted, Rice, Sibley, Steele, Wabasha, Waseca, Watonwan, and Winona
Southwest	Big Stone, Chippewa, Cottonwood, Jackson, Kandiyohi, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, McLeod, Meeker, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Renville, Rock, Swift, and Yellow Medicine
Suburban Metro	Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Scott, Washington, and suburban Hennepin and Ramsey
Twin Cities Urban Core	Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul

Figure 28. What part of Minnesota is your organization located in? Please select all that apply. (n = 116)



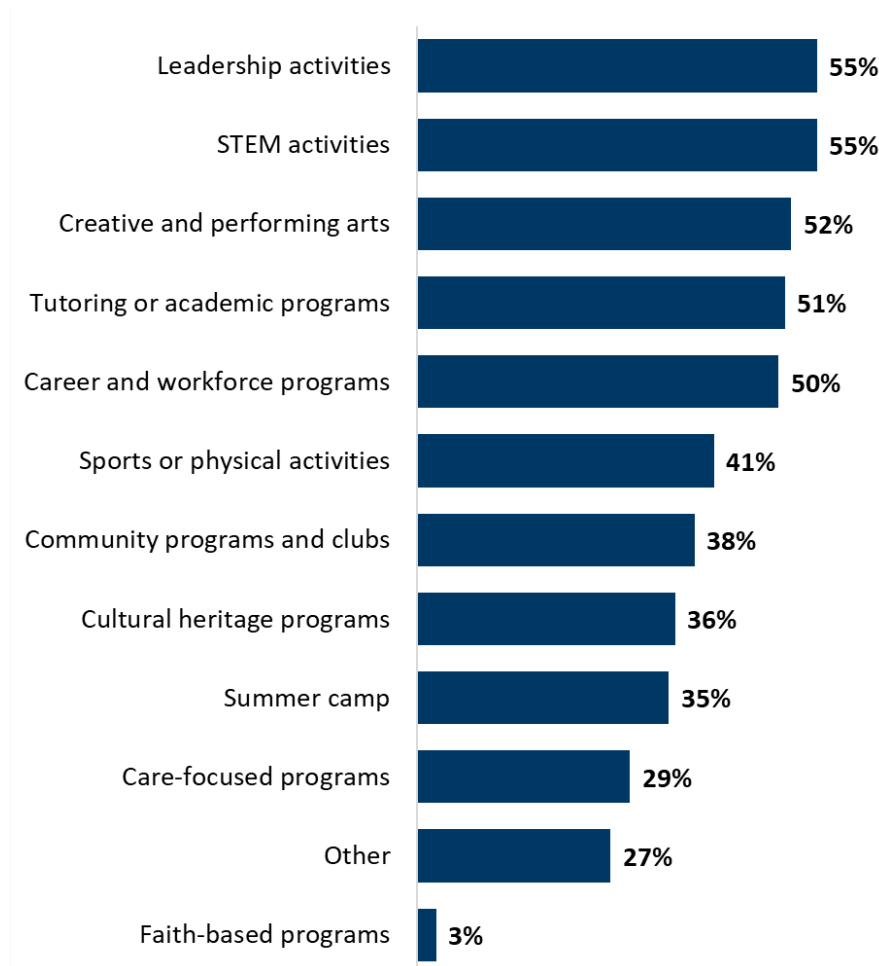
OST program offerings

Responding providers offer a broad array of OST programming (Figure 29). The most common programs include leadership activities and STEM programs, each provided by 55% of respondents. Creative and performing arts programs (52%), tutoring or academic support (51%), and career and workforce programs (50%) are also widely offered.

Physical activity and community-based programs are also common, with 41% offering sports or physical activities and 38% offering community programs or clubs. More than one-third provide cultural heritage programs (36%) or summer camps (35%). Care-focused programs are offered by 29% of organizations.

In addition, 27% of respondents reported offering other types of programming. These programs include basic needs support, violence prevention and healthy relationship education, mentoring and youth development, justice-focused programming, personal enrichment and skill-building activities, health and wellness education, outdoor recreation, and special-interest clubs, event access. Faith-based programs are offered by a small share of respondents (3%).

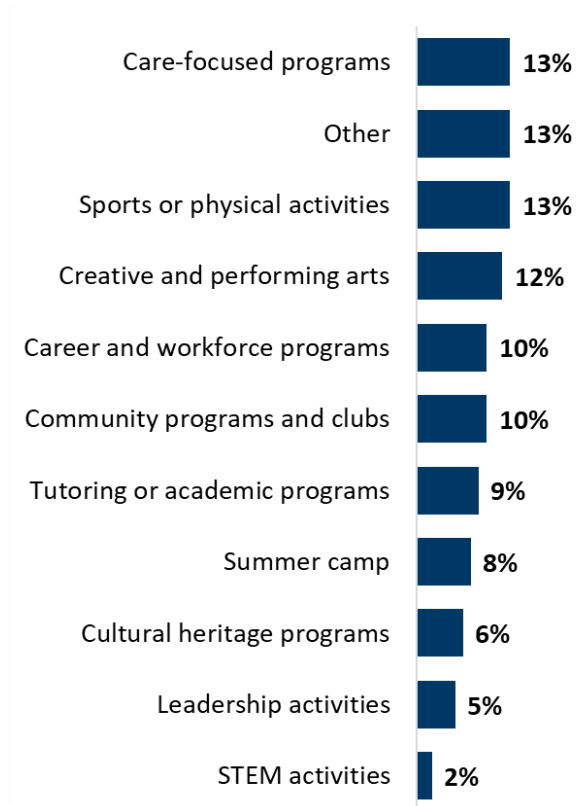
Figure 29. What type(s) of OST programming do you provide? Please select all that apply. (n = 112)



When asked which of their OST offerings receives the highest attendance, youth program providers reported a broad mix of program types (Figure 30). Care-focused programs, sports or physical activities, and programs categorized as “other” were the most frequently identified, each selected by 13% of respondents. Creative and performing arts programs followed closely at 12%.

Career and workforce programs and community programs or clubs were each cited by 10% of youth program providers as their most attended offering. Respondents also identified tutoring or academic programs (9%), summer camp (8%), and cultural heritage programs (6%) as top-attended options by smaller proportions of respondents. Leadership activities (5%) and STEM activities (2%) were less commonly reported as the programs with the highest attendance, and no respondents identified faith-based programs as their most attended offering.

Figure 30. Of the programs you selected, which is the most attended? (n = 93)

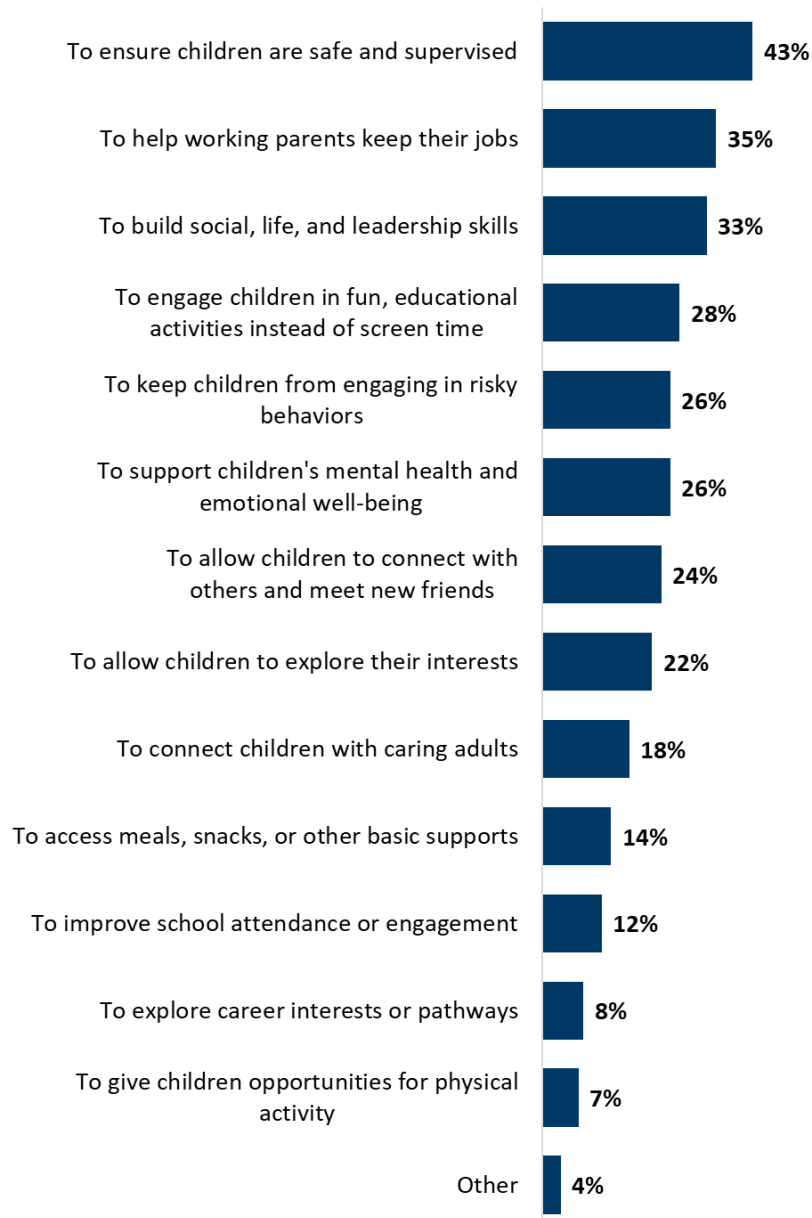


Reasons for enrolling children in OST programs

When asked about the top reasons families in their communities enroll their children in OST programs (Figure 31), youth program providers most frequently cited safety and supervision. Forty-three percent said families primarily participate to ensure children are safe and cared for outside of school hours. Supporting working parents was the second most common reason (35%), followed closely by helping children build social, life, and leadership skills (33%).

Youth program providers also identified several additional motivations: engaging children in fun, educational activities instead of screen time (28%), keeping children from engaging in risky behaviors (26%), and supporting children’s mental health and emotional wellbeing (26%). Other reasons included opportunities to meet new friends (24%), explore interests (22%), connect with caring adults (18%), or access meals or basic supports (14%). Smaller shares noted improved school attendance or engagement (12%), career exploration (8%), or physical activity (7%) as primary motivators. Four percent selected “other,” noting reasons such as providing childcare for working parents and connecting youth with cultural activities.

Figure 31. What do you think are the THREE biggest reasons families send their kids to OST programs in your community? (n =108)



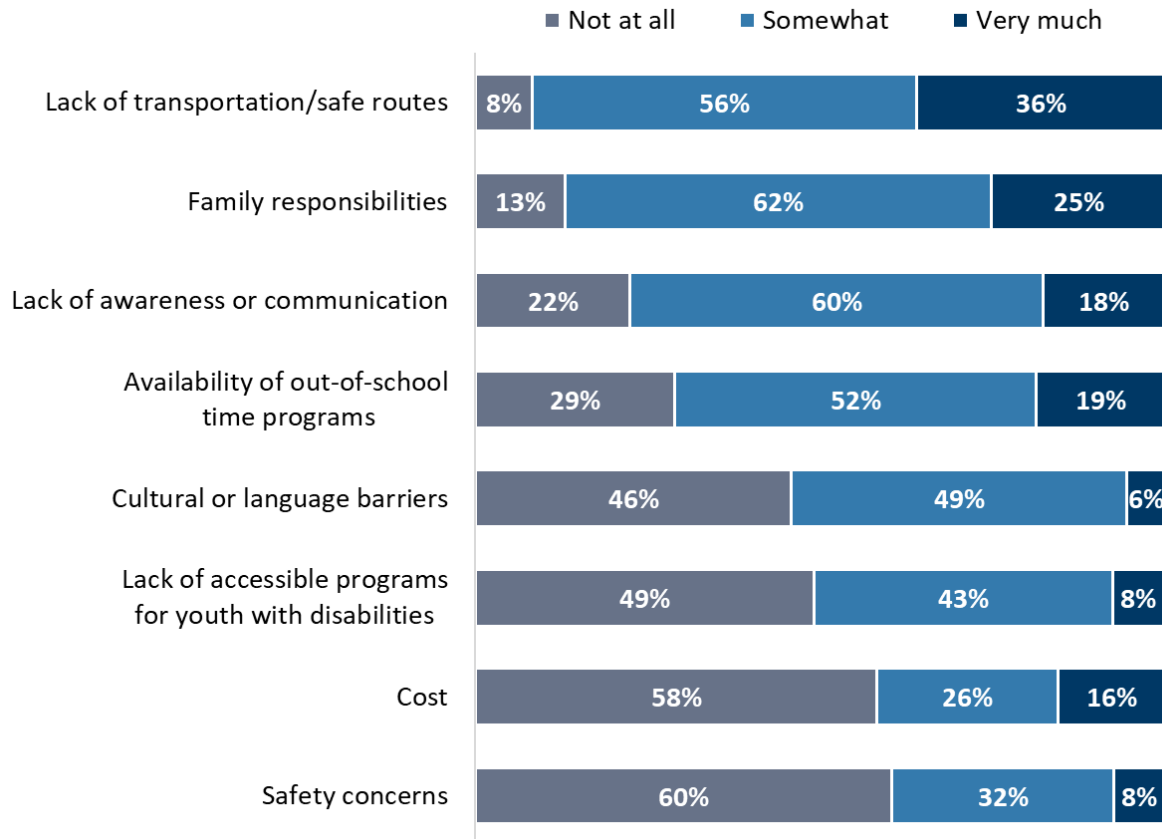
Barriers to OST participation

Youth program providers responded to a question regarding factors preventing youth participation (Figure 32). Transportation challenges emerged as the biggest barrier, with 92% saying lack of transportation or safe routes prevented participation. A large share of youth program providers (87%) indicated that family responsibilities prevent participation.

Awareness and availability are moderate barriers including lack of awareness or communication (78%) and lack of program availability (71%). Over half of respondents indicated that cultural or language barriers and limited accessibility for youth with disabilities are also factors preventing participation.

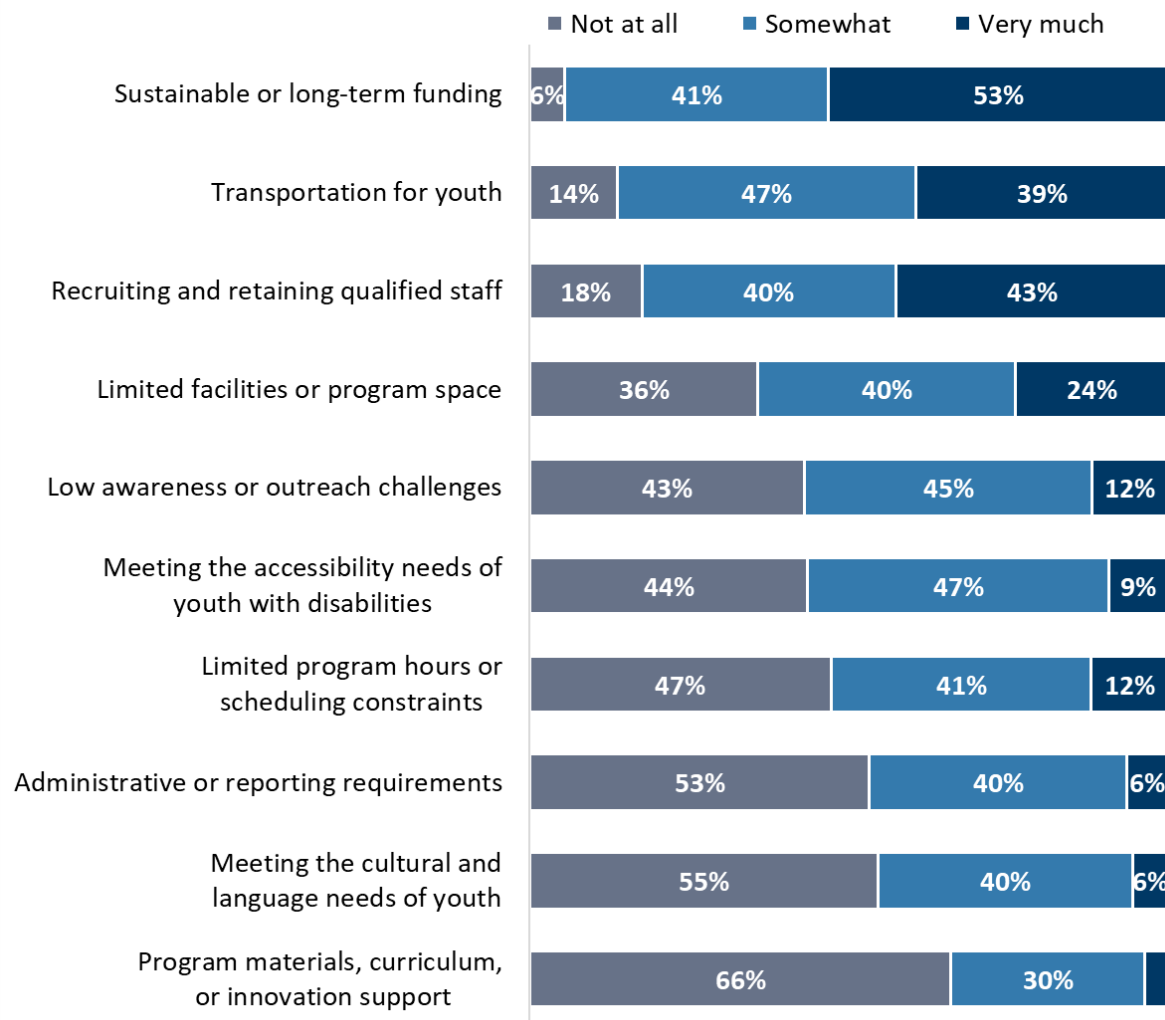
By contrast, 60% of youth program providers indicated cost and safety concerns were not at all barriers.

Figure 32. How much do the following factors prevent youth from participating in your OST programs? (n = 108)



Factors affecting youth program providers' ability to offer quality OST programs

Figure 33. How much do the following impact your ability to provide quality OST programs? (n =108)



Youth program providers reported that several factors substantially affect their ability to deliver high-quality OST programs (Figure 33). Sustainable or long-term funding was the top barrier, with 94% of youth program providers saying it impacts their work. Transportation for youth was also a major issue, impacting 86% of youth program providers. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff was nearly as challenging, affecting 83% of youth program providers.

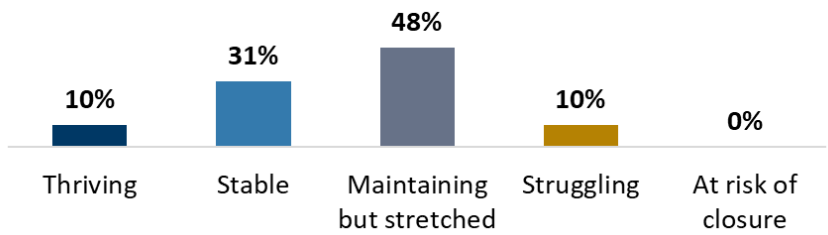
Other commonly reported challenges included access to facilities and program space (64%), awareness and outreach (57%), meeting the accessibility needs of youth with disabilities (56%), and scheduling constraints (53%).

Administrative or reporting requirements (46%) and meeting the cultural and language needs of youth (46%) were less frequently identified as barriers, though still relevant for many programs. Program materials, curriculum, and innovation support were the least commonly cited challenge, impacting 34% of youth program providers.

OST program funding

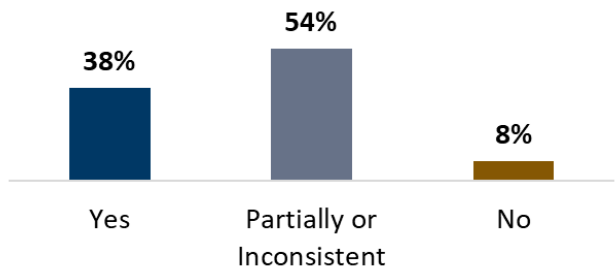
Youth program providers described the current financial state of their OST programs (Figure 34). Nearly half (48%) reported that their programs are “maintaining but stretched.” About 40% indicated their programs are either stable (31%) or thriving (10%). Another 10% described theirs as struggling. No respondents reported being at risk of closure.

Figure 34. How would you describe the overall state of your OST program(s)? (n = 115)



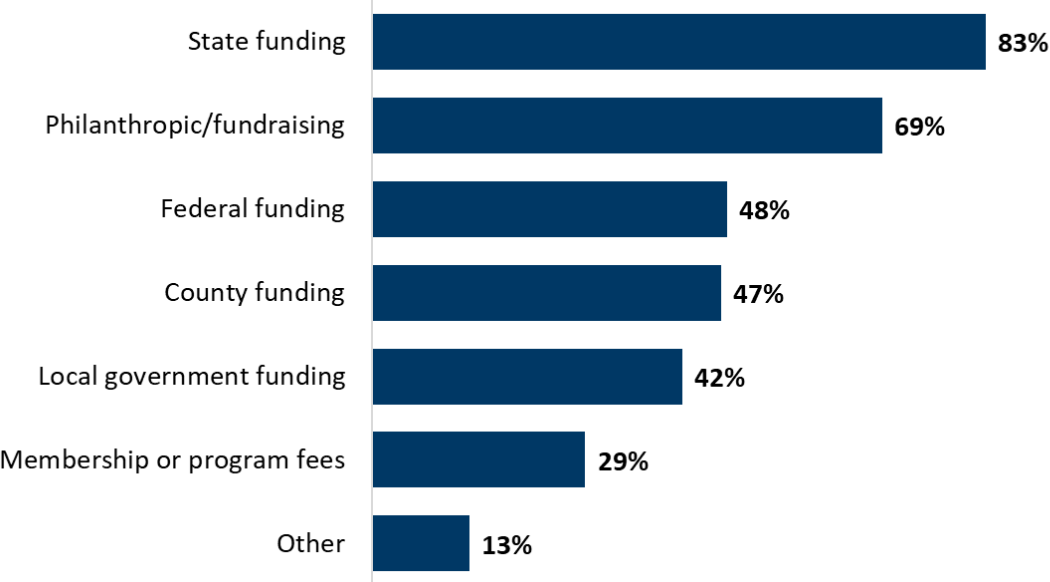
When asked about funding stability (Figure 35), fewer than four in ten (38%) reported having stable funding. A little over half (54%) said their funding is only partially stable or inconsistent, indicating ongoing uncertainty in financial resources. An additional 8% reported having no stable funding at all.

Figure 35. Does your organization have stable funding? (n = 113)



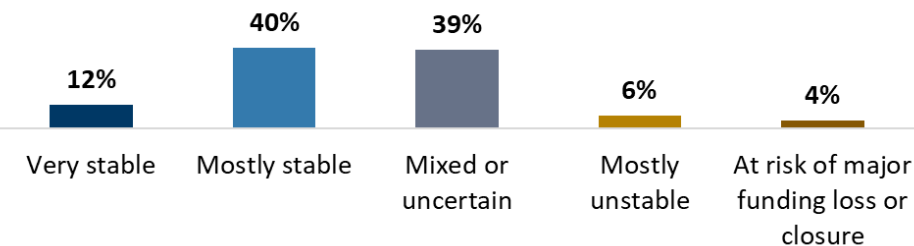
More than four in five organizations (83%) reported receiving state funding (Figure 36). Philanthropic support and fundraising also play a major role, supporting 69% of responding organizations. About half of youth program providers receive federal funding (48%) or county funding (47%), and 42% receive support from local government. Membership or program fees contribute to the budgets of 29% of organizations, and 13% reported other sources of support.

Figure 36. What are your organization’s funding sources? Please select all that apply. (n = 115)



Looking ahead, slightly over half of youth program providers (52%) described their organization’s financial health for the coming year as mostly or very stable (Figure 37). Nearly 40% reported their outlook as mixed or uncertain. A smaller share indicated more serious concerns, with 6% reporting their financial health as mostly unstable and 4% saying they are at risk of major funding loss or closure.

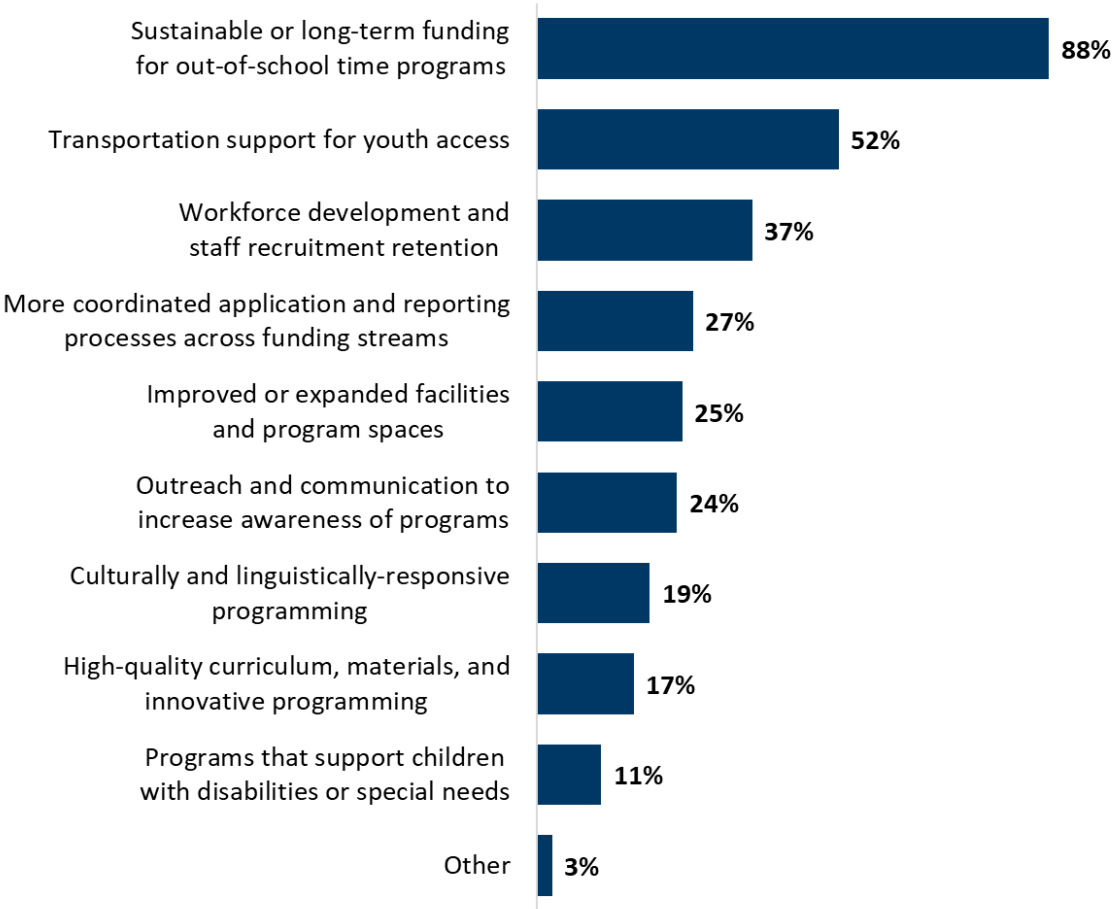
Figure 37. How would you describe your organization’s financial health in the next year? (n = 111)



Ideas for strengthening OST programs

Top investment priorities

Figure 38. If you could choose, what are the top three things that should receive the most investment to strengthen OST programs? (n = 109)



When asked to identify the top three areas that should receive the most investment to strengthen OST programs (Figure 38), youth program providers overwhelmingly selected sustainable or long-term funding (88%), making it the most widely supported investment need. Transportation support for youth access was the second-highest priority, selected by over half of respondents (52%).

Workforce development and staff recruitment and retention was another key area, selected by 37% of youth program providers. Additional administrative and structural supports were also identified, including more coordinated application and reporting processes across funding streams (27%), improved or expanded facilities and program spaces (25%), and outreach and communication to increase awareness of programs (24%).

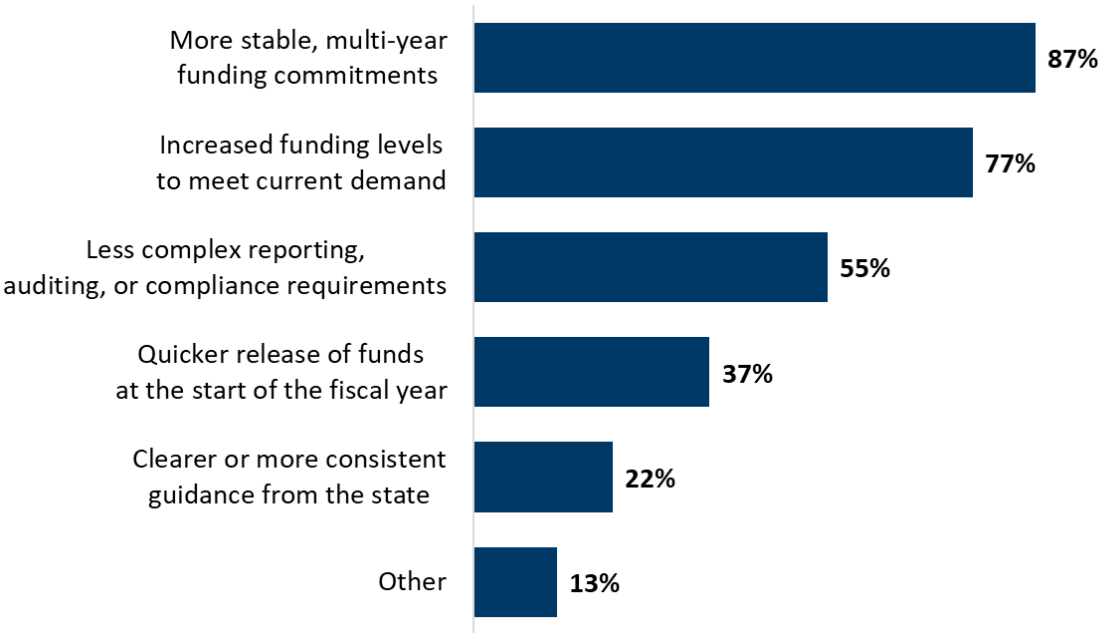
Other priorities, while selected less frequently, remain important for strengthening the OST ecosystem. These include culturally and linguistically responsive programming (19%), high-quality curriculum and innovative program materials (17%), and supports for children with disabilities or special needs (11%). A small number of respondents identified additional “other” priorities (3%).

Desired improvements to state funding

Youth program providers receiving state funding were asked what improvements they would most like to see in state funding for OST programs (Figure 39). Nearly nine in ten respondents (87%) identified more stable, multi-year funding commitments as a key need. Increased funding levels to meet current demand were also a top priority, cited by 77% of youth program providers.

More than half (55%) said they would like to see less complex reporting, auditing, or compliance requirements. Additional improvements included quicker release of funds at the start of the fiscal year (37%) and clearer or more consistent guidance from the state (22%). About 13% identified other needs.

Figure 39. What improvements would you like to see related to OST state funding? Please select all that apply. (n = 93)



Program provider perception of OST programs

The survey ended by asking youth program providers the open-ended question, “Why are out-of-school time programs important for youth?” Of the 116 providers who responded to the survey, 92 completed the open-ended question.

Across their comments, youth program providers emphasized a wide range of benefits that OST programs offer. Many highlighted how these programs enrich young people’s experiences by complementing what they receive at school and at home. MAD grouped individual themes that represented similar concepts into overall themes to provide a clearer picture of these perspectives. Comments could be counted in multiple themes, meaning themes were not mutually exclusive. Table 5 below presents these overall themes along with the number of responses associated with each.

Table 5. Why are OST programs important for youth?

Overall theme	Individual themes	Response count
Safety and supervision	Safety, youth engagement, reduced screen-time, prevention of risky behaviors	64
Connection and Community	Connection, community	60
Exploration and enrichment	Enrichment, explore interests, exposure to a variety of activities	55
Holistic support	Support, necessity	45
Personal growth and life skills	Development of life skills, cultural development	44
Academic advancement	Academic support, school attendance, opportunities for continued learning	20

Safety and supervision

About 70% of responses noted that OST programs are important because they are an additional supervised safe space for youth to go outside of school and the home. The safety provided by the programs also gives parents and caregivers confidence that their youth are engaging in healthy, productive activities and minimizing engagement in risky or dangerous behaviors. Further, OST programs provide outlets for youth to stay busy and active, reducing their time online and on social media.

- The most dangerous time to be a kid are the hours between 3–7 p.m. when school is out and parents are still working - out of school time programs like Boys and Girls Clubs are open during those critical hours for youth to be seen, heard, and protected.
- These programs help young people stay engaged, build friendships, and continue learning outside the classroom, while also providing healthy alternatives to excessive screen time and risky behaviors.
- Our neighborhoods are deficient of healthy outlets for youth to exhibit otherwise normal thrill-seeking behavior(s), which causes them to create or explore unhealthy outlets for this normal developmental stage of their adolescent lives. Youth deserve out-of-school time programs, so they develop healthy activity patterns, rather than delinquent behavior.
- OST programs provide youth a valuable third place space that isn't a digital space.

Connection and community

About two-thirds of youth program providers pointed to the ways in which OST programs provide important opportunities for connection and community for youth. In particular, OST programs create valuable opportunities for youth to connect not only with their peers and classmates but also other caring adults outside of their home.

- *These programs offer consistent access to supportive adults, mentorship, and positive peer connections.*
- *Aside from providing needed tutoring, academia, and cultural teachings, they connect youth with meaningful role models and mentors, and a circle of supportive friends and community.*
- *Our model was founded on research showing that the single most important factor in overcoming childhood adversity is a long-term, nurturing relationship with a consistent and caring adult. Research over the past three decades continues to affirm how much these relationships matter.*
- *Our youth need opportunities to connect to caring and reliable adults who can guide them, especially when their parents may not be able to.*

OST programs also help build strong, healthy communities by connecting youth to the places where they live and fostering a sense of belonging that encourages them to give back.

- [OST programs] keep youth engaged in positive experiences within the community.
- Seasoned staff are meeting staff and volunteers that have experienced and benefited from out of school time as children, which has completely altered their understanding of community and social emotional learning. This grounding enables deep connection with the youth and commitment to quality programs. It translates into civic and community engagement.

Exploration and enrichment

The majority of respondents stated that OST programs allow youth to explore their interests outside of traditional classroom subjects, while providing a fun environment that contrasts with the pressures of school. OST programs also can expose youth to a variety of new activities and hobbies.

- Beyond safety, after-school time serves as a powerful extension of the learning day and year, offering enrichment opportunities from STEM activities to the arts that might not be available in a traditional classroom setting. By combining supervision with structured exploration, these programs empower youth to discover new passions, build essential life skills, and reach their full potential.
- Out of school time programs offer additional opportunities for youth that they might not receive elsewhere such as in school or at home. We provide career exploration, exposure, and experiences.
- Our youth are the future, and everyone deserves an opportunity to explore their interests, strengths, and have fun while doing it.

Holistic support

In addition to providing fun and connections for youth, about half of responses noted that OST programs also serve as essential support systems for working parents, bridging the gap between the end of school day and the end of the workday.

- [OST] programs allow parents to stay in the workforce knowing their children are safe and learning.
- Most parents in our community are a two-parent-work house and OST activities provide a safe space for kids to keep active and participate. If not, they would be home alone and unsupervised.

Further, OST programs can also help to bridge gaps in need by providing access to activities, meals, and other resources that support not only the youth in the program, but entire families.

- Out-of-school time programs help to fill gaps in services for children who may not otherwise have access due to family financial obligations.
- Closing the opportunity gap: Consistent access to enrichment helps level the playing field for students who might not otherwise have access to specialized tutoring or extracurriculars.
- It also allows equitable access to opportunities such as art, music, sports and college and career readiness for families that cannot afford traveling sports clubs, private music lessons, and art classes.

- For youth from immigrant, refugee, low-income, or historically marginalized communities, OST programs can be a lifeline, offering mentorship, culturally responsive support, meals, and resources they may not otherwise access.
- Youth have a warm space to be themselves, and we ensure they leave with snacks and drinks until the next day. Our staff have resources to help youth navigate any hardships in life, and we have free resources, including food bags, hygiene bags, and clothing. Schools do not have the capacity to provide these resources, and their focus is primarily on education.

Personal growth and life skills

Half of respondents described the many ways OST programs help youth grow—not only academically or athletically but also by equipping them with skills that will carry into adulthood. Though too numerous to list in full, youth program providers repeatedly pointed to specific life skills cultivated in OST programs, such as confidence, teamwork, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation.

- We believe in creating supportive environments that nurture confidence and growth by promoting social and emotional wellness in a fun, non-judgmental environment. Our curriculum focuses on developing self-esteem, confidence, self-awareness, self-regulation, and demonstrating the dynamics of teamwork, and the value of clear communication and establishing healthy boundaries. All important pieces which contribute to future awareness, and compassionate and connected community members.

Importantly, youth program providers noted that OST programs, unlike school or other competitive environments, allow students to develop these skills without shame or assessment against a standard, like grades.

- Out-of-school programs provide a "shame-free environment" where youth can explore personal identity and develop coping mechanisms. Our programs offer instruction in de-escalation and self-regulation. We also provide safe spaces for our youth to come speak with mentors and coaches and feel like it is a home away from home.
- Young people deserve caring, third spaces where they can learn, grow, make mistakes, and be themselves.

Some OST programs also provide outlets for youth to explore their own cultures and learn about new ones.

- In our spaces, they have the opportunity to learn about our Anishinaabe culture.

- In after-school programming, we have the opportunity to bring activities that keep youth connected to their cultural roots and build pride in where they come from that they don't always get during the school day. Our youth are all immigrant/refugee youth whose parents were often were not born in the US and have limited exposure themselves.

Academic advancement

Lastly, about 20% of respondents stated that OST programs can supplement and support academics by providing tutoring, promoting additional learning opportunities, and encouraging consistent school attendance.

- OST programs reinforce learning through tutoring, homework help, STEM activities, and literacy support. They help close achievement gaps, boost school engagement, and improve graduation outcomes, especially for students who may not get that support at home.
- Youth have experienced a series of unprecedented events over the last several years that have impacted school attendance, mental health, sense of connection, and more. Out-of-school time programming supports youth in making positive connections to each other, staff, school, and community. We have students who only come to school on days when we have after-school programming. It is powerful!
- [OST programs] provide additional education support and complements to what they may learn at school or at home.

XIII. Appendix E: OST external advisory interview summary

This document summarizes interviews with representatives on the project’s external advisory team. The external advisory team members have partnered with state staff to identify and connect people and resources, review research methods and plans, promote project and research engagement, help review findings, and make additional recommendations for the final legislative report. MAD conducted hour-long interviews with eight of the 11 external advisory team members.

Youth programs represented

Table 6 lists the organizations represented by the external advisory team members that MAD interviewed, including the locations they serve and additional program information. All external advisory team members are part of the organizations listed below. Most of the organizations are primarily engaged in statewide OST program efforts.

Table 6. List of organizations represented on the external advisory team

OST Program/organization	Locations served	Organization information
Beacons/YMCA	Statewide	Beacons is a collaborative community initiative providing after-school and summer care for young people in grades K-12. Through Beacons, YMCA of the North helps provide high-quality educational, recreational, and youth development activities while limiting barriers to participation for all youth.
Boys and Girls Clubs of Minnesota	Statewide	Operating 63 locations, the programs include literacy, workforce development, financial management, and social-emotional learning. Goals are to help students graduate high school, demonstrate good character, and live a healthy lifestyle.
Minnesota Community Education Association (MCEA)	Statewide program sites in Mahtomedi and Mounds View	MCEA is dedicated to supporting and empowering community education professionals to strengthen lifelong learning in their communities. Their goal is for everyone to have access to quality learning opportunities and resources, regardless of need, to eliminate gaps and positively impact communities.

OST Program/organization	Locations served	Organization information
Minnesota Alliance with Youth – Youth Council (MYC)/ AmeriCorps	Statewide	This program brings people together in service across generations to make Minnesota a place where all young people can thrive. The Minnesota Youth Council has 36 representatives helping amplify the voices and power of young people across the state. Through AmeriCorps, youth build skills and work to support young people in their communities.
Sprockets	St. Paul	Sprockets works to improve the quality, availability, equity, and effectiveness of OST programs in St. Paul. They collaborate with community organizations and government partners.
Minnesota 4-H	Statewide	4-H is Minnesota’s largest youth development program, serving over 40,000 youth (grades kindergarten through one-year post-high school). They focus on youth-driven hands-on experiential learning.
Youthprise	Statewide	Youthprise is a philanthropic intermediary organization that works to increase funding for Minnesota youth programming and promotes innovation in how communities work with youth. It supports over 100 youth organizations across the state.

Across interviews, advisory team members noted the importance of and the severe need for OST programs in Minnesota. They emphasized the importance of valuing and centering youth voices. Several programs focused on learning opportunities and the development of advisory team members. Each program prioritized its work in the community, meeting youth where they are at and aligning the program’s offerings to the youth’s interests.

Overview

Throughout interviews, OST programs generally described a focus on intentional skill-building, civic engagement, and mental health support for students. While demand for OST programs is increasing, especially among middle school-aged youth, OST advisory team members face significant hurdles, including transportation costs, staff burnout, and unstable funding. Advisory team members emphasized that programs offer a safe space with opportunities to build community and discover new opportunities, such as career exploration, that students may not have access to during their school day. The OST advisory team members suggested that further public

investment and interorganizational collaboration are essential to maintaining high-quality services and ensuring equitable access for all families.

Trends in youth programs

Belonging, identity, and youth voice

Overall, the concept of youth voice was at the forefront of the OST advisory team members' minds. They shared that five to ten years ago, prioritizing and placing value on the voice of youth was a novel concept. Now it's an expectation that helps programs with their planning and governance while ensuring they understand what youth need.

The importance of encouraging belonging and identity was also a theme that the OST advisory team members shared. While creating a safe environment within OST programs, advisory team members have also noticed a shift in youth wanting to "try on different identities" and find "their people," peer support, and like-minded community members.

Mental health support

All advisory team members shared that there have been many changes in OST programs over time, specifically in the last five years, post-COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health support continues to be a significant need for youth in OST programs. OST programs now include more mental health support, including having mental health practitioners, like social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, who come into the OST programs to meet with the youth.

Advisory team members identified an increased need for safe spaces where youth can sit and share with peers, rather than engaging in more traditional OST program opportunities, like sports. One leader shared that, "we aren't going to get out of the mental health crisis without increasing the connections and communities of support." This trend has caused challenges for programs, such as community education. While programs feel the need to provide mental health support to participants, they do not have the funding to do so. These programs often have funding to pay for teachers and materials but cannot provide transportation for participants.

Career and interest exploration

Advisory team members shared that OST programs offer a chance for youth to explore personal interests they may not be aware of or that they don't have access to at their school. Some of these include gaming, like chess or Dungeons and Dragons, crafting, and various art mediums.

Career exploration is also a component of several OST programs. For example, there are youth development programs, like the St. Paul Youth Commission and Youth on Boards programs, that pay youth or hire them as interns. These opportunities allow youth to gain valuable real-world experience while getting an income. Some programs even hire older youth to mentor younger peers. Youth can use some of their OST program experience as resume builders and to aid in their college application process. Some OST programs are also using technology to enhance career exploration. Using virtual reality, youth can see what it would be like to have a specific career. They can envision what a day-in-the-life of a job would be like, anything from a role in hospitality to an airplane mechanic, and more.

Skill building

Most OST programs focus on skill building. One advisory team member shared that their OST program is focusing on building the capacity of future leaders. They manage this through programmatic offerings designed to engage youth in creative thinking and help them build leadership skills focused on impacting their community and school, specifically related to civic leadership development strategies. Another advisory team member shared that they have a goal of reimagining education and the lines between school learning and out-of-school learning. They want the programs they offer to help youth build their skills in a variety of industries outside the traditional classroom setting. If possible, this could also allow youth to obtain credentials or get credit for school.

Access to youth programs

Transportation

All advisory team members shared several hurdles preventing youth from accessing OST programs. The biggest barrier is transportation. This is especially a problem for lower-income families and throughout Greater Minnesota, where access to public transportation and ridesharing is less available. While some OST programs offer transportation, many youth are unable to participate due to a lack of reliable transportation.

However, many programs are exploring ridesharing or cooperative transportation options, including compensating families for providing rides to overcome this hurdle for youth participation.

Safety

All advisory team members shared that one of their main objectives is to create an environment in their program where youth feel safe. Several advisory team members shared that at the time of the interviews in January and February 2026, the increased presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was a current barrier for some families. Advisory team members shared that if youth do not feel safe in their community, they are less likely to attend an OST program.

Cost

Finally, the cost of attending some OST programs can be prohibitive for families. While many programs have low to no-cost options, the cost of materials, equipment, transportation, or other needs can create a barrier to attending. Additionally, with the increase in operational costs such as materials and administration, programs cannot offer as many scholarships as they had previously or reduce the cost to attend their program. Funding and additional operational and administrative constraints since the state's increased focus on fraud, waste, and abuse have greatly impacted OST programs.

Funding, growth, and sustainability

Advisory team members shared that a lack of sustainable funding is the most significant vulnerability to continued operations. Advisory team members described their funding as “tenuous” and uncertain. While many programs rely on public donations, one leader said that “we can’t depend on philanthropy to fund us forever.” Public donations can help to keep membership fees low or non-existent for youth. However, most advisory team members mentioned that sustainable funding sources are a concern. One program leader reported that donors prefer to fund new programs or initiatives over scholarships or administrative costs. This limits OST programs from allocating donations where they are needed most.

The OST programs represented by the advisory team members MAD spoke to had varying funding sources. Some get funding through federal, state, or city budgets. Another program is funded on a two-year reimbursement cycle through state taxes. A third OST program recently partnered with the state to expand to nine new sites and received five million dollars to assist with the expansion. These funds only accounted for about 9% of their overall budget. Much of their funding comes through public and private donations. This program shared that even with generous state funding, the amount was not enough to meet all their needs.

According to advisory team members, there is a divide between Minnesota families who are more affluent and can pay for private lessons and tutors and lower-income families who rely on grant-funded OST programs. Most community education programs are fee-based to offset their budget. Community education programs are not trying to make money. They aim to have sufficient funding to maintain the sustainability of their offerings. There are often scholarships available for community education courses, which can be tied to free and reduced lunch eligibility. While the community education programs identified a higher need for scholarships now than in the past, it has been difficult to get families to apply for the scholarships. They identified several factors as to why they believe this is happening.

- Families do not know about the programs and therefore do not apply.
- There is stigma around applying and being included in the scholarship program.
- With Minnesota offering free breakfast and lunch through its public schools, many families do not fill out the paperwork that could allow them assistance for community services and OST programs.

State-funded programs are concerned that the budget for youth enrichment has not increased since 2003. The rising costs of staff, administrative efforts, transportation, supplies, food, etc., have led to sustainability concerns for the OST programs. Specific concerns exist about funding and the impact of budget cuts on fee-based community education programs. The community education advisory team members indicated that there has been a lot of teacher burnout following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it increasingly difficult to recruit and keep teachers and to provide sustainable program offerings.

The advisory team also said that administrative burdens and compliance needs are some of the biggest barriers to OST program sustainability. One leader noted that the current shift in focus to fraud, waste, and abuse in Minnesota has increased the burden of compliance. The focus on extra documentation hurts smaller grassroots organizations that lack the large overhead and administrative personnel. Often, these smaller grassroots organizations provide very culturally specific content and high-quality support for specific communities. One program provider shared that these additional burdens may severely impact the ability of smaller organizations to remain open, especially without sustainable funding and support.

Without proper support and efforts towards sustainability, many advisory team members have concerns about the growth of OST programs in Minnesota. In some cases, larger, statewide organizations serve as intermediaries and help to offset the burden of reporting and data tracking for smaller organizations. This allows OST programs to focus on building relationships within their community, allowing for culturally specific needs, and providing a

safe environment for youth. Advisory team members want to continue to find and support opportunities for collaboration between OST programs for the future growth and sustainability of all Minnesota OST programs.

Policy considerations

Advisory team members identified a great need for state infrastructure and system coordination. A repeated theme in many interviews was the concept of a fragmented system. Minnesota has a great number of nonprofits, OST programs, and other organizations supporting youth (affectionately called “the land of 10,000 nonprofits”), but there is no unified system. One advisory team member suggested a structure like what DCYF is doing with early childcare. They said there needs to be a “central clearinghouse” that can help to manage, support, and assist families with accessing OST programs. OST advisory team members are calling for a statewide champion for OST programs. They felt this would be a way for OST programs to connect, collaborate, and support each other, helping create growth and sustainability for all OST programs.

When asked what policy changes could support OST programs in Minnesota, every advisory team member identified that a dedicated state funding stream for OST programs was essential for a sustainable program. Advisory team members shared that there has not been a stable funding stream for OST programs since the early 2000s. One program found in their financial analysis a ten-to-one return on investment from the funds given to them by the state. Meaning that for every one dollar that the state invests in OST programs, they see a 10-dollar return on their investment. They indicated that this information supports the need for increased and sustainable funding from the state.

Another policy consideration was specific to universal access for all children. According to advisory team members, an ideal system would look like the free school lunch program in Minnesota, where there would be sufficient funding for OST programs for all children to attend these programs for free. One advisory team member said that OST programs should be thought of as a “right, not a privilege.”

There is a desire amongst advisory team members to eliminate the lines between school and OST programs. They want to create “third spaces” where their programs can be available on nights and weekends to truly serve the community’s needs and youth interests.

Program stories

One of MAD's goals with the external advisory team interviews was to capture success stories from the OST programs. The stories varied, but the main examples shared were experiences the youth had within the OST programs or positive outcomes because of the programs. Many OST programs discussed a sense of belonging and described how youth were able to find "their people" and other connections that they may never have made otherwise. For example, one story was shared about a high school student who found connections to other peers who had recently navigated the college application process. The student was able to connect with peers who offered suggestions and support while the youth were submitting their applications. Several stories were shared about how youth participating in OST programs can discover interests or participate in activities that are not available at their schools. This can help introduce youth to other hobbies and activities or lead to a future career interest.

Several OST programs have a specific focus on career readiness. One example shared was how youth participate as summer interns on various boards, which helps them learn professional skills, interact with adults, and gain board membership experience. An advisory team member stated that their internal data shows that students who participate in OST programs demonstrate higher grade point averages and have fewer school absences.

This advisory team member also shared a story about how a youth used the OST program as a place of refuge from community violence. This youth became an advocate for other youths, including at the state Capitol, even earning a college scholarship to pursue teaching based on her advocacy.

XIV. Appendix F: Listening session findings

This section summarizes key findings from a series of listening sessions conducted as part of a broader environmental scan of Minnesota’s OST ecosystem. The environmental scan employed multiple methods to understand the current state of OST in Minnesota, examine the needs of youth and families, and identify opportunities to strengthen the field. Listening sessions were one component of this work, designed to ensure that perspectives of those most directly affected—youth, families, youth program providers, and community leaders—were heard and centered.

It provides a detailed account of what was heard across listening sessions, organized thematically to support policy makers, funders, and advocates and other decision-makers in understanding the priorities, experiences, and needs of Minnesota’s OST community.

Methods

To understand the perspectives of key stakeholders across Minnesota's OST ecosystem, the project team conducted 13 listening sessions between March and April 2026, engaging a total of 90 participants statewide. Sessions were held with four distinct groups, as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Breakdown of listening session participants by group type

Group type	Participant count
Youth	19
Parents and caregivers	30
Youth program providers	27
Faith leaders	13

To help bring a diversity of voices and ensure accessibility and trust, the project team recruited youth and families through partnerships with trusted community organizations. Internal and external advisory members also supported outreach efforts throughout the entirety of the project. Participants represented rural, urban, and suburban locations, as well as immigrant communities throughout Minnesota. Table 8 summarizes participation by community type. Because the immigrant community sessions were conducted in the Twin Cities metro area, participants from those sessions are included in both the immigrant community and Twin Cities counts. As a result, the totals shown in Table 8 exceed the overall participant count of 90.

Table 8. Breakdown of listening session participants by community type

Community type	Participant count
Greater Minnesota	27
Twin Cities metro	63
Immigrant communities	18

MAD conducted sessions both in-person and online. Partner organizations were identified through external advisory committee recommendations and community networks. Families whose primary language was not English were offered the option to attend a session conducted in their preferred language, with interpreter support provided as needed.

Facilitators used a semi-structured discussion guide that included a set of predetermined questions while allowing participants to shape the conversation and explore emerging topics in greater depth. This approach allowed the team to gather both comparable data across groups and nuanced, community-specific insights. A notetaker captured transcription-style notes during all sessions, which were subsequently processed and analyzed to identify themes and patterns across participant groups.

Response counts reported throughout this section reflect the number of times participants identified a particular theme during the listening sessions. These counts should be interpreted as indicators of a theme’s salience rather than as statistical measures of prevalence. MAD lightly edited quotes for clarity. Quotes are also attributed by participant group to protect confidentiality.

Findings and key themes

*“During the school day, the teachers control everything. We gotta do assignments, this and that, but with OST programs, we get the power back!” –
Older youth*

Across listening sessions, participants described a vision for OST programming that supported a wide variety of needs, interests, and activities. Parents and caregivers, youth, and youth program providers talked about the importance of building community—forming relationships, friendships, and connections that help youth feel included. Parents and caregivers also identified reduced screen time and enrichment activities as key reasons

they support these programs. Youth program providers named academic support, enrichment activities, and life skills as top reasons youth and families sought their programming.

What youth and families want in OST programs

Table 9 lists the themes most frequently identified by youth program providers, parents and caregivers, and faith leaders when asked what they believe youth and families want from OST programs.

Table 9. What youth and families want from OST programs

What youth and families want	Response count
Development of life skills	12
Explore interests	11
Academic support	9
Enrichment	9
Community	9
Connection	7
Cultural development	5
Necessity	4
Safety	4
Less screen time	4

“It’s essential [that] we have these programs. Kids are online [more]. It has created distance and loneliness. It’s created domestic situations. The programs [can offer] counseling, and togetherness, a sense of belonging, interaction, and social ties...it takes a village.” – Parent/caregiver

Parents and caregivers most frequently named community, reduced screen time, and enrichment as top priorities, reflecting broader concerns about social disconnection and the effects of increased technology use among youth. Many families who participated in the listening sessions understand OST not only as programming but as a critical infrastructure for belonging and safety.

Youth program providers named academic support and connection as top priorities for youth and families in their programs, reflecting their direct view of youth needs within schools and communities.

Faith leaders emphasized belonging and growth, underscoring OST’s potential role in affirming identity and character development.

What youth dislike about OST

Middle and high school youth, who were grouped together for analysis, described frustrations that differed from those reported by younger youth (3rd-5th grade). All youth expressed a desire for increased autonomy and having a meaningful voice in program design. They also noted that staff shortages and funding constraints negatively affected their experience by reducing program quality and availability. Younger youth were more likely to raise concerns with the program environment, including feelings of chaos or disorder and challenges such as long wait times or delays in activities.

If youth could change one thing about OST

“It’s great, affordable programs exist (such as internships) but deadlines are short, and advertising is limited; students don’t hear about them in time.” –

Older youth

When asked what single change they would make to OST, older youth most consistently named safe and accessible transportation as a foundational barrier to participation. They also identified the need for equitable college support, teen-focused spaces, and better communication about available opportunities. Younger youth prioritized movement programming and more consistent, flexible program days.

Where programs are missing the needs of youth and families

Youth program providers hold a unique perspective, positioned between institutional systems and the families and youth they serve. During the listening sessions, they described insufficient programming for the size of community need as the biggest structural gap, followed closely by transportation and cost (Table 10).

Participants also mentioned career and college readiness programming, social-emotional learning, and food access as unmet needs.

“College readiness programs [are] not available for everyone; often setup to serve White students that are high achieving. There’s not enough space in

*programs [or they] have age limits that restrict those that want to participate–
they’re too young or too old” – Youth program provider*

Table 10. Missing needs identified by youth program providers

Missing needs	Response count
Insufficient programming for community size	8
Transportation	6
Cost	5
Need for career and college readiness	4
Need for social and emotional learning	3
Food access	2

“Transportation from the family side of things is a big challenge. A lot of kids are local, and we do a walking bus, which is where we walk them to the program after school and then walk them home. But some families do not live close. But sometimes if there’s car trouble, or weather, or ICE, we see kids not coming to programs as often.” – Youth program provider

Program gaps and opportunities

“There is a greater need to involve youth in a greater range of activities – internships, mentorships, outings, activities. Career exploration opportunities. Our parents in our community know there’s a need.” – Faith leader

What opportunities are missing

Even among participants who spoke positively about existing OST programs, both youth and youth program providers shared that there were missing or insufficient activities to meet the variety of needs and interests of youth. The gaps were not only about adding more activities. They reflected the specific types of programming most absent: sports, movement, and identity-based programming were most often named as missing elements. Youth program providers also raised serious concerns about inadequate supports for youth with disabilities or

individual education plans (IEPs). Together, these gaps described a field seeking to serve an increasingly diverse population with insufficient resources and infrastructure.

What high quality OST would look like

“Youth voice. It’s a buzz word these days. The more that young people feel they are influencing what they are showing up to, build ownership of the space where youth are engaged in an intentional way. The component of fun and experience joy. [They think] this is exciting, energizing. ‘I’m showing up to something that fills me.’ The mental health and emotional support where young people know that this program is not removed from [their] real life. ‘I can show up in this space in a way that acknowledges and validates me.’” –

Youth program provider

When participants were asked to describe what high-quality OST programming should look like, they identified indicators of quality that extended beyond specific activities or program offerings (see Table 11). Across all groups, safety (physical, emotional, and mental well-being) was the most frequently named feature of quality programming, cited nine times overall. Staff training and development, youth voice and choice, and appropriate staffing levels closely followed. Together, the responses describe a vision of OST as a relational, youth-centered environment where youth feel safe, seen, and engaged.

“Make it an inclusive, safe, engaging place. Communication is one of the best things but also being able to use their voice to create a solution. The whole point is to have a safe place where they can express their views, and they are safe to do so.” – Youth program provider

Table 11. Elements of high-quality OST programs

What high-quality OST programs look like	Response count
Safety (physical, emotional, mental)	9
Staff training and continuous improvement	6
Youth voice, choice, and directed content	6
Staffing levels and youth-staff ratio	5
Engagement, fun, joy, and meaningful activities	4
Life skills	4
Inclusion and accessibility for diverse needs	4
Relationships, community, and belonging	3

“Choice is a big deal for our kids. They want to have more choice with certain clubs versus other avenues. [They want] diversity in what they can choose from. And there needs to be enough staff so they can do it all.” – Parent/caregiver

Families emphasized life skills development, a variety of programming, and programs that prevent negative outcomes for youth. Youth program providers focused on safety, staff quality, inclusion, and the importance of centering youth voice. Both families and youth program providers named culturally responsive programming, including attention to religious and cultural identity, as a hallmark of quality, underscoring the importance of programs that affirm and uplift who youth are.

Costs, funding, and staffing challenges

“For us, staffing challenges often show up as inconsistency, limited training, and a lack of relatable mentorship. Many programs rely on volunteers who care deeply but may not have the tools or time to fully support youth needs, making it harder to build trust, address real-life challenges, and keep youth meaningfully engaged.” – Youth program provider

Funding and staffing challenges were woven throughout nearly every conversation in the listening sessions, which surfaced not just as stand-alone concerns, but as root causes of many other gaps identified by participants. For youth program providers and faith leaders in particular, the challenges of maintaining stable, qualified staff were a constant structural constraint, one that directly impacts program quality, youth relationships, and organizational sustainability.

What gets in the way of high-quality programming

Youth program providers identified staff retention, compensation, and employment stability as the greatest barrier to delivering high-quality OST programming, naming it six times throughout sessions (Table 12). Participants also mentioned training needs, particularly around trauma-informed practice, challenges related to lack of incentives and participation supports, community safety conditions, funding instability and constraints, and challenges related to program times and availability.

Table 12. Barriers to high-quality programming

What gets in the way	Response count
Staff retention, compensation, and employment stability	6
Staff training needs	2
Incentives and participation supports	2
Safety concerns related to community crisis	1
Funding instability, grants, and financial constraints	1
Program time and availability	1

Staffing challenges in OST programs

Staffing challenges in the OST field are not simply a recruitment problem, but a reflection of deeper structural tensions in how youth work is resourced, valued, and sustained (Table 13). Across all groups, two challenges tied as the most frequently named: staff retention, compensation, and employment stability, and reliance on unstable labor models, including volunteers, part-time workers, and informal staffing arrangements. Participants cited both of these issues six times.

Staff well-being and mental health, relationship instability undermining program quality, and role overload and burnout were each named three times, pointing to a workforce under significant pressure. Faith leaders described a heavy dependence on volunteers and part-time staff, with role overload and burnout as direct

consequences. These conditions create a cycle in which the people most committed to serving youth are also the most at risk of leaving the field.

Table 13. Staffing challenges identified by participants

Staffing challenges	Response count
Staff retention, compensation, and employment stability	6
Reliance on unstable labor models	6
Staff well-being/mental health	3
Relationship instability undermines program quality	3
Role overload, burnout, and boundary challenges	3
Staff training needs	2

Barriers to access and missing voices

"No matter where you are going, it's a competition. There are such limitations on volume. It's not that the programs are making money—there are limitations on locations. Even as a two-parent family, it's a challenge for everyone." —
Parent/caregiver, rural Minnesota

Understanding who OST programs reach requires equal attention to who they are not reaching. Across all four participant groups, barriers to access were plentiful and, in many cases, interconnected (Table 14).

Transportation stood out as the predominant challenge, named 22 times overall and cited by 68% of youth participants, making it the most consistent finding across the listening sessions.

But transportation was rarely described in isolation. For many families and youth, it compounded other challenges, including cost, scheduling, and limited program availability, particularly for families in Greater Minnesota. Costs and affordability, family responsibilities, staffing shortfalls, mental health barriers, registration challenges, and the effects of community disruptions, including the impacts of immigration enforcement actions, also emerged as barriers.

Table 14. Barriers to access identified by participants

Barriers to access	Response count
Transportation	22

Barriers to access	Response count
Costs and affordability	6
Family responsibilities and caregiving	5
Accessibility for youth with disabilities	3
Staffing shortfalls	3
Mental health barriers	3
Registration, documentation, and transparency	3
Community disruptions	3

Barriers specific to Greater Minnesota

Families who participated in listening sessions from Greater Minnesota described a landscape of scarce options, reduced capacity, and geographic isolation. Limited availability of programs was the most frequently named challenge, followed by limited capacity within the programs that do exist (Table 15).

Table 15. Access barriers specific to rural Minnesota

Barriers	Response count
Limited availability of programs	8
Limited capacity/reduced access	5
Transportation	3
Weather-related interruptions	2
Insufficient staffing	1

"My kids aren't sporty. If you're not in sports or have a membership at the Y, there isn't much to do around here. The Y is expensive — even with a scholarship." — Parent/caregiver, Greater Minnesota

Families in Greater Minnesota described a patchwork of seasonal programming, often available only in summer, with little consistency during the school year. Participants mentioned the Big Buddies program repeatedly and with warmth as a bright spot, valued for its flexibility, relationship-based approach, and willingness to adapt schedules to family needs. But even that program has seen reductions in consistent programming over time.

Families also described the compounding costs of participation: fuel expenses for long drives, time lost from work, and the difficulty of affording programs even when scholarship options exist. For single parents, the logistics of OST access are particularly acute: program timing that assumes two-parent or two-vehicle households, programs that start before a working parent can arrive, and distances that make ridesharing impractical.

"Many events are at 5 or 5:30, but as a single parent working 8 to 5 and living 15 miles away—we miss the first hour or the whole thing."— Parent/caregiver, Greater Minnesota

Families with children who have disabilities identified an additional layer of challenge in Greater Minnesota. With fewer program options overall, finding programming that accommodates specific routines, sensory needs, or behavioral supports is exponentially more difficult.

Whose voices are least heard

Listening session facilitators asked youth program providers, whose voices are least heard in shaping OST systems. Youth program providers identified several groups that they saw were largely invisible in program planning and decision-making. They are listed in order of most frequently mentioned.

- Parent and caregivers – programs often consult families minimally, if at all, in shaping programs their children attend.
- Youth voices – despite broad consensus that OST programs should center youth, youth rarely have formal influence over program design.
- Marginalized communities – programs tend to reach families with existing connections to institutions and information networks which leaves many marginalized communities left out.
- Youth with disabilities – whose access needs are rarely built into program design from the start.
- Part-time staff and frontline youth program providers – whose knowledge of youth needs is deep but whose voices are not always elevated into systems-level conversations.

Trends and recommendations

"I'm impressed with the variety of options and the collaboration. My kids are exposed to so many things." — Parent/caregiver

Altogether, the listening sessions point toward a set of shared priorities that cut across groups and reflect both the promise and precarity of OST in Minnesota. Funding emerged as the biggest priority, underscoring that many of the gaps and challenges identified by participants are not simply matters of program design, but represent an underinvestment in the systems themselves. Participants described how funding constraints contribute to staffing challenges, leading to high turnover, reliance on unstable labor models, and the heavy toll it takes on the people who do this work. Alongside funding, listening session attendees named the importance of equitable access, varied enrichment opportunities, and centering youth voice as foundational to a strong OST ecosystem.

While these themes were broadly shared, the emphasis differed by group in meaningful ways: youth were most focused on having more and better options; families prioritized access and affordability; youth program providers stressed program quality and the value of the profession; and faith leaders were most vocal about OST's broader community significance.

Impactful partnerships

"We have robust partnerships which I don't take for granted. We have health staff and offer mental health programming, school-based health clinic, partners that do data tracking and grant requirements, dental requirements, nature centers, law enforcement, 4-H, etc. It's a huge impact on our programs. We can build connections. [We've] partnered youth with career industries... We couldn't operate without the help of our partners." — Youth program provider

When asked what partnerships have made the most difference, participants across groups pointed to partnerships that were selective, intentional, and grounded in shared values—rather than partnerships pursued simply for capacity or convenience. Participants described the most impactful partnerships as those with

organizations that support program quality or content, partnerships that expand access to fun and experiential learning, and relationships built on trust and aligned missions.

Top priorities across all listening sessions

“[It needs to be] more fun and sometimes you just don’t know what to do because there’s just grass. We need more choices.” – Younger youth

Across all groups, youth were most vocal about needing varied enrichment opportunities and equitable access (Table 16). Older youth named overloaded schedules and competing demands as barriers to participation. Families centered funding and access and were particularly attuned to transportation and the availability of physical spaces for youth.

Table 16. Top priorities identified by participants

Top priorities across groups	Response count
Need for funding and financial investment in OST	26
Importance and value of OST for communities	24
Need for varied enrichment opportunities	23
Equity in access (cost, language, culture)	20
Transportation as root cause of inequity	8
Safety, stability, and emotional support	8
Centering youth voice in decision-making	8
Overloaded youth and competing commitments	8

Youth program providers most strongly emphasized OST’s value and the importance of centering youth voice in how programs are designed and governed. Faith leaders nearly unanimously named the broader importances and value of OST—reflecting OST as integral to community health and cohesion.

XV. Appendix G: Internal summary of programs

The internal advisory team members partnered with the MAD project team to provide subject matter expertise, contacts, and knowledge of out-of-school time (OST) work within the State of Minnesota to guide the research study. This includes offering advice on background literature, identifying key stakeholders for the external advisory team, reviewing research methods and plans, and making connections to relevant state resources and professional networks. The team also helped shape findings and recommendations for the final report. MAD conducted hour-long interviews with ten of the eleven agencies on the internal advisory team. This document summarizes interviews with representatives on the project’s internal advisory team.

Youth programs represented

Table 17 below lists the agencies represented by the internal advisory team members that MAD interviewed and the agency programs and grants relevant to OST. All internal advisory team members are part of some of the agencies listed below. The OST programs are primarily engaged in statewide efforts.

Table 17. List of agencies represented by the internal advisory team members and grants relevant to OST

Agency	Agency programs relevant to OST
Department of Children, Youth, and Families	• Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP): CCAP provides financial assistance to low-income families to help pay for childcare while families are working, looking for a job, going to school, or participating in activities within an employment plan. CCAP financial assistance can be used to support OST but must be used at certified centers. • Youth Intervention Programs (YIP): YIPs are designed to strengthen public safety and community well-being across Minnesota. By intervening early with youth experiencing trauma, toxic stress, and instability, YIP-funded programs help prevent more serious and costly challenges later, including justice system involvement and

Agency	Agency programs relevant to OST
	school disengagement. In 2025, YIPs served almost 25,000 young people across Minnesota, with a \$7 million allocation. Funding went to a variety of existing programs/organizations, such as restorative justice programs, mentorship, or after-school assistance.
Department of Education	• The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP): CACFP is a federally funded program administered by a division at the Department of Education that provides payments for meals and snacks served at adult care centers, childcare centers, family day care homes, after school care centers, and emergency shelters. • 21st Century Community Learning Center Grants (CCLC): CCLC is a federally funded initiative designed to exclusively support OST programming. The grant primarily serves underserved youth in high poverty areas. • After School Community Learning Grant (ACLG): ACLG grant funding is designed to bridge schools and their local communities by supporting “culturally affirming and enriching after-school and summer learning programs.” • Targeted Services Program: Targeted Services provides “before school, after school and summer programs for students in grades K-8 who may be struggling in the regular school program and need additional time to develop skills and abilities.” • American Indian Education Aid (AIEA): AIEA is a program that provides funding to schools or Tribal schools that report an American Indian student count of 20 or more. Funds are designed to enable schools and districts to “scale up and enhance American Indian education programs and initiatives” and can be used to support OST programming.

Agency	Agency programs relevant to OST
Department of Employment and Economic Development	• Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Grant (WIOA): WIOA is a federally funded grant intended to promote workforce development by providing youth between the ages of 16 and 24 and in-school youth between the ages of 14 and 21 with year-round employment and training services. • Minnesota Youth Program (MYP): MYP supports youth aged 14-24 to develop skills needed to promote career readiness through one-on-one career exploration and guidance. • Youth at Work Competitive Grant Programs: Youth at Work Competitive Grants have been awarded to nonprofits, school districts, and workforce development boards across the state to create experiential learning opportunities for economically disadvantaged and at risk youth ages 14–24, helping them build work readiness and 21st century skills through project based and work based learning. Some grantees, such as Achieve Twin Cities, have programs that occur both in school and out of school. • Youthbuild: The Youthbuild grant program provides training in construction, career and work readiness, leadership, and basic academic skills to youth aged 16 to 24 who are at risk of not completing their high school education. Youth in the program also receive hands-on work experience, safety training, and mentorship.
Department of Health	• Minnesota Partnership for Adolescent and Young Adult Health Strategic Plan: The Minnesota Department of Health convened a group of stakeholders in 2017-2018 to help develop the Minnesota Partnership for Adolescent and Young Adult Health Strategic Plan. While the plan’s overall goal is to “address overarching adolescent health goals,” there are many action steps outlined in the plan to help guide community action. Relevant to OST is an action step that seeks to “promote digital well-being resources so that schools, out

Agency	Agency programs relevant to OST
	of school time organizations, and other youth serving organizations can implement digital well-being resources for students and educators.” • Supporting children of incarcerated parents: The Minnesota Department of Health also offers resources for parents, families, schools, and jails on how to better support the children of incarcerated parents, a demographic that has been historically underserved across systems.
Office of Higher Education	• Get Ready GEAR UP Minnesota Program: A federally funded program that helps students prepare for life after high school by providing academic support, college and career planning, and financial aid guidance through partnerships with K-12 schools, colleges, and community organizations. While there is no specific tie to OST currently, schools are building capacity over the next few years to add after-school programming for this program. • Summer Academic Enrichment Program (SAEP): SAEP helps low-income Minnesotan youth ages 3-11 participate in academic summer camps by covering some or all of the cost. • Minnesota College Planning Series (formerly “Ready, Set, FAFSA”): The Minnesota College Planning Series program is a free virtual college readiness program that helps families navigate the college application and financial aid process. Live interpretation is also offered in Spanish, Somali, and Hmong.
Department of Labor and Industry	• The Youth Skills Training (YST) program is designed to prepare young people for high-wage, high-growth careers by giving them early, structured access to real industry experiences. Through a competitive grant that is typically awarded to schools, YST supports four core pillars: industry exposure, industry-aligned classroom instruction, opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials,

Agency	Agency programs relevant to OST
	and paid work experience. This framework allows students to make meaningful progress toward high school graduation while simultaneously exploring career pathways and gaining practical skills outside of school hours. Some schools also use YST as an effective dropout-prevention strategy and will hear from employers, “we want to hire you, but you have to finish high school first,” which motivates youth to stay engaged and complete their education.
Department of Transportation	• Safe Routes to School (SRTS): SRTS is a program designed to encourage youth in kindergarten through 12th grade to walk or bicycle to school by teaching about safety, building excitement about walking and biking, and improving multimodal transportation infrastructure, like signage and crosswalks. • Towards Zero Deaths (TZD): A statewide program designed to eliminate traffic fatalities, TZD is a collaboration with the Department of Transportation, the Department of Public Safety, and the Department of Health. The purpose of the program is to provide resources and funding to reduce traffic crashes, injuries, and deaths on Minnesota’s roads. While both programs above are not directly relevant to OST, data collected in this study found that transportation is a barrier to participation in OST programs, thus it is helpful to examine the work the Department of Transportation is doing to support the entire transportation system that impacts OST programming.

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XVI. Appendix H: OST subject matter expert interview summary

Overview

As part of the broader environmental scan, MAD interviewed subject matter experts (SMEs) in various out-of-school time (OST) roles statewide to understand program benefits, participation barriers, effective practices, and sustainability challenges. This section summarizes key themes from those interviews and provides qualitative context to complement surveys and listening sessions.

Methodology

Between January and May 2026, MAD conducted 21 online interviews with 34 OST SMEs, selected based on recommendations from field experts and the project’s advisory teams. Participants represented a range of roles and perspectives statewide, including youth program providers, targeted service providers, and representatives from state agencies and other organizations supporting youth programming. Table 18 provides a breakdown of interview participants.

The primary purpose of these interviews was to gather stories and contextual insights about OST programs and their impacts on youth, families, and communities. Facilitators used a semi-structured approach with a standard interview guide and asked follow-up questions to explore emerging topics or seek clarification. A note-taker captured detailed session notes, which MAD later analyzed to identify themes and patterns across participant groups.

Table 18. Breakdown of interview participants

Participant group	Details
Youth program providers	10 interviews with 12 participants
Targeted service providers	1 interview with 5 participants
Other SMEs	10 interviews with 17 participants

Key findings

This section presents insights from the interviews, organized around five major themes: value of OST programs; access; programming and engagement; funding, growth, and sustainability; and policy considerations.

Value of OST programs

Interviewees described the many benefits of OST programs for youth and families. They frequently referenced the concept of “third spaces,” a term they used to describe a safe, supervised environment outside of home and school where youth can spend time when caregivers are working or when childcare is unavailable. A key benefit identified by interviewees was that OST programs help youth develop a sense of belonging and support their social-emotional growth. By participating, youth can build relationships with trusted adults and peers, connect with mentors, and take part in enrichment opportunities they might not otherwise have. OST programs also provide academic support, including help with homework, tutoring, mentoring, and literacy programs.

Along with academic assistance and enrichment opportunities, OST programs also provide youth with access to basic needs. Many programs provide snacks and/or meals for program participants. One interviewee reported serving over 35,000 meals and snacks since the program opened. Several interviewees shared that they partner with local food banks to ensure that youth and their families have their food needs met, especially over weekends and holidays. Interviewees also shared that they connect families with other community support organizations to ensure broader needs are met.

Overall, interviewees described OST programs as providing critical childcare alternatives, enrichment opportunities, prevention support, and community connection. All interviewees emphasized the importance of OST programs for youth and families in their community.

Program stories

Interviewees shared many stories illustrating the positive impact that OST programs and youth program providers have on youth, families, and communities. Across interviews, participants emphasized that meaningful relationships with caring adults are central to these successes.

Several interviewees described exceptional youth program providers whose contributions extended well beyond their formal responsibilities. One OST program administrator shared a story of a staff member who excelled at recruiting youth and became a trusted presence within the program. The interviewee described this individual as irreplaceable, noting that their absence was felt by youth, families, and staff alike. Another interviewee

highlighted the importance of a teen coordinator role in their OST program, responsible for engaging more teens and encouraging participation. The interviewee also shared that this coordinator helped host a job and college fair attended by 250 youth.

Interviewees also shared stories demonstrating how OST programs identify and respond to individual youth needs. An OST program administrator described a pre-teen who had been homeschooled and was significantly behind academically when they began attending the program. Program staff worked closely with the youth's family and local school district to secure academic support and facilitate enrollment in the public school system. According to the interviewee, the youth quickly caught up with their peers after receiving this support. The administrator noted that their program previously employed a staff member dedicated to helping youth facing significant challenges but had to eliminate the position due to funding constraints.

Library representatives shared stories about babysitting certification programs, coding and gaming-related programming, and partnerships with community mental health organizations to provide support and programming for youth. They described their goal of creating welcoming environments where youth feel a sense of belonging and where youth's interests and needs shape programming.

Interviewees also shared examples of youth achieving significant milestones through OST participation. Stories included youth who became advocates at the national level in Washington, D.C., earned scholarships, won awards, or pursued educational or career opportunities that may not have been accessible. Many interviewees felt OST programs played an important role in helping youth build the skills, confidence, and connections needed to pursue these opportunities.

OST program staff noted that work-based learning can serve as an important alternative setting for students whose strengths may not be reflected in traditional academic environments. They observed that youth with disabilities often demonstrate increased engagement, improved behavior, and greater confidence when given opportunities to build practical skills in real-world settings. One interviewee shared an example of a child who struggled with behavior and attention during the regular school day but flourished in the OST environment. The interviewee said that this individual became more focused, actively participated in programming, and developed new skills because activities aligned with their interests and strengths.

Interviewees frequently pointed to mentoring, internships, and workforce development opportunities as particularly impactful experiences for older youth. A few interviewees gave examples of youth participating in the Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) program, which allows youth to explore career interests and opportunities while receiving supports and accommodations to succeed. Several interviewees emphasized that

OST programs can play a critical role in connecting youth to employment pathways, developing workforce skills, and preparing them for future educational and career opportunities.

Access

While all interviewees discussed the value of OST programs and shared many stories about their positive impact, they noted that access is a top barrier for youth and families. Reported barriers included awareness, challenges for youth in foster care and youth with disabilities, transportation, facilities, and participant safety.

Participation and awareness challenges

Interviewees frequently cited a lack of awareness of OST programs as a barrier to participation. They shared that many families are unfamiliar with available programs and are unsure where to find information or how to access programs. Interviewees also described significant gaps in childcare availability, particularly in rural areas. Several referred to these communities as “childcare deserts” because the supply of childcare falls far short of demand. In one county, for example, more than 7,000 children under age nine compete for fewer than 2,000 licensed childcare slots. This shortage highlights the important role OST programs play in meeting families’ childcare needs, especially in rural communities where few alternatives exist.

Other interviewees shared that OST programs have inconsistent access points, which increases confusion and uncertainty for families. Some have enrollment models tied to space and staffing requirements. Others determine capacity based on grant and reporting requirements, while libraries often operate on a drop-in basis. One interviewee noted that because library-based programs are free and open to the public, some families might perceive them as lower quality. Interviewees said they need to build trust with families to help them understand the value of OST programs. Word of mouth was the primary way families learn about OST programs, often through other participating families or community relationships.

Access barriers for youth with disabilities and foster youth

Interviewees working with foster youth and youth with disabilities noted that these youth often face heightened barriers to OST participation. They shared that “disability, trauma, and neglect are interconnected.” Interviewees also said that the system, including OST programs, was not organized to support children who need extra help or who have experienced significant challenges.

For foster youth, interviewees noted that housing instability, placement changes, and mid-year school transitions can make it difficult to access programs with long waitlists or strict enrollment deadlines. One interviewee noted that waitlists can extend up to 18 months, by which time the child may have moved to a different district.

Several interviewees further noted that foster youth continue to face barriers to participation despite the 2016 enactment of the [Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard](#), intended to support their involvement in age-appropriate activities. Interviewees reported that some risk-management and administrative practices continue to restrict participation, including burdensome requirements such as background checks for individuals in private homes before foster youth may attend social activities. Interviewees stated that these practices can contribute to low participation in OST programs and continued social isolation from peers.

Interviewees also identified policy and funding barriers that limit participation for youth with disabilities. Although waiver-funded disability supports exist, participants noted that federal and state rules often prohibit using those funds for activities deemed “recreational or diversionary,” which may prevent families from using disability-related supports for OST activities. Participants described this as a barrier to inclusion in community-based programming.

Transportation and location challenges

One of the biggest challenges identified by interviewees was transportation. Often, there is limited school district support for busing students from schools to OST sites when programs are not located on school grounds. Even when buses are available, programs often cannot transport all interested participants due to limited bus capacity or a lack of staff with an appropriate license to drive vans or buses. In one example, a program administrator described partnering with a nonprofit that offered to provide buses. However, the OST program lacked funds for gas or drivers and had to decline the partnership.

Distance was identified as a top transportation-related challenge for many OST programs, especially in rural communities. One program administrator shared that he had to personally drive youth home because the program could not find enough staff or vehicles. An interviewee said they used the YMCA’s Bus for Us program to supplement transportation needs. Unfortunately, even at a lower cost than school district transportation, it remained prohibitive for regular use.

Another interviewee shared that transportation disruptions during the recent immigration enforcement surge in Minnesota created additional challenges for their program. They said that many families were reluctant to leave their homes or continue participating in OST programming, and some youth were not attending school during

that period, further disrupting transportation and participation. To address this, OST programs relied on staff and trusted volunteers to transport youth to and from the program. Organizing and sustaining volunteer transportation was difficult, and interviewees said it was not a viable long-term option.

Facility and safety challenges

Interviewees also identified the location, size, and physical infrastructure of OST facilities as barriers to access for youth and families. OST programs are housed in a variety of settings, including schools, libraries, community spaces, program-owned facilities, and shared-use spaces. One program leader described significant challenges in establishing a rural OST program that would address identified community needs. While awaiting a permanent site, the program cycled through several temporary facilities—some with burst pipes, heating failures, or mold—which increased costs, created transportation barriers, and placed extra strain on staff and families. Ultimately, these disruptions led many families to withdraw or not return once the new location was completed.

In some rural communities, programs were operating at or above facility capacity. Interviewees also highlighted safety concerns. One interviewee described youth walking long distances over railroad tracks or through unsafe areas to reach their program, and others noted that OST facilities often lack essential safety features such as tornado shelters.

Programming and engagement

In many interviews, participants identified several characteristics of effective OST programming. Interviewees emphasized that effective OST programs are youth-driven, engaging at all age levels, and create safe spaces where youth can make connections with trusted adults and peers.

Youth-driven programming

Interviewees described OST programming as most successful when designed with youth input. One interviewee shared the concept of “educational vitamins,” which are informal, enriching learning experiences that supplement traditional school learning. The goal is to enhance academic, social, and emotional development with fun, engaging youth-driven activities. They noted that OST programs serve as a bridge between school and home.

Many interviewees identified the co-creation of program spaces and activities with youth participants as a key feature of a successful, youth-driven OST program. Often, youth are drawn to hands-on, practical, and experiential learning options. For example, because gaming is popular, several programs have incorporated

coding-related activities. Other activities include cooking classes (including culturally based cooking and learning activities), virtual reality or 3D printing experiences, and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) programming.

One interviewee reported receiving grant funding to create a recording studio, where youth can learn sound engineering and produce music. Additional high-demand activities reported by interviewees include slime, crafts, board games, and fandom clubs, which center on shared interests in movies, books, and games.

Developmental differences

Generally, interviewees stated that OST programs are most successful when they are tailored to the developmental stage and interests of youth participants.

For elementary-aged youth, interviewees emphasized that OST programs often function as a childcare replacement and a stabilizing routine. They added that families valued programs that provided consistent structure, supportive relationships, and exposure to a wide range of activities. Reducing screen time and ensuring positive engagement were recurring priorities for families with younger children.

Middle school youth, by comparison, were described as strongly motivated by connections and a sense of belonging with peers. Interviewees noted that youth in this age group often participate in OST programs primarily to spend time with friends, particularly when youth are not connected to sports or formal clubs.

For older youth, the key driver in participation was relevance to future goals. According to interviewees, high school students were motivated by tangible benefits such as résumé-building experiences, interview practice, internships, and paid work opportunities. Industry exposure and credential-building activities were seen as especially influential in engaging teens.

Safe spaces

Consistently, interviewees shared that they want OST programs to be a safe space where youth and their families feel part of a community. They noted that identity-affirming spaces and activities can increase participation and retention in OST programs. Interviewees stated that creating a space to foster positive relationships with peers or mentors is an essential goal for the youth in OST programs. Interviewees indicated that the trusted relationships that youth build in OST programs can be just as important as the programs and activities they participate in. Other interviewees shared that having staff who are from the community or share similarities with youth participants helps build trust and strengthen connections with youth and families.

One interviewee said their OST program focuses on self-actualization, love, and belonging for the youth they serve. Many interviewees said this approach of listening to youth voices and incorporating their perspectives had contributed to long-term engagement and program success.

Family engagement and community connection

Interviewees identified family engagement and strong community connections as essential components of effective OST programming. Family-centered programming, such as family nights or cultural events, often drew large family and community participation. One interviewee described hosting weekly family fun nights as well as Native drumming and dance events that regularly attract around 150 participants.

Several interviewees noted that it can be difficult to reach and engage under-resourced communities.

Interviewees identified the need for trauma-informed and culturally competent programming, activities, and staff training. Often, a lack of staff capacity, limited training, and funding impacts OST programs' ability to meet the community's needs.

Administrators shared that OST programs often help families access basic needs, such as food and supplies, and serve as a community hub, connecting families to resources, services, and community support. Interviewees reported that schools, social services, law enforcement, and other community members often refer youth and families to OST programs. This helps increase community engagement and connects families to community services.

Interviewees stated the importance of affirming youth, family identities, and cultures in the programs and activities they offer. This includes integrating cultural practices, traditional foods, and language. One interviewee shared that they offer specific programs and activities for Native youth. One activity included creating dreamcatchers using traditional Anishinaabe practices. They have also had activities around ricing, spearing, making maple sugar candy, harvesting animals, and even working with the State of Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources to learn about the land. This program also has family and community nights, with cookouts and community clean-ups, where they pick up trash in their area.

An interviewee shared about their partnership with museums and a Native American justice organization that worked together to create some legislation for Native youth. Interviewees indicated that a major reason youth and families continue to participate in OST programs is that the programs maintain connections to surrounding communities, services, and organizations to ensure that programming is culturally relevant.

Funding, growth, and sustainability

Interviewees reported an increasing demand for funding to support growth and sustainability in OST programs across the state. Interviewees described the OST landscape as fragmented, with uneven access and availability across regions. Interviewees identified persistent challenges related to funding, staffing, and transportation, all of which affect both program stability and reach. They emphasized the need for better coordination across OST providers to reduce duplication of effort and enable more intentional sharing of resources and supports.

*“We can’t do this alone. Programs need to work together to survive.” – OST
program administrator*

Several interviewees noted that while they would like to increase participation in their OST programs, they often have limited space, funding, or staffing to sustain the current OST program needs. Many program administrators said their ability to grow is restricted either by the terms of their facility agreements or leases or by limitations imposed by their umbrella organizations.

Funding was the biggest limitation for all interviewees. Most programs are dependent on grant funding. Several interviewees shared that their program offerings and staffing are directly tied to grant funding and small private donations. They said that paying for materials, administrative support, staffing, and facilities does not allow for growth or sustainability.

*“We need more money. We always need more money.” – OST youth program
provider*

Interviewees reported that the grant process is overly complicated and needs improvement. They noted that many grants have both competing and overlapping priorities, which forces programs to braid funding and spend significant time on application, administration, and grant management. One interviewee described a situation in which their program improved after receiving grant funding, but as their outcomes improved, private funding declined. As a result, the program later became ineligible for the grant that had initially supported its success. This interviewee further stated:

“You lose successful programs at the expense of grants seeking new, different, or innovative [ideas]. You pull dollars away from successful programs. As a result, [an OST program] will no longer be able to operate in the way that it should.” – OST youth program provider

One interviewee noted that even when they can collaborate with other organizations, funding for culturally specific programming is limited. They shared that they feel like they get funding and get a program going, only to have the funding cut, so they need to start over and identify funding for a successful program.

“The uncertainty is constant.” – OST program administrator

Several interviewees said that this negatively impacts the success and sustainability of OST programs. An interviewee shared that while federal funding can be helpful, it often gets cut, or the program may not get funded again. They shared a constant need to seek financial support. The time spent on finding funding prevents program growth and progress.

Targeted services funding

Interviewees working with targeted services funding described their programs as “grossly underfunded,” with funding often covering only teacher salaries. Targeted services are school-based academic and enrichment programming designed to support students identified as at risk of academic failure or in need of additional educational support. Targeted services funding provides more comprehensive supports such as transportation, meals, and nursing services. Programs reported combining multiple funding sources, including Title I federal funding, 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, and federal Full-Service Community School grants. Interviewees described the current grant environment as highly competitive and resource-intensive, with some school districts hiring dedicated grant managers to manage applications and compliance requirements.

Interviewees working in targeted services also identified licensure requirements as an additional staffing barrier. Participants reported that stringent licensure requirements can prevent otherwise qualified staff from providing instruction or support where they are most needed, creating an additional administrative burden and limiting staffing flexibility.

Furthermore, the reimbursement model presents a significant financial risk. Interviewees noted that reimbursements are often delayed by nearly a year and are based on actual attendance (“seat time”) rather than enrollment. Programs reported that fluctuations in attendance caused by transportation barriers and community disruptions can create significant budget shortfalls after staffing and operational decisions have already been made.

Staffing challenges

Many interviewees shared that staffing was one of the top challenges. Due to grant funding or other restrictions, such as staffing ratios, program size, facility size, lack of funding, a reduction in educational and training programs for youth program workers, or general interest in being a youth program worker, many OST programs experienced staffing shortages. One interviewee told of a staff hiring freeze across all libraries due to a lack of funding. It can be hard to build staffing models within current budget limitations. Several interviewees shared that participation in their program is walk-in, making staff forecasting nearly impossible. They shared that they often can’t pay competitive wages compared to other employment opportunities.

One interviewee noted that because grant funding is so competitive, they have been unable to pay OST staff or provide the same level of programmatic activities as other larger OST programs.

“It’s a constant grind. We believe this is passion work, but we feel like we’re pouring from an empty cup.” – OST program administrator

Several interviewees who focus on work-based learning identified a critical gap in support during out-of-school time hours. Participants noted that contractual limitations often prevent school staff from supporting students outside the regular school day, leaving some youth without the paraprofessional or individualized support they need to participate in after-school work-based learning opportunities. Interviewees emphasized that this barrier disproportionately affects youth with the highest support needs, who are often the most resource-intensive to serve. One interviewee said that “the youth who need the most support and assistance are the ones being left out.”

An interviewee shared that they used to have a more robust K-5 program. Due to staffing shortages, increased liability concerns, and increased costs to support this age group, such as the required staff-to-child ratio, they were forced to reduce the program size, even though there was still a need for programming for the K-5 age group. Another interviewee noted that their rural location makes it difficult to recruit staff, and the salaries they

can offer aren't competitive with other jobs in the area. Another shared that the federal funding supporting their program was recently cut. This meant they had to lay off staff and may eventually need to adjust their hours of operation because they do not have enough funding or staff to sustain their program. One interviewee shared that youth depend on their programs and without proper staffing, they fail youth.

Consistency and longevity of staff are another challenge identified by interviewees. OST programs want the ability to serve as many youth and families as they can. Interviewees shared that program activities may have to be reduced due to having fewer staff members. They said OST programs may not be able to offer additional staff training or professional development, such as trauma-informed care or learning about family engagement.

Policy considerations

When asked what policies or programming ideas could strengthen OST programs and systems, interviewees emphasized three main areas: funding, workforce support, and collaboration. Overall, they expressed a strong desire for more accessible and equitable funding. One interviewee noted that OST "organizations have been doing the work but not receiving the resources." Another echoed this by saying that state systems supporting OST programs should be more equitably staffed and funded. Interviewees also suggested updating statutory language to reflect more inclusive and strength-based terminology.

Interviewees offered several ideas for improving collaboration. One OST program administrator recommended dedicated funding to support partnerships between programs and organizations, including shared resources or joint programming. Another interviewee suggested in-person shadowing opportunities between programs to exchange best practices and identify opportunities for resource sharing. Interviewees also proposed state funded recruitment events to help families and youth learn about available OST programs, citing examples such as community music and game nights.

One interviewee encouraged the state to restore funding for Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs). These committees previously brought together OST professionals and community partners, including counties, tribes, and parents—to collaborate, share resources, and expand opportunities for youth with disabilities. They stated that losing this funding negatively affected both committee participants and the communities they served. Other interviewees supported this idea and recommended convening open, collaborative discussions among OST programs, youth, families, community members, and advocates to share best practices and resources.

Interviewees also suggested establishing a dedicated fund for OST programs, potentially supported by tax revenue or by leveraging existing state funds such as cannabis, substance use disorder, or opioid remediation funds. Another idea was to include OST programs as options in workplace giving campaigns, payroll deductions, or other state supported donation mechanisms.

Several interviewees noted gaps in policies and funding for older youth, particularly those with disabilities who require additional support or those transitioning out of traditional school aged OST programs. One OST program shared that, due to funding shortages, they were considering becoming a licensed daycare to secure more stable funding, though they preferred to remain focused on meeting youth needs.

Workforce support was another consistent theme. Interviewees questioned whether current funding models adequately address staffing needs, especially for programs serving youth with complex needs or those operating beyond their intended capacity.

Finally, interviewees expressed interest in more standardized data collection and reporting support from the state. They felt that improved data systems, paired with more opportunities for collaboration, would help OST programs share best practices and strengthen outcomes.

Conclusion

Interviewees shared that when youth feel connected to and supported by their OST program, both the program and the youth benefit. They highlighted the value of sustained participation, noting increases in school engagement, academic achievement, and positive peer connections—especially for youth who have been involved in OST programs for longer periods. According to interviewees, OST programs help youth avoid risky behaviors, reduce isolation, and provide a safe space to be themselves, grow, and explore opportunities not available during the school day.

Overall, interviewees described OST programs as an essential part of community infrastructure for youth and families, rather than simply a place for youth to go outside of school hours. They emphasized that OST programs foster inclusion and community. Create positive outcomes and remain a relevant and needed resource. However, interviewees stressed that continued program growth and sustainability are threatened by limited access, transportation challenges, insufficient funding, staffing shortages, and a lack of coordinated systems.