

K-12 Academic Enrichment Programs in Alabama



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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager training program.

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Introduction

After the school day ends, a few more productive hours remain in a child's day for continuing to learn and grow. For some children, that time is spent in a program that provides academic enrichment and other beneficial programming. However, for many others, that time is not used productively. While many excellent enrichment programs exist, both afterschool and summer learning, not all children who need to be—or want to be—in a program are enrolled in one. According to America After 3PM's National Report, for every three children nationally who would be enrolled in an afterschool program if one was available to them, only one child is actually enrolled. For Alabama, the number of children who would be enrolled if a program was available is higher than the national statistic. Eleven percent of Alabama children are enrolled in an afterschool program, while forty-nine percent would participate in a program if one were available to them. The same report also finds that enrollment in afterschool programs dropped in 2020 and found reduced access for young people across income brackets in the same year (America After 3PM, 2020, p. 1). Having more programs and resources available would allow more children to be enrolled in these programs and provide benefits to the children themselves and society.

The K-12 Academic Enrichment Programs in Alabama Team was given the task of demonstrating the past and present successes of Alabama afterschool programs and examining academic services and initiatives provided by Alabama's afterschool and summer learning programs. We will also identify challenges faced by these programs and recommend strategies for the afterschool and summer learning programs to help close the learning gap for Alabama's K – 12 students caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Background

Academic enrichment programs can include both afterschool programs and summer learning programs. An afterschool program or summer learning program is defined as programming for youth development which takes place during times when the child is not in school. This would include before and after school, weekends, and school holidays, such as summer vacations (Alabama Afterschool Community Network, 2019). According to the Alabama Afterschool Community Network's quality standards, "programs are structured and offer a wide range of learning

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and enrichment activities that promote academic, artistic, physical, social and emotional development for all participating children and youth” (Alabama Afterschool Community Network, 2019). Out-of-school programs, which would encompass both afterschool and summer learning programs, can be described as programs able to provide educative activities. Additionally, such programs must “mount activities that provide youth with ongoing experiences that engage them in the moment” (Intrator & Siegel, 2014, p. 158).

Enrichment programs are popular with parents and have proven positive academic and social results. In Alabama, 91% of parents with a child in an afterschool program were satisfied with the afterschool program their child participated in during 2020. Among all parents surveyed, 87% were in favor of additional public funding for afterschool programs (America After 3PM, 2020, pp. 1-2). Support for summer programs was even higher, with 96% of parents with participating children satisfied and 88% of all parents supporting public funding (America After 3PM, 2021, pp. 2-3). High-quality programs have been shown to increase student interest in classroom participation and learning, increase math and reading test scores, improve grades and lower school absences (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, p. 2).

Availability of afterschool and summer learning programs has been an issue even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the unmet demand found by America After 3PM’s survey was 49% of children in Alabama, up from 41% of children in Alabama in 2014 (America After 3PM, 2020).

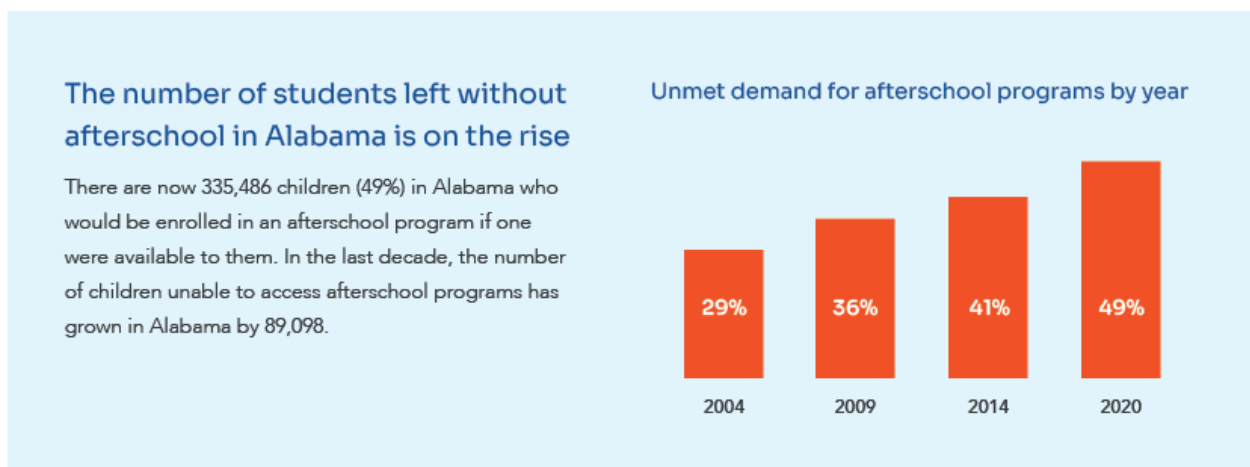


Figure 1 (America After 3PM, 2020)

The Learning Gap

Learning gaps aren't unique to the coronavirus pandemic. A learning gap occurs every year during the summer. Children lose skills over the summer months when they are not in school, typically about two months of grade level equivalency in reading and math (Afterschool Alliance, 2010, p. 2). A similar issue, it is hypothesized, occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of in-person learning (Tarawasa, 2020). A national survey of program providers in March 2021 found that 81% of program providers were concerned about learning loss due to the pandemic (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, p. 13). In a different survey of classroom educators by Horace Mann that same month, 96% of respondents saw some loss of academic or social skills due to the pandemic, with over half describing it as "significant" compared to previous years (Horace Mann, 2021, p. 3).

An early study, completed in November 2020, found that Fall 2020 student improvement in reading had flat-lined and that student improvement in math was 5-10 percentage points lower than in Fall 2019. The study suggests that learning loss may be uneven. The authors acknowledge that they might have underestimated the impact of COVID-19 as the assessments were optional and may show only the higher-performing students. (Kuhfeld, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Lewis, 2020, p. 9). The true impact of the pandemic on academic achievement may not be fully apparent for many years.

In Governor Kay Ivey's 2021 State of the State Address, she addressed the issues faced by students due to the coronavirus pandemic. She stated that "remote learning was always intended to be temporary." She referred to her past as an economics teacher to describe the learning loss due to the lack of in-person instruction, then added, "Catching our students up won't happen overnight or during the traditional school hours" (Ivey, 2021, p. 4). Afterschool and summer learning programs will have to help students overcome the pandemic learning gap.

Existing Academic Enrichment Programs

Alabama has many excellent academic enrichment programs which have been making efforts to close the learning gap before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, 82,574 children participated in afterschool programs in Alabama, spending an average of 6.5 hours per week in their K-12 Academic Enrichment Programs in Alabama | Certified Public Manager® Program 2021 | Page 7

program (America After 3PM, 2020, p. 2). These programs have an impact on many children in the state.

For out-of-school programs, the only federal funding source solely designated to afterschool and summer learning programs are the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21stCCLC) grants. These programs are selected by the Alabama State Department of Education and the US Department of Education based on their ability to provide academic and career enrichment (Afterschool Alliance, 2019, p. 1). Although there are other funding sources, many of the programs described in this section are 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Benefits

Afterschool programs have been shown to increase student's test scores and engagement with school and academics. Studies with control groups of students not participating in afterschool and summer programs found increases in GPAs and test scores for students participating in afterschool and summer programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, p. 2). Research has found that participants in academic enrichment programs are more likely to graduate from high school than non-participants. They also generally have better school attendance, which can correlate with students' future engagement in the workplace. Students are better at completing tasks and meeting deadlines, which enhances their future employability (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, pp. 5-6).

Out-of-school programs can also have other, non-academic benefits. Participants can learn leadership and self-reliance skills by being responsible for small projects or coaching and mentoring younger students (Intrator & Siegel, 2014, pp. 113, 163-165). Programs also take place during hours when juvenile crime is most likely, helping to keep children and teenagers from becoming involved in illegal activities (Afterschool Alliance, 2019, p. 1). A 2020 study found that participants in elementary school afterschool programs as children reported less contact with police after becoming adults (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, p. 5).

High quality afterschool programs are proven to accelerate student achievement:¹

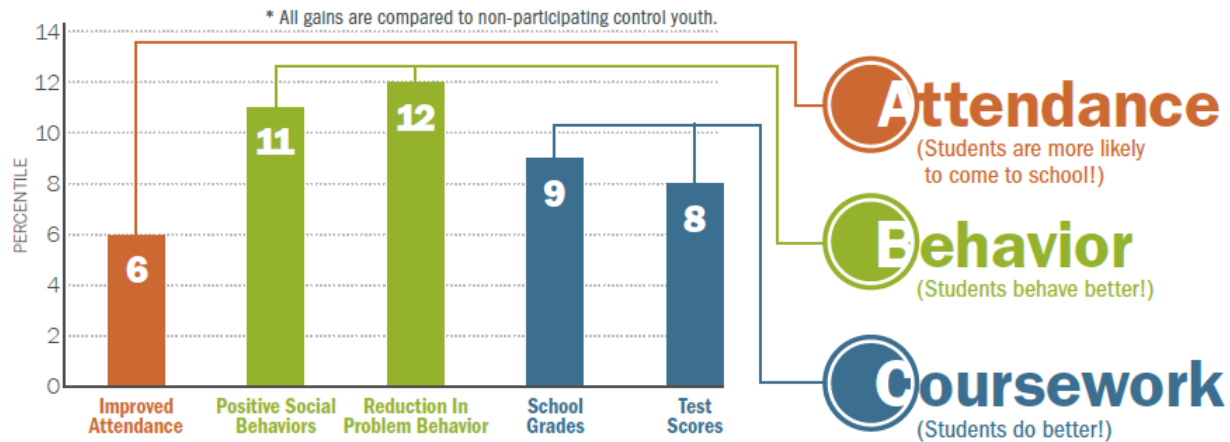


Figure 2 (The Expanded Learning & Afterschool Project, 2012)

The Alabama Afterschool Community Network has eight standards they use to determine eligibility for their Afterschool Seal of Pledge to Quality. These are caring for the physical well-being of participants (nutrition, health and safety), the relationship between staff and youth participants, participation (learning and engagement), family and community partnerships, the types of programs offered, administration and organizational development, staffing and professional development, and continued evaluation for improvement (Alabama Afterschool Community Network, 2019, pp. 6-8). These standards acknowledge that the benefits of out-of-school programs go beyond academic enrichment to enhancing other aspects of participants' lives.

Parents surveyed by the America After 3PM project saw the programs their children participated in as providing academic benefits as well. Seventy-three percent described their child's program as offering STEM learning opportunities, and an equal number reported homework or academic help was provided by their child's program. The largest benefit observed by parents, however, was an opportunity for their child to improve their social skills through interacting with peers in afterschool programs (America After 3PM, 2020, p. 40).

Effective Methods

There are several criteria for determining the quality of programs and the effectiveness of methods used in out-of-school programs.

Funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) is determined by adherence to guidelines laid out in the 21st Century Community Learning Center Operations Manual. 21st CCLCs are evaluated on these guidelines by the Alabama State Department of Education. Programs receiving federal grants must adhere to several legal requirements established by the federal government. Regarding academic enrichment, at a minimum “the US Department of Education requires that all 21st CCLC programs offer language, reading, and math skills enrichment activities as part of their agenda” (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 27). The guidelines also require grantees to have a community partner—if a local education agency, the partner must be a community organization, and if a community organization it must partner with a local education agency (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 6).

Alabama State Department of Education Technical Advisors also share many best practices observed during their evaluations of the 21st CCLC programs in the operations manual. The manual includes advice on how to manage a program’s budget, how to hire and manage employees of a program, student discipline, academic enrichment guidelines, communicating with the community, publicizing an academic enrichment program, and how to leverage non-financial resources (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, pp. 25-27). These printed guidelines allow new programs to adopt methods spearheaded by earlier programs and avoid issues that might have caused problems for previous programs. Some examples of suggestions in the manual include rotating staff schedules to prevent burnout, having regular communication between teachers and other staff, and how to best utilize volunteers. They also recommend keeping close contact with parents to increase publicity through word of mouth, offer ideas for advertising the program to potential students, as well as suggesting the types of community organizations a program might reach out to for assistance (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 19).

Official publications are not the only way program directors can communicate effective methods with each other. Erika Rucker, the 21st CCLC Program Coordinator, facilitates an Alabama After-school Task Force meeting during most months of the program year where program directors can face common issues together and discuss ideas and methods. During the pandemic, these Alabama afterschool programs utilized methods such as drive-thrus to provide enrichment activities and meals to their students in order to continue their services. Despite the circumstances,

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program providers kept their students engaged through alternative methods and continuing existing methods. (Baker, et al., 2021).

A Success Story

The K-12 Academic Enrichment team spoke with Jackie Bretl, Academic Programs Coordinator with the Montgomery Education Foundation on June 3, 2021, before the MGM LEAPS program began, then again after the program had ended. She spoke with the team about the opportunities within the program and the challenges it faced. The MGM LEAPS program is a summer program for elementary school students in the Montgomery area (Montgomery Education Foundation, 2021).

The MGM LEAPS program was provided for the first time in the summer of 2021. The program partnered with the City of Montgomery Parks and Recreation Department and served almost 100 kindergarten through rising 5th grade students. The Montgomery Public Schools feeding program provided students with both breakfast and lunch. There was no cost to the parents of program participants. The Montgomery Parks and Recreation department led physical activities in the afternoon, while MGM leaps offered academic enrichment in the mornings. Physical enrichment included many activities such as swimming, horseback riding, kayaking, archery and even STEM projects. Montgomery Public Schools provided transportation to the afternoon physical enrichment. The academic enrichment was in the form of two theme-based units of a scripted curriculum aligned to state standards and grade level books, Civil Rights History and Community Arts (Montgomery Education Foundation, 2021). The program had two sites, Capitol Heights Middle School and Booker T. Washington Highschool (Bretl, 2021).

In the arts unit, participants painted murals with Montgomery Community Arts, made sculptures and also learned to make quilt squares. There were also guest speakers such as a local muralist. In the civil rights unit, students heard from guest speakers such as Sheyann Webb, the youngest marcher during the Civil Rights March and Georgette Norman, Project Historian for the Alabama African American Civil Rights Heritage Sites Consortium. College students, hired as program lead-

ers, led the students in studying books about both units and were coached by two certified teachers. The goal, Bretl stated, was to provide a program that kids would want to attend and would be relevant to their lives (Bretl, 2021).

The program faced several challenges before and after the program began. Operating in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, precautions had to be taken against the spread of the virus. The program ultimately required masks of both leaders and participants. However, this led to another challenge as masks had to be purchased for students who had lost theirs. Hiring was another issue. Because of the pandemic, Montgomery Public Schools offered its own large summer program at the same time, with heavily increased enrollment to try to alleviate pandemic learning loss (Henry, 2021). They hired from the same pool of teachers as MGM LEAPS, and eventually raised their pay to a level that teachers originally hired by MGM LEAPS left to work for Montgomery Public Schools. Even with funding through the CARES act, the program was not able to match the increase in pay (Bretl, 2021).

The program was still able to accomplish its goals despite these challenges. Participating students experienced 108 hours in the academic enrichment program and 54 hours in the extracurricular and physical activities. On average, the student participants gained the equivalent of 2.5 months of reading skills and 2 months of math skills. Parents, students and program leaders were satisfied with the program. Ninety-six percent of parents reported that they would recommend the program to other community parents and all program leaders reported that they would like to return to the program the following year. Ninety-seven percent of the students surveyed agreed with the statement that they had learned something new during the program. The program's overall attendance rate was 81% (Bretl, 2021).

Challenges

Challenges exist for programs and staff as well as parents of eligible children. Among out-of-school program directors interviewed by the K-12 Academic Enrichment Team, lack of capacity, lack of funding, and a lack of community involvement were identified as common issues.

Lack of Capacity

The issue of lack of capacity has been ongoing even before the pandemic and has been documented as a major issue since 2004 by the Afterschool Alliance (America After 3PM, 2020, p. 1). As students cannot be rejected from admission to a 21st CCLC program due to an inability to pay a tuition fee, only a certain number of students can be covered under a 21st CCLC grant with limited funds (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 47). Academic enrichment programs often operate with a waitlist of students who desire to participate in the program. Several 21st CCLC programs participating in the task force meeting also described waitlists for their programs across the state (Baker, et al., 2021). Jackie Bretl described the MGM LEAPS summer program as operating with a waiting list greater than the program's total capacity—despite Montgomery City Schools offering their own summer program simultaneously (Bretl, 2021).

Lack of funding can also cause capacity issues, as it limits the number of staff able to supervise the children participating in the program. The State Department of Education sets strict limits on the staff per student ratio and the types of assistance volunteers can provide. Volunteers are unable to be left unsupervised with children, limiting their ability to fill the roles of staff (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, pp. 26-27). Program directors can also have capacity issues due to the types of facilities available to their programs. Many programs use school facilities, but others may not have a traditional classroom setting.

Lack of Funding

Besides staffing issues and capacity issues, lack of funding keeps afterschool programs from having resources to help students. The Alabama State Department of Education requires 21st CCLC programs to submit budgets for review to ensure granted funds are not wasted. A list of allowable and unallowable expenses is compiled in the Operations Manual. Restrictions are set on use of the 21st CCLC funding for things like food, field trips and promoting the center to students and potential funders. Any funds needed for unallowable items would need to be found elsewhere (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, pp. 37-42). Programs are encouraged to find additional funding, as the 21st CCLC grant is not intended as a sole funding source for a program (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 30).

During the coronavirus pandemic, many programs ran into some of the same technology problems faced by schools. As tablets had been distributed to students by their school districts, the students had the ability to participate in virtual programming with their afterschool programs. However, program directors faced issues with the battery life of the devices. The students had charged their devices overnight and used all of the battery life completing their regular schoolwork, so had little to none left for connecting to their afterschool program (Baker, et al., 2021). With additional funding, the programs could have purchased devices for their students so they could remain connected.

Afterschool Funding by State

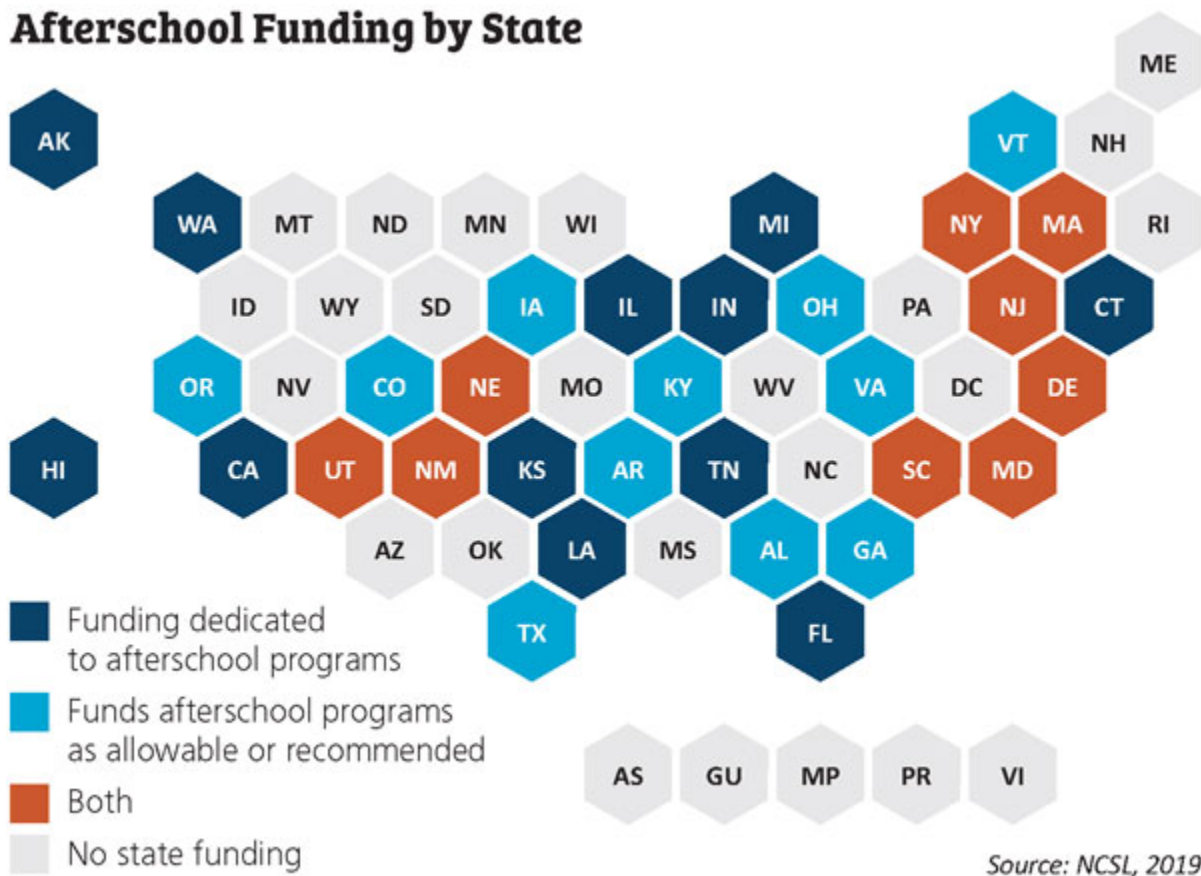


Figure 3 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021)

As seen in the chart above, unlike other states, Alabama does provide state funding to afterschool programs, though the funding is not dedicated to afterschool programs (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Additional funding could solve many problems faced by K-12 academic

enrichment programs, but without additional funding sources created by the Alabama state legislature or the federal government, more creative solutions will be necessary.

Lack of Community Involvement

Lack of community involvement is the least expensive challenge for programs to face, but perhaps the most difficult to overcome. Because of limited staffing, some work is provided by unpaid volunteers. Tutoring, art, dance, and life skills are listed in the 21st CCLC Operations Manual as some of the services volunteers might teach or provide (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 63). While this is the most common way individuals could contribute to an academic enrichment program, this is not the only kind of community involvement.

Beyond volunteers, the directors of Alabama academic enrichment programs the team spoke with expressed a desire to have greater involvement from the wider community, not just additional volunteers. Jackie Bretl with MGM LEAPS described lack of community involvement as an area in which academic enrichment programs commonly have unprovided needs (Bretl, 2021).

The Alabama State Department of Education encourages 21st CCLC programs to search for community partners to provide additional program funding or other donations, and the operations manual includes a list of techniques for forming such partnerships. It also lists the types of community contributions and the services they might provide to an academic enrichment program. Schools and direct partner organizations can share information on the ongoing instruction of participants, public facilities can provide expanded offerings, churches, civic clubs and social service agencies can give funding, volunteers and allow children to learn through performing community service, and local businesses can provide funding, volunteers and donations of supplies (Truman Pierce Institute, 2019, p. 23).

Challenges for Parents

For parents, surveys have found that a lack of programs in the child's local area, the cost of programs and transportation to and from programs are major issues preventing them from enrolling their children in afterschool programs. Of those issues, the cost of the program was the most frequently cited among Alabama respondents (America After 3PM, 2020, p. 3). If some of these

hurdles were removed, more parents might be able to enroll their children in out-of-school academic enrichment programs.

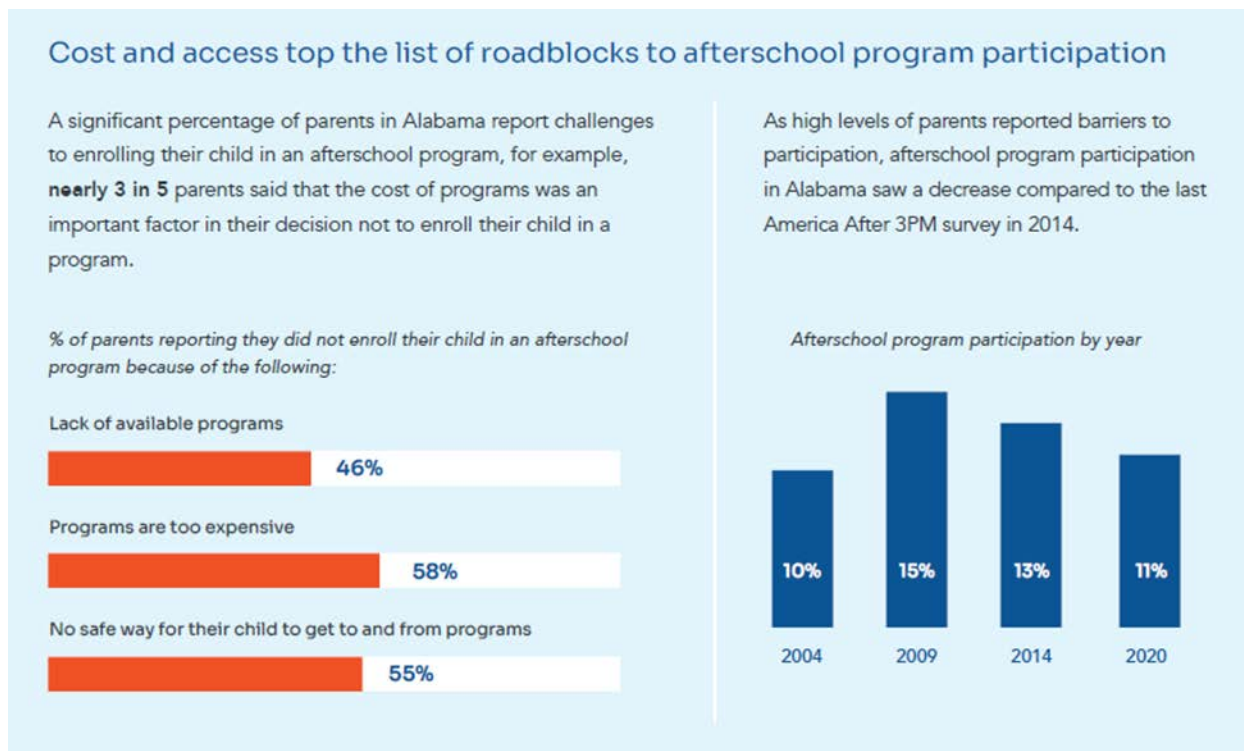


Figure 4 (America After 3PM, 2020)

Recommendations

While afterschool and summer learning programs in Alabama are achieving successes, these programs could reach more students and provide more assistance to participants. Based on our team’s research and findings we recommend the following methods to overcome the challenges faced by Alabama’s academic enrichment programs and improve results: increase community involvement, increase the use of afterschool clubs, and utilize virtual teaching methods pioneered during the pandemic.

Increasing Community Involvement

While individuals and community organizations are currently involved with academic enrichment programs, the amount of their involvement can be improved. Strong connections to local schools can improve program results (Harris & Wilkes, 2013, p. 2). And academic enrichment

programs can do effective outreach to families to increase the involvement of parents' in their child's education, while working with non-academic community organizations can create additional sources of volunteers.

Connections between academic enrichment programs and parents can have many benefits. Students in programs with better outreach and communication to parents can have increased benefits from the program, as parents can continue to encourage their child in the lessons learned through the program well beyond the operating time of the program. Parents can also provide information to out-of-school programs about their child's activities when not in the program, allowing the program to make modifications when needed (Harris, Rosenberg, & Wallace, 2012, pp. 1-3).

A brief from the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Harvard Family Research Project suggests improving parent and community involvement through having legislatures include out-of-school programs in new initiatives and invite out-of-school program representatives to discussions around creating educational quality standards (Harris, Rosenberg, & Wallace, 2012, p. 3). Studies suggest that stronger connections within a community and to institutions of higher learning can bring in quality volunteers with less turnover than other recruitment methods (Garcia, et al., 2020). Encouraging community organizations to reach out to programs, rather than expecting programs with limited staff attempt to recruit better-funded partners, would allow programs to have more time to focus on students and give them more resources to do so.

Afterschool Clubs

While many afterschool programs in Alabama include clubs as part of the services offered to students and many schools currently offer clubs afterschool, a statewide funded program of clubs operated through schools could ease some pressure on existing afterschool programs.

Afterschool clubs can provide some similar benefits as out-of-school programs. Extracurricular school-based STEM learning, such as through a STEM or robotics club, has been shown to in-

crease student interest in entering science-related fields, particularly for female students. Studies have also found that earlier exposure is more effective (Dika, Alvarez, Santos, & Suárez, 2016, p. 31).

Funding for school clubs in science does exist in Alabama. The Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) through the Alabama Department of Education provides grants to applicant schools desiring to offer a robotics program to their students (Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative, 2021). The University of Alabama has the STEM Entrepreneurship Academy, which works with teachers and students in Alabama high schools through a year-long program (University of Alabama, n.d.). However, these programs and associated funding sources are not enough to provide these services to all schools, so only students at schools where teachers are able and willing to put in the work to apply will have access to these programs.

The Governor’s Advisory Council for Excellence in STEM suggested expanding these programs to ensure access to them for underserved populations (Alabama's Roadmap to STEM Success: A Strategic Plan for STEM Education, 2019, p. 16). The K-12 Academic Enrichment team agrees with their assessment. Additionally, the creation of new funding sources for afterschool clubs similar to these—not just for science related areas but other academic fields—could help students enter these fields and allow existing afterschool programs to focus on resolving the coronavirus learning gap.

Virtual Afterschool Programs

Virtual learning during the pandemic opened new avenues for potential growth in academic enrichment programs. Teachers in schools adapted existing models to educate virtually during the coronavirus pandemic and utilized new technologies (Horace Mann, 2021, p. 8). While virtual learning has drawbacks that have contributed to the learning gap, virtual learning still has benefits which could make afterschool and summer learning more flexible and able to reach larger numbers of participants.

In interviews conducted by Horace Mann, educators reported “better communication with students and parents, as well as increased collaboration with colleagues” due to virtual learning

(Horace Mann, 2021, p. 8). Afterschool programs seem interested in continuing some virtual learning as well. In surveys conducted by the Afterschool Alliance in early 2021, twenty percent of respondents were still interested in resources and strategies related to virtual learning despite most programs being physically open at that time (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, pp. 2, 12). It's important to note the difference between online learning and enrichment and the emergency adaptation brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. Creating new models that do not simply adapt existing education models, such as lectures and group discussions, to an online format would allow students to learn while utilizing the strengths of online learning (Lockee, 2021, pp. 5-6). Barbara Lockee writes that "lengthy Zoom sessions are seldom instructionally necessary and are not aligned with the psychological principles of how humans learn. Interaction is important for learning but forced interactions among students for the sake of interaction is neither motivating nor beneficial" (Lockee, 2021, p. 6).

Virtual learning could allow students to access educational resources created outside of the afterschool program they participate in, while being personally assisted by staff at their afterschool program. It could also allow students who have online connections but lack transportation access to the resources and assistance of a virtual afterschool program.

Conclusion

Existing academic enrichment programs provide many benefits to the Alabama's children, but improvements and increased funding could enlarge the benefits and expand them to even more young people in the state. The learning gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to expand afterschool and summer learning programs to reach more students.

Afterschool and summer enrichment programs offer benefits beyond those schools can provide. A successful program is not simply one in which a student's GPA or test scores improved, but one which made the student themselves equipped for success. As out-of-school programs are not as restricted by test-based curriculum, programs can focus on what students are interested in individually, allowing them to learn and develop important skills outside of the framework of schools (Intrator & Siegel, 2014, pp. 161-162). A quality out-of-school program can revitalize interest in

learning for students who have lost interest in traditional school, and keep other students from becoming unmotivated (Afterschool Alliance, 2021, pp. 4-6).

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic won't be resolved by focusing solely on one aspect of the education system, but expanding student access and resources available to afterschool and summer learning programs can create valuable changes for Alabama's students—especially those in disadvantaged areas. Academic enrichment programs can increase more than test scores—they can increase participating students' readiness for success in school, careers and beyond.

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