

# The State of After-School Programs

**Results of a National Survey  
On Programming During a Pandemic**



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**Research Center**

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The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and special reports such as Quality Counts, and Technology Counts. The center also conducts independent research studies.

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## Executive Summary

The disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic produced new challenges for students and schools. Many students missed out on academic content and faced social isolation during remote learning. After-school activities may be one option for assisting students and providing educational or social-emotional support as they recover lost ground. But the challenges of the pandemic—ranging from staffing issues to economic turmoil—might impact the capacity of after-school programs to offer services.

To assess the current state of after-school programs, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of school principals and after-school employees between May and June of 2022. The survey examined the types of activities that programs provide, perceptions of pandemic-related changes, and hiring or retention difficulties.

Several key themes emerged from the survey results.

- Access to after-school programs is not universal. Nearly half of after-school program employees reported that their programs currently have a waiting list of students who want to participate.
- Survey respondents also indicated that most students participating in their programs are white and from more affluent families, which raises questions about racial/ethnic and income-related disparities in access to enrichment activities.
- Access to such programs could offer students a wide range of opportunities. Programs most commonly provide free time to play (91%), arts and crafts (90%), and homework help (85%).
- Views regarding the appropriate focus of programming differ depending on the grade levels of students participating. For instance, respondents more often said that helping students develop skills they will need to succeed in the workplaces of the future should be the primary focus of programs for students in secondary schools than at the elementary level.
- Survey respondents also see an increasing focus on social-emotional learning in local after-school programs now compared with before the pandemic. The majority of respondents said that the focus on SEL had increased since the pandemic began compared to just one-quarter reporting that academics are now receiving greater attention.
- One factor that could affect future access to programming and activities: staffing. Most principals and after-school employees responding to the survey said that challenges in recruiting and retaining staff members caused extensive problems for their after-school programs. Pay—usually \$10 to \$20 per hour for after-school personnel—could be one of the top causes of employment-related issues.

## Introduction

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, students faced unprecedented disruptions in their daily lives. Due to efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19, they were suddenly unable to attend school in person let alone enroll in after-school programs. As students have returned to in-person schooling, there are opportunities to resume after-school activities. But how are these programs faring in these tumultuous times? What are their challenges and opportunities?

To take stock of where things currently stand with after-school activities, it's important to hear from people with firsthand experience—the educators and staff members closest to the programs.

In a nationally representative survey administered from May through June 2022, the EdWeek Research Center asked principals and after-school employees about their perceptions of the current state of these programs.

Several key takeaways emerge from this research. Nearly half of after-school employees report that they have waiting lists of students wanting to get into their programs. Equity could be an issue since these after-school programs typically enroll more white students and students from more economically advantaged families. The programs also have staffing concerns due, perhaps, to relatively low pay—staffers typically earn between \$10 and \$20 per hour. Inflation and other economic challenges stemming from the pandemic remain as stumbling blocks for recruitment and retention. In this environment, programs continue to provide activities, ranging from academic development to social-emotional support, that can help students.

### **SURVEY DETAILS**

Surveys Administered: May-June 2022

Sample: Nationally representative

Method: Online [Email invitations sent to an online survey]

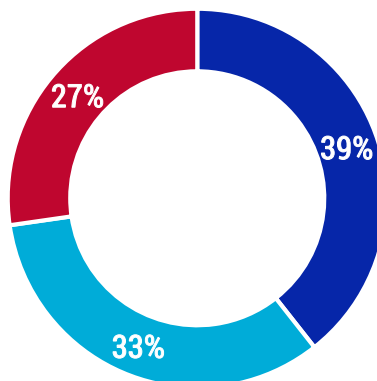
Respondents: K-12 Principals, Directors, and Other Personnel of After-School Programs

## Demographics

Between May 31st and June 10th, 2022, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative online survey that asked K-12 principals and after-school workers about the number of children they can serve, changes due to the pandemic in how they serve children, and their ability—or inability—to retain their program staffing.

The sample included 981 participants. Survey respondents include 164 elementary school principals, 25 middle school principals, 31 high school principals, 49 principals in other grade configurations, 384 most senior manager/founder/directors at after-school programs serving at least some students in grades K-12, and 328 other staffers at after-school programs serving at least some students in grades K-12.

## Which of the following best describes your current job?

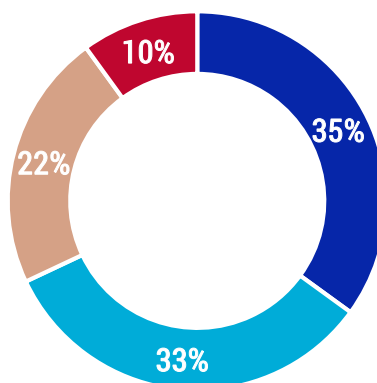


- Most senior manager/founder/director at an after-school program serving at least some students in grades K-12
- Other personnel at an after-school program serving at least some students in grades K-12
- Principal

Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Eighty percent of principals responding to the survey work for public schools and 20 percent lead private schools. After-school personnel who participated in the survey most commonly work in nonprofit environments (35 percent). One-third work in school-operated programs. One out of five after-school workers has a job with a for-profit program.

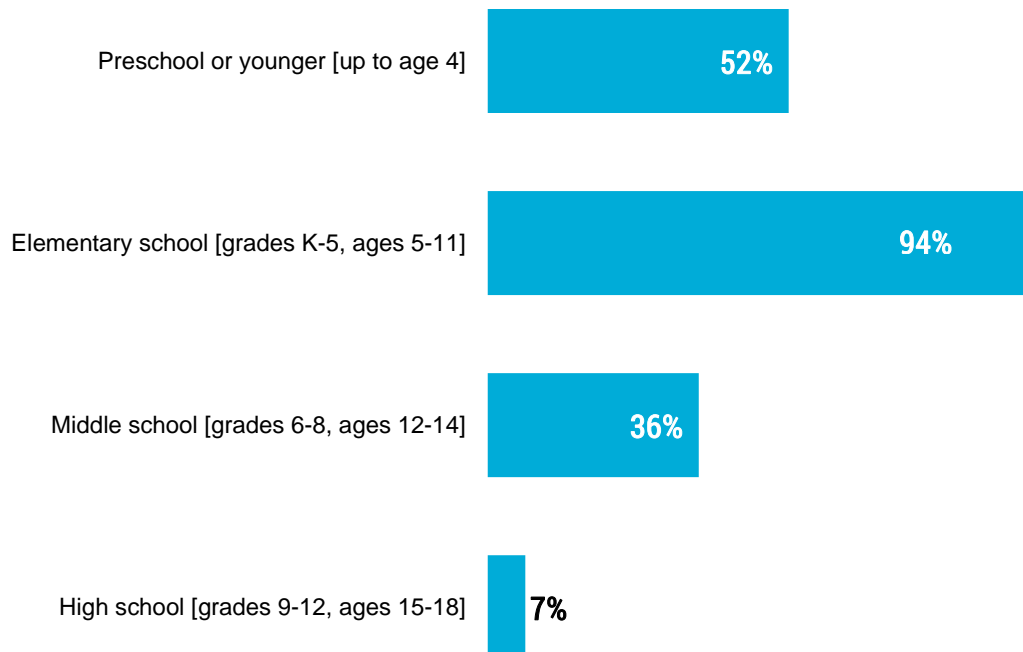
## What kind of program do you work for?



- Nonprofit—not operated by a school district
- School/school-district operated
- For-profit
- Other

Ninety-four percent of after-school workers say they work with children aged 5-11. Fifty-two percent work in programs enrolling children who are four years old or younger. Thirty-six percent say they work with children between the ages of 12 and 14; only 7 percent say their after-school program serves 15 to 18-year-olds.

**How old are the students your program serves? Select all that apply.**



Principals and after-school personnel report that the student populations served by their after-school programs are typically white and living above the poverty line. Only 36 percent of survey respondents report that the majority of the students they serve come from low-income families, while 64 percent report that the student populations they serve are mostly from more economically advantaged backgrounds.

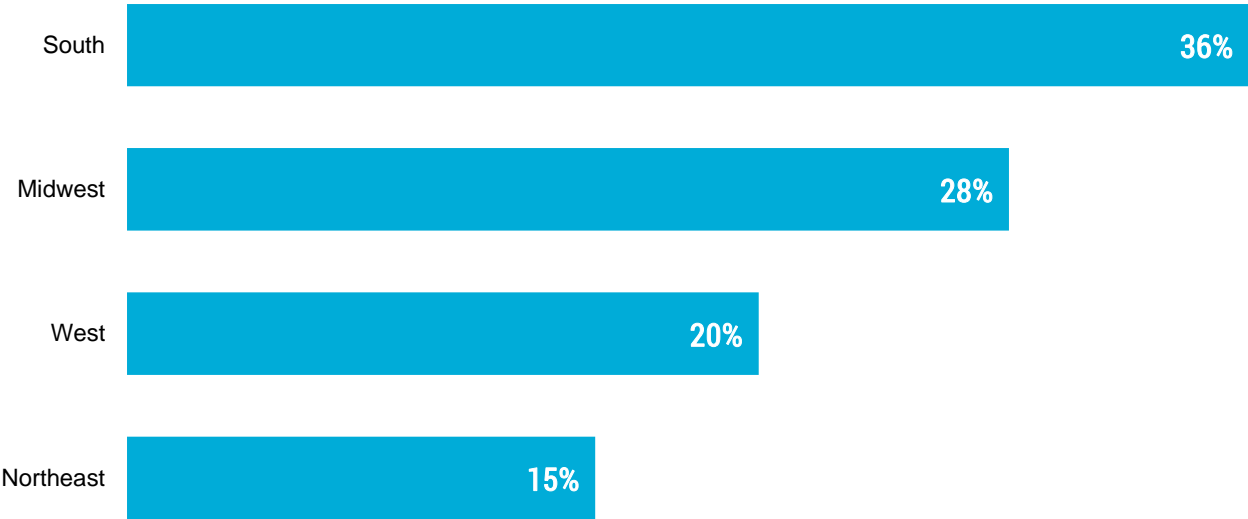
**Race/ethnicity and economic characteristics of students attending programs**

	Which of the following best describes the percentage of students from low-income families who attend your program or school?
Fifty percent or less low-income students	64%
Fifty-one percent or more low-income students	36%
	Which of the following best describes the percentage of white students in your program or school?
Forty-nine percent or less white students	34%
Fifty percent or more white students	66%

Only 34 percent of principals and after-school personnel report that most students served by their program or school are non-white. Sixty-six percent report that white students make up the majority of the student population they serve.

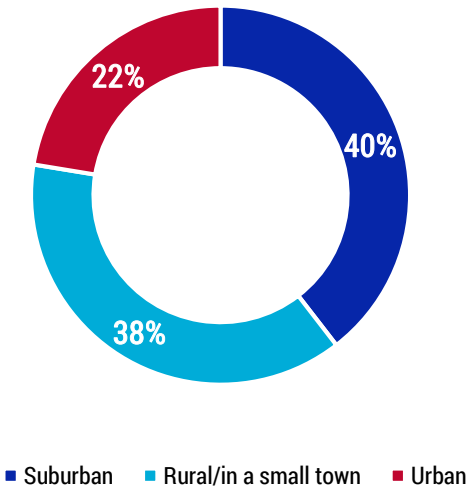
Thirty-six percent of all survey participants work in the South, 28 percent work in the Midwest, and 20 percent work in the West. Only 15 percent of participants reported working in the Northeast.

**Region where respondents work**



Finally, 2 out of 5 principals and after-school employees work within a suburban area and 38 percent work in a rural area or a small town. Only 22 percent of survey respondents report working in an urban context.

**Locale where respondents work**



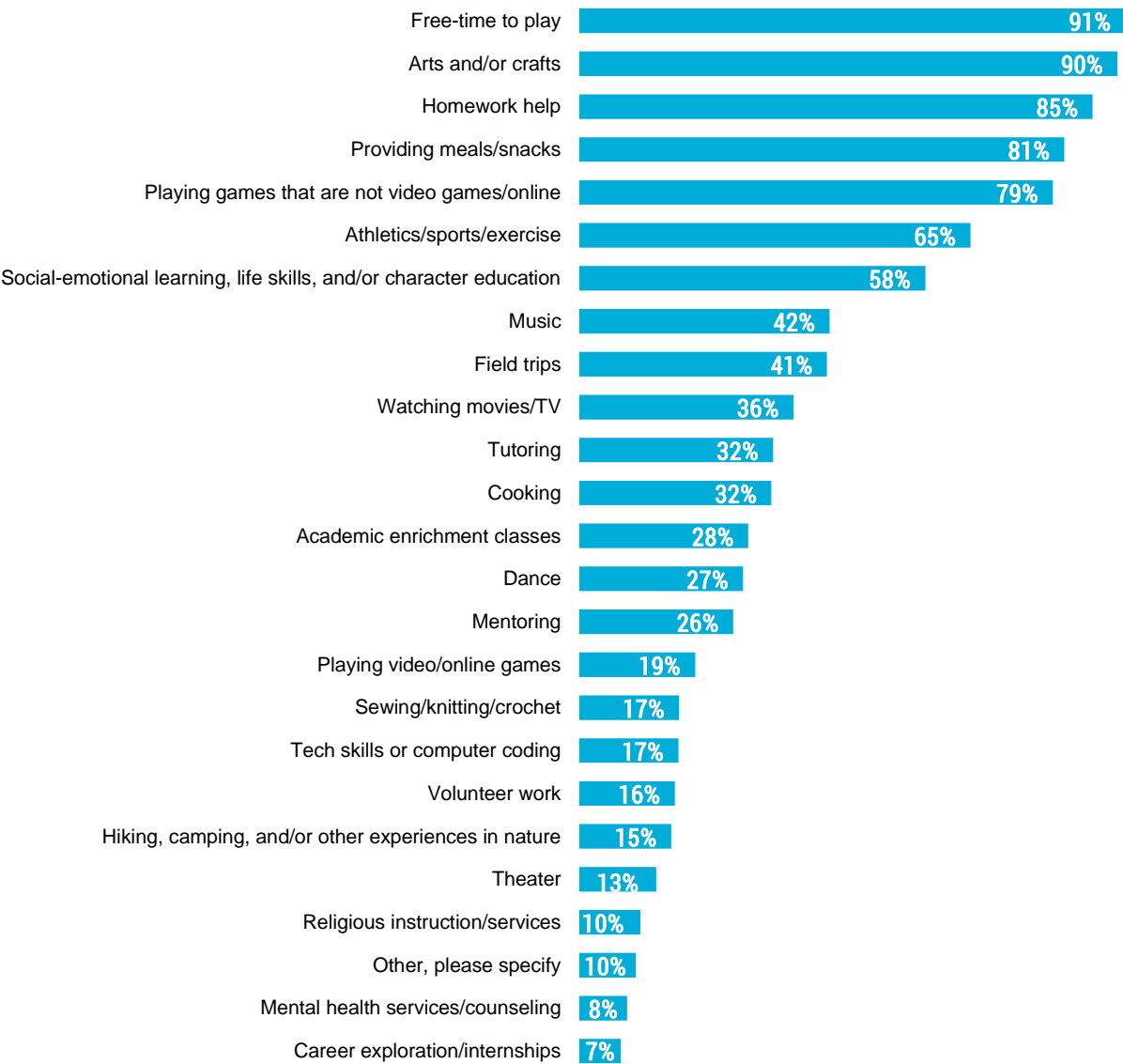
# Current Activities

The survey asked after-school employees about the activities their programs offer.

Ninety-one percent of employees report their programs provide free time to play, followed by arts and crafts at 90 percent. Eighty-five percent report their program provides homework help. Roughly 8 in 10 report that they provide meals and snacks and play games. Two-thirds of after-school respondents report that athletics and exercise play a role in their after-school programs, followed by social and emotional learning (SEL) or life skills at 58 percent.

Very few programs provide counseling (8%) and career exploration opportunities (7%).

**What kinds of activities does your after-school program offer students? Select all that apply.**



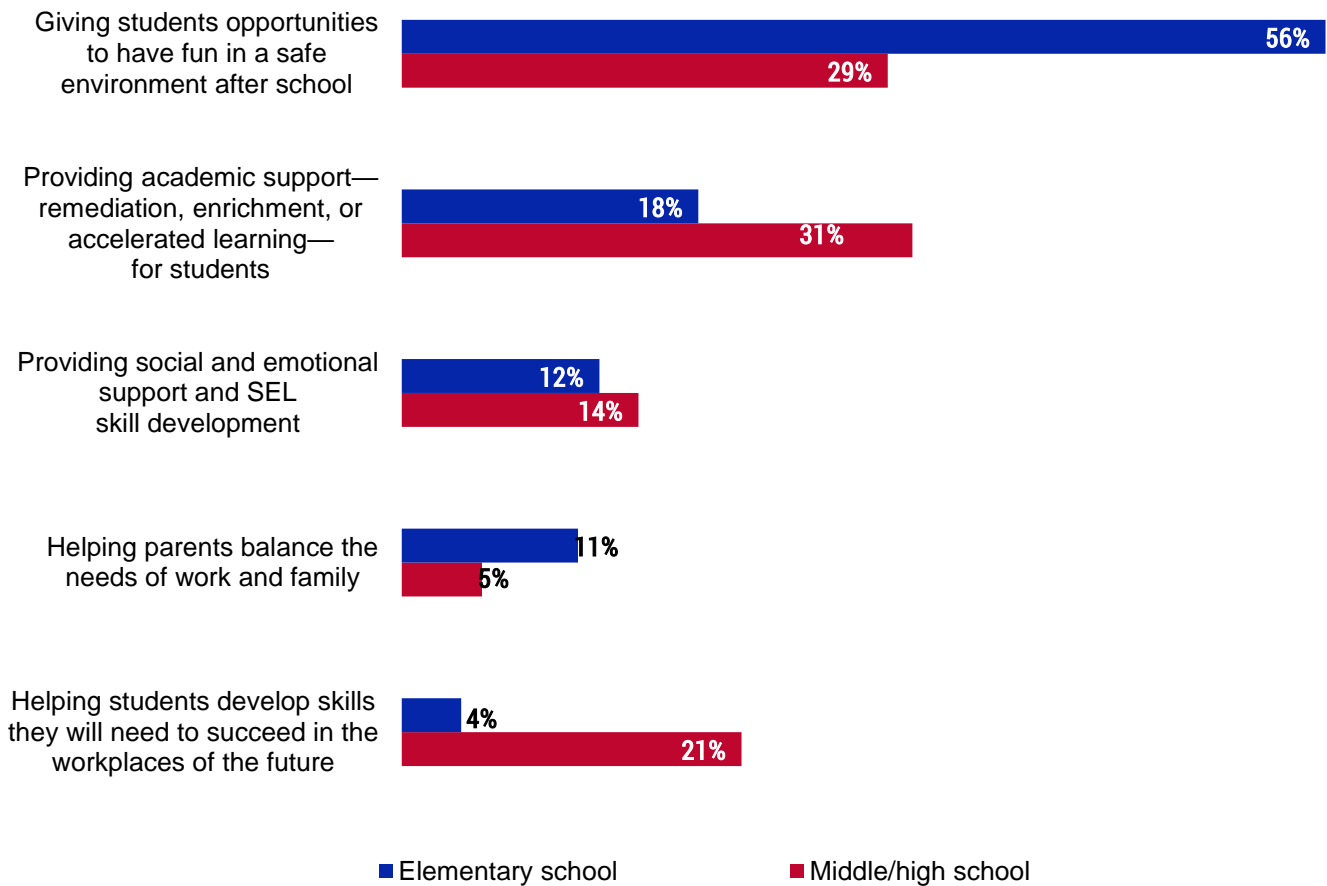


It is, perhaps, unsurprising that these programs often provide free time to play and arts and crafts given that they frequently serve students in elementary schools.

## Programming Goals

Most after-school providers and principals believe the primary goal of after-school programming for elementary students should be to have fun after-school opportunities in a safe environment. Survey respondents considered fun less of a priority for middle and high school students.

**In my view, the primary focus of after-school programs for students should be:**

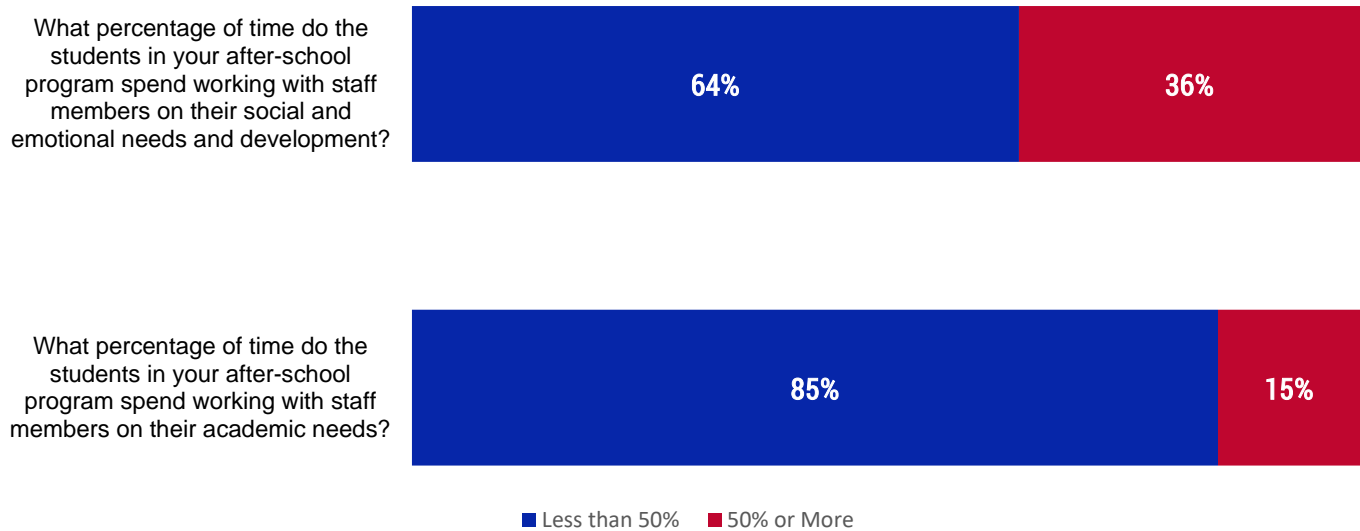


Fifty-six percent of survey participants thought the goal for elementary students would be to have a fun, safe environment after school. By contrast, just 29 percent said the same for secondary school students.

Nearly one-third of respondents felt that the focus for middle and high school students should be to provide academic support compared to only 18 percent for elementary school students. Additionally, 21 percent pointed to the goal of helping middle and high school students develop skills they need to succeed in the workplaces of the future compared to only 4 percent for elementary school students.

Smaller shares of principals and after-school employees felt that providing social and emotional support and SEL skill development should be the primary focus for elementary and middle/high school students at 12 and 14 percent, respectively.

**Percentage of time the students in after-school programs spend working with staff members:**



Only 15 percent of after-school personnel say students spend more than half their time in their programs working with staff members on their academic needs.

It's more common for students to work with staff members on their social-emotional development. Thirty-six percent say that students spent the majority of their time working with staff members in that area.

### Changing Needs in Programming Due to the Pandemic

When asked to describe the focus on academics in local after-school programs now compared with before the pandemic, principals and after-school staffers most commonly say there was no change (49 percent). Some report even less focus on academics (26%). Only a quarter of participants report more focus on academics within the after-school programming.

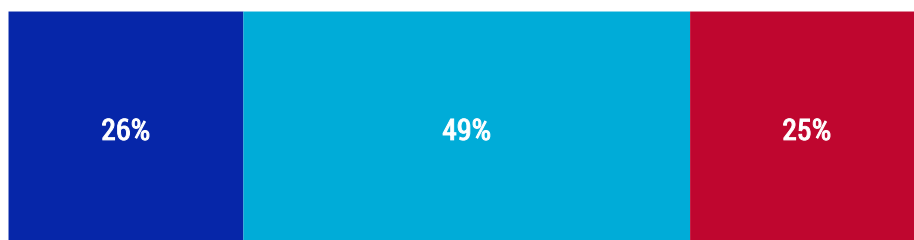
Only 34 percent of participants report no change in the focus on social-emotional learning in local after-school programs compared to before the pandemic and only 7 percent say there is less focus on SEL issues. The majority, at 59 percent, say there is more focus on SEL than before the pandemic.

## Focus on SEL and academics compared to prior to the pandemic

How would you describe the focus on social-emotional learning in local after-school programs now, compared with before the pandemic?



How would you describe the focus on academics in local after-school programs now, compared with before the pandemic?



■ Less focus ■ No change ■ More focus

## Students Waiting to Get in

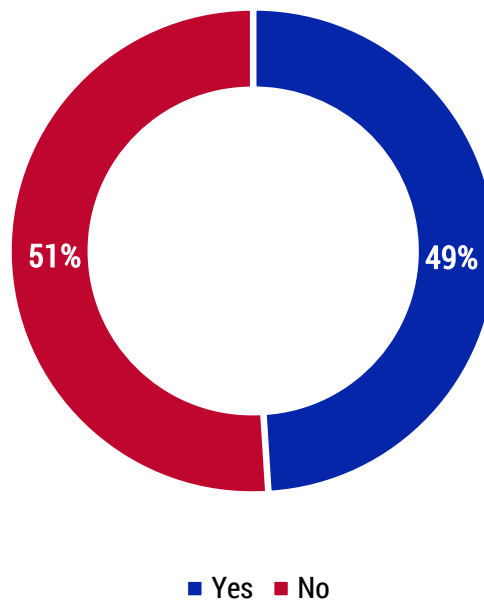
There are students waiting to get into after-school programs. Nearly half of after-school personnel report that their program currently has a waiting list of students.

These survey results suggest that students might be missing out on opportunities that they need due to lack of capacity in after-school programs. It's unclear whether students on waiting lists will ultimately be able to participate in any after-school programming or whether they will receive support in other settings.

When existing programs can expand or new programs are started, it will provide families with additional options and the ability to select the program that best fits their needs.

This gap in the ability to serve all students may be connected to recruitment and retention issues with program staff.

## Program currently has a waiting list of students



The data indicate that 1 out of 5 students cannot participate in after-school programs. The average after-school employee reports that their program houses 166 students, and an additional 39 students are waiting on the sidelines for a spot to get in.

## Students served by programs and on waiting lists

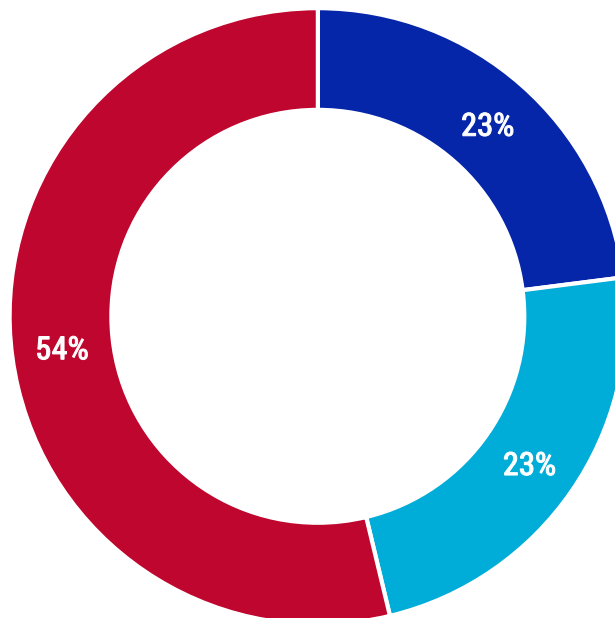
	Mean	Median
How many students does your program serve?	166	60
How many students are currently waitlisted for your program?	39	15

## Recruitment and Retention

Fifty-four percent of principals and after-school workers said retention and recruitment were either a lot or a tremendous amount of trouble, selecting "it's a major crisis."

An additional 23 percent said hiring and sustaining a workforce for after-school programming causes "some trouble." Twenty-three percent said the current after-school workforce issues within their community were no trouble at all or only causing a little trouble.

**How much trouble are after-school programs in your community having to recruit and retain staff members?**



■ No trouble at all/A little trouble   ■ Some trouble   ■ A lot of trouble/A huge amount of trouble

When after-school workers and principals described their community's significant challenges for after-school programs, two top issues emerged: recruiting and retaining qualified employees.

Sixty-seven percent pointed to recruiting qualified employees as a major challenge and 61 percent said retaining qualified employees was a concern. Another 44 percent said their income and budgets had not kept pace with the rising costs of running programs. Forty-two percent said they are having difficulties because students misbehave more now than pre-COVID.

Only 6 percent of after-school workers and principals said they could not think of any significant challenges for after-school programs in their community.

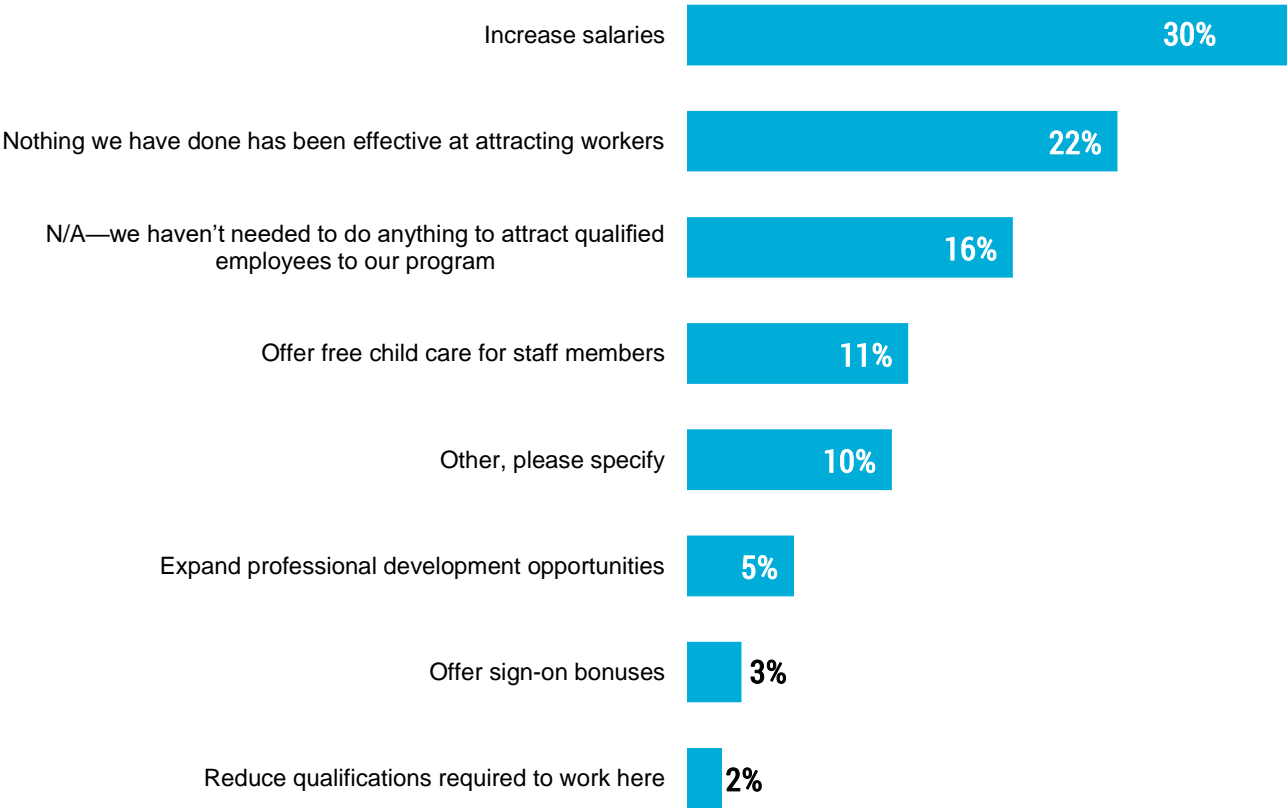
Which of the following are **MAJOR** challenges for after-school programs in your community right now? Select all that apply.



# Salaries and Pay

According to survey respondents, improving salaries is the most effective solution they have used to attract qualified employees to after-school programs.

**The most effective approach you have used to attract qualified employees to after-school programs:**

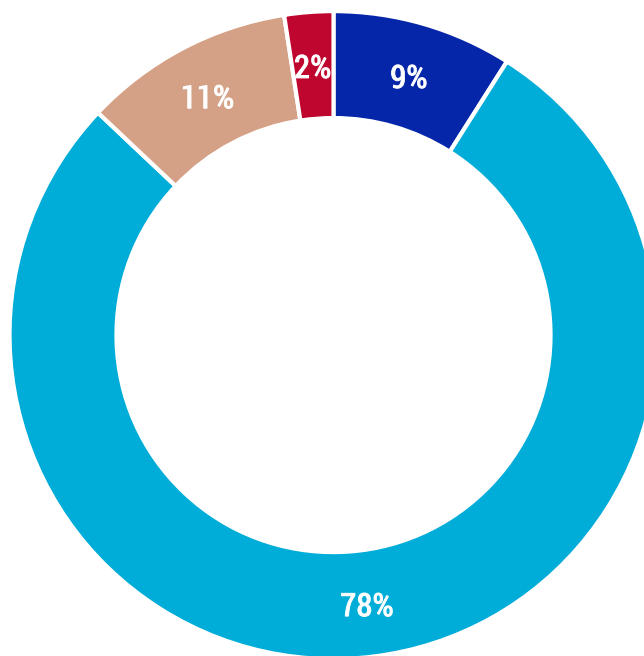


Increasing salaries was the top option selected at 30 percent, followed by after-school workers saying "nothing we have done has been effective at attracting workers" at 22 percent. Another 16 percent said, "we haven't needed to do anything to attract qualified employees to our program."

Only 2 percent of respondents said the most effective approach to attracting employees was reducing the qualifications to work for the after-school program.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents say that after-school employees earn between \$10 and \$20 dollars per hour. Breaking out that 78 percent further, 45 percent say they earn between \$10.01-15.00 dollars, and 33 percent said they receive \$15.01-20.00 dollars an hour.

## Program typically pays employees



■ Less than \$10.01 an hour ■ \$10.01-\$20 an hour ■ More than \$20.01 an hour ■ N/A

Nine percent earn less than \$10 dollars an hour. Another 11 percent said they earn more than \$20 dollars an hour. Two percent said not applicable (N/A).

## Conclusion

The majority of principals and after-school personnel perceive that they have tremendous trouble when it comes to retaining and recruiting staff for their programs. This survey documents the current waiting lists for students to get into after-school programs suggesting that adequate staffing could open up greater opportunities for young people looking to participate.

Given the tremendous disruption and isolation caused by COVID-19, it's not surprising that survey respondents report after-school programs provide more social-emotional learning and support than before the pandemic. The lingering impact of the pandemic has caused an increased need for both the homework help and social-emotional development that after-school programs might provide.

But with staffing concerns limiting these programs, it's unclear whether they will have the capacity to meet student needs without further investments and resources.