CMA 2025 #127
IN CITY COUNCIL
May 19, 2025

To the Honorable, the City Council:

I am pleased to share with you the Cambridge Out of School Time (OST) Expansion Study Report. This report was developed in collaboration with OST providers, colleagues across the School Department and Department of Human Service Programs and families. While Cambridge is fortunate to offer more affordable OST options than many communities, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable high-quality experiences across our community.

The City Council has held numerous committee meetings over the last several years hearing from families, providers and city staff.   As the report details, the pandemic and its aftermath reshaped the OST landscape, bringing both positive strides towards equity and new barriers to service delivery.

A major strength of this study and the report was the deep engagement with a range of stakeholders. The Steering Committee led by the Agenda for Children Co-Directors, Susan Richards and Khari Milner, included school, City and community program leaders. The Advisory Group, which met throughout the study, included principals, family liaisons, district staff, and OST staff and leaders so that their perspectives could be included. There were 10 focus groups with caregivers including many caregivers of children with special needs so that their voices would be centered here.

The key recommendations of the Study provide a road map for first shoring up the existing Out of School Time system and then for phased expansion over the next several years. Before we can expand, we need to begin to address the critical challenges which impede our current provision of services:

1. Adequate space for out of school time programs,
2. Appropriate pay and benefits for OST staff,
3. Barriers to access for some children with special needs,
4. Complex application and enrollment processes for families, and
5. Deeper partnerships between school and OST staff to support children.

It will take the deep commitment of the City, School and Community partners to address the challenges listed above. The engagement of critical partners in the study sets the stage for the next phase of work.

As you know, the City proposed budget for FY26 includes support in two areas related to Out of School Time. The DHSP budget includes city funding to replace the current ARPA funding for scholarships for 91 low-income students attending five community nonprofit programs. The proposed budget also includes funding for additional supports that will allow DHSP to better meet the needs of some additional children with special needs.

I recommend that the City Council refer the Report to the City Council Human Services and Veteran's

Committee.

Yi-An Huang
City Manager

Cambridge
Out-of-School Time
Expansion Study

withinsight

resonance
data collective
surfacing and centering community wisdom

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Forward

Letter to the Community

We are excited to share with you the Cambridge Out of School Time (OST) Expansion Study Report developed in collaboration with OST providers, colleagues across the School Department and Department of Human Service Programs and families. While Cambridge is fortunate to offer more affordable OST options than many communities, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable high-quality experiences across our community.

As the report details, the pandemic and its aftermath reshaped the OST landscape, bringing both positive strides towards equity and new barriers to service delivery. The report focuses on the OST programs that provide learning and care 5 days a week until 5:30 or later. This includes currently 28 different programs provided by the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP) and community-based nonprofit providers.

A major strength of this report was the deep engagement with a range of stakeholders. The Steering Committee led by the Agenda for Children Co-Directors, Susan Richards and Khari Milner, included school, City and community program leaders. The Advisory Group, which met throughout the study, included principals, family liaisons, district staff, and OST staff and leaders so that their perspectives could be included. There were 10 focus groups with caregivers including many caregivers of children with special needs so that their voices would be centered here.

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It will take the deep commitment of our teams to address the challenges listed above. The engagement of critical partners in the study sets us up well for the next phase of work.

While we are aware of the potential budgetary limitations over the next several years, the City proposed budget for FY26 includes support in two areas here. The DHSP budget includes city funding to replace the current ARPA funding for scholarships for 91 low-income students attending five community nonprofit programs. The proposed budget also includes funding for additional supports that will allow DHSP to better meet the needs of some additional children with special needs.

We look forward to working with all of our partners as we begin the next phase of the work.

Yi-An Huang
City Manager
City of Cambridge

Ellen Semonoff
Assistant City Manager, Human Services
City of Cambridge

David Murphy
Interim Superintendent
Cambridge Public Schools

Recognition

Gratitude for Community Engagement

WithInsight, Resonance Data Collective and Agenda for Children Out-of-school Time (OST) would like to express our appreciation for the individuals and organizations who participated in this project. The project was a participatory process that would not have been possible without their contributions and perspectives.

We are also especially grateful for the caregivers, youth workers, teachers, principals, and OST directors who participated in focus groups, completed surveys and shared their experiences. Special thanks to Louis Costa de Beauregard who served as a Harvard Kennedy School of Government Intern and helped build the groundwork for the project during the summer of 2023.

AGENDA FOR CHILDREN OST PROJECT TEAM
- o Kara Bixby, WithInsight, Evaluation Director
- o Trish Dao-Tran, Resonance Data Collective, Founder & Principal
- o Michelle Farnum, Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP), Assistant Director of Child, Youth and Family Services
- o Khari Milner, Agenda for Children OST, Co-Director
- o Nic Miragliuolo, City of Cambridge, Strategy Manager
- o Susan Richards, Agenda for Children OST, Co-Director
- o Mercedes Soto, Agenda for Children OST, Impact and Evaluation Advisor

OST EXPANSION STUDY STEERING COMMITTEE
- o Melissa Castillo, DHSP Cambridge Youth Programs, Division Head
- o Michael Delia, East End House, Executive Director
- o Michelle Farnum, Cambridge DHSP, Assistant Director of Child, Youth and Family Services
- o Darrin Korte, Cambridge Community Center, Executive Director
- o Michelle Madera, Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) Elementary and Early Education, Assistant Superintendent
- o Erin Muirhead McCarty, Community Art Center, Executive Director
- o Bucky O'Hare, DHSP King Open Extended Day, Director
- o Ray Porch, CPS Family and Community Engagement, Director
- o Ellen Semonoff, Cambridge DHSP, Assistant City Manager

OST EXPANSION STUDY ADVISORY GROUP
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- Jada Alleyne, Community Art Center, School Age Program Manager
- Bonnie Bertolaet, Science Club for Girls, Executive Director
- Chris Delvecchio, East End House, Chief Operating Officer
- Allegra Fletcher, Maria L. Baldwin Community Center, Director of Children's Programs
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- Rachel Kinch, Cambridge Community Center, Director of OST Programs
- Mia Klinger, JOYweavers, Executive Director
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- Jodi Rich, Dragonfly Afterschool Program, Executive Director
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- Katie Gladfelter, DHSP Administration, Executive Project Assistant
- Liz Lewis, DHSP Community Schools, Manager
- Wendy McLaughlin, DHSP Childcare, Afterschool Manager
- Vlad Pierre, DHSP Recreation, Director
- Marc Saunders, DHSP Cambridge Youth Programs, Director of Operations
- Zach Solomons, DHSP Inclusion Initiative, Director
- Nancy Tauber, DHSP Family Policy Council, Executive Director
- Ellen Thompson, DHSP Community Schools, Manager

CPS District Leaders
- Diecline Bazile-Dorvil, CPS, Bilingual Family Liaison Coordinator Haitian Creole
- Debbie Bonilla, CPS Family Engagement Specialist
- Rob Emery, CPS, ICTS Student Data Coordinator
- Dr. Karyn Grace, CPS Office of Student Support, Assistant Superintendent
- Maria Marroquin, CPS, District Instructional Lead: ELA/Math, Preschool - Grade 2
- David Murphy, CPS Interim Superintendent
- Desiree Phillips, CPS OSS, Executive Director of Special Education
- Zuleka Queen-Postell, Cambridge Public Schools District, Special Education Liaison
- Maggie Rabidou, Cambridge Public Schools District, Operations Manager

CPS School Leaders
- Nancy Campbell, Haggerty Elementary School, Principal
- Heidi Cook, Maria Baldwin Elementary School, Principal
- Neusa DaCosta, King Open School, Family Liaison
- Chris Gerber, Kennedy-Longfellow Elementary School, Principal
- Lauren Morse, Graham and Parks Elementary School, Family Liaison
- Lissa Galluccio, Haggerty Elementary School, Family Liaison
- Abdel Sepulveda-Sanchez, Peabody Elementary School, Principal
- Daniel Skerritt, Fletcher Maynard Academy, Family Liaison
- Darrell Williams, King Open School, Principal

Introduction

WHAT IS OST?

Out-of-school time (OST) refers to the time period when children are not in school, such as after school, during school vacation, and summer breaks. It encompasses various activities and programs designed to engage young people in constructive, enriching, and developmentally appropriate experiences during these out-of-school hours. The goal of the OST field is to support the social, emotional, academic, and physical development of children outside regular school hours.

OST programs often aim to enhance children's well-being, reduce the risk of engaging in risky behaviors, and provide a safe and supportive environment for learning and growth. These programs span different OST periods and can include:

- **Afterschool programs**: Structured activities that take place after the school day ends and during vacation weeks, often providing academic support, recreational activities, arts, and social skills development.
- **Summer camps and programs**: Programs that provide learning opportunities and social activities during the summer months.
- **Enrichment activities:** Opportunities like sports, arts, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) programs, community service, and other extracurriculars that help children and youth explore new interests and develop important life skills.

Importance of Afterschool Programs

Afterschool programs, in particular, are incredibly important as they not only offer numerous benefits to children's development and learning, but also provide essential and stable childcare to caregivers and families. For children, they are crucial for supporting holistic development, helping to improve academic outcomes, promote emotional and social growth, provide safe and structured environments, and give children the skills they need for future success. The quality of care that they experience during their school years also impacts long-term outcomes such as their health, education, employability, social network, quality of life, and civic engagement as adults. For caregivers, afterschool programs provide critical support and benefits that help them balance their personal, professional, and family responsibilities. Table 1 lists some of the ways in which afterschool programs support children and caregivers.

Table 1. Ways Afterschool Programming Supports Children and Caregivers

Children	Caregivers
o Social emotional development o Safety and supervision o Physical health and wellness o Enhanced creativity and critical thinking o Academic support and improvement o Increased access to resources	o Reliable supervision o Affordable childcare o Ability to work o Family stability o Increased access to resources

Shifts and Challenges in the OST Field

Despite the numerous ways that afterschool programs contribute to children's learning and development and family stability, many children do not have access to afterschool programs. In fact, the proportion of children who do not have access to afterschool has grown over the last ten years. According to Afterschool Alliance, 24.6 million school-aged children (about 50%) did not have access to afterschool in 2020, up from 38% in 2009. In Massachusetts, that figure was 56% in 2020.

Nationwide, caregivers experience barriers to accessing afterschool programs. According to a caregiver survey administered by Afterschool Alliance in 2020, 57% of caregivers who responded said that programs were too expensive; 42% cited a lack of available programs; and 53% said there was no safe way for their child to get to and from programs. This was especially true for Black and Brown families and households with lower incomes.

In 2020, the number of children in an afterschool program nationwide decreased for the first time in a decade from 8.4 million in 2009 to 7.8 million in 2020, down from 10.2 million children in 2014.[1] This drastic shift was likely in large part due to the seismic disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even as communities "returned to normal," afterschool programs faced difficulties returning to pre-pandemic capacity. A major reason for this was due to challenges attracting and retaining frontline youth workers. According to one respondent of a national survey of afterschool programs, inadequate staffing meant children could not be served: "My program lost about two-thirds of the students in the fall of 2020. This year we could be at the number we were, but I cannot find staffing to care for the children. I currently have 20 children on the waitlist. Our biggest obstacle is finding and retaining staff." The effects of COVID-19 exacerbated existing difficulties with recruiting and retaining frontline youth workers.

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[1] *2020 America after 3PM*. Afterschool Alliance. (n.d.). https://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/#covid-19.

Table 2. Frontline Youth Worker Recruitment and Retention Challenges in the Afterschool Field

Recruitment and Retention Challenges	
Low Pay	The relatively low compensation for many frontline youth worker positions makes it difficult to attract candidates who may have other higher-paying job options or who prefer a less stressful but similarly paying job.
Lack of Benefits	Those in part-time positions typically do not have access to employer benefits (i.e., health insurance and paid time off), which makes it harder to retain workers long-term, especially when workers can find similar roles in other sectors that offer better compensation and benefits.
High Stress and Emotional Demand	Working with youth, especially those facing challenges like behavioral issues, mental health problems, or socioeconomic hardships, can be emotionally and mentally taxing. Youth workers often deal with challenging situations. The emotional toll of the work and sometimes challenging working conditions, can lead to burnout.
Understaffed and Overworked	The shortage of workers can lead to existing staff being overworked, which may make recruiting new staff even more challenging due to the additional pressure placed on hiring managers or current team members.
Limited Career Paths	Many frontline youth worker positions offer limited opportunities for career advancement. Without clear pathways for growth within an organization, employees may seek opportunities elsewhere.

Cambridge OST Ecosystem

Mixed Delivery System

The Cambridge OST Ecosystem consists of a variety of afterschool and summer programs serving youth. It is a mixed system which includes community-based nonprofit organizations and city-run programs led by the Department of Human Services Programs (DHSP) and extended-day and summer programs administered by the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS).

There are more than 70 OST programs in Cambridge, of which 28 offer afterschool care to K-8 students 5 days per week. These 5-day a week programs – run by DHSP and nonprofit organizations – address a critical need for afterschool care in the city. Many of these programs (18) are also co-located with CPS schools in city-owned buildings.

Caregivers can apply for a seat for their child or children in one of the 28 5-day a week afterschool programs by submitting an application to the [DHSP afterschool lottery](#) for city-run programs or applying directly with the organization for nonprofit programs. In addition, CPS teachers and staff can refer students for a City-sponsored seat in a non-profit program. This City Scholarship program supported 91 afterschool seats during the 2023-2024 school year. Overall, 44% of children enrolled in grades K-8 in CPS were enrolled in a 5-day a week program during 2023-2024.

Agenda for Children OST

"Young people live in the intersection of three major spheres: family, school and out-of-school time (OST). This is where Agenda for Children strives to meet them. From this place, we hope to make the greatest impact on the healthy development of our community's young people." - Agenda for Children OST

The Cambridge Agenda for Children OST (Agenda for Children OST) is a citywide intermediary that is strategically set up to build connections between OST providers (including community-based nonprofits and city-run programs), schools, families and city leadership. Its co-directors are anchored in the two largest child and youth-serving departments in Cambridge as members of their leadership teams: Khari Milner with Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) and Susan Richards with Cambridge's Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP). In addition to CPS and DHSP departments, Agenda for Children OST staff also work closely with community-based nonprofit programs. Annually, Agenda for Children OST provides professional development opportunities for more than 450 staff from 70 OST programs and partners who work with 3,000 Cambridge children and youth.

For more than twenty years, Agenda for Children OST has convened, catalyzed, and supported the youth-serving community in Cambridge towards a shared purpose of increasing equity, access and innovation and sustaining the highest quality OST experiences for all children, youth and families. An official member of [Every Hour Counts](#), a national network of intermediaries building after school systems across the country, Agenda for Children OST holds integral roles in facilitating systems change efforts in Cambridge's OST ecosystem. It also offers direct support to children and families, OST frontline youth workers, and OST programs.

Agenda for Children OST:
- o Facilitates data sharing and analysis of CPS and OST-affiliated student data.
- o Connects high priority children and families with opportunities and provides enrollment and financial support to enable them to participate in OST programs.
- o Convenes the Cambridge OST Coalition, comprised of approximately 70 youth program providers to build an advocacy agenda and share data.
- o Facilitates OST - School Partnerships to support young people.
- o Convenes network meetings for programs serving youth at different developmental ages and stages (elementary, middle school, and high school youth) and also helps OST programs support youth through transitions.
- o Coordinates the Out of School Time Learning Institute which provides professional development workshops, Communities of Practice, and an annual OST Symposium.
- o Coordinates the Quality Improvement System supporting Cambridge OST programs and organizations to engage in peer learning and continuous quality improvement through leadership coaching and facilitated self-assessment processes.

Through these critical functions, Agenda for Children OST nurtures and builds a strong OST ecosystem in Cambridge. It is poised to support the coordination of future expansion efforts and strategies, including tracking and reporting on change at the system level, program level, and youth level. More information about Agenda for Children OST can be found on its website.

About the Study

Need for OST Expansion

After many schools and afterschool programs were forced to shut down during the height of the pandemic, many families were eager to enroll their children in afterschool programs again once they reopened. This led to a surge in demand as parents returned to work and sought safe, structured environments for their children. At the same time, the pandemic led to staff shortages in many sectors, including afterschool programs. This exacerbated waitlists as programs struggled to find enough staff to support the increased number of children.

In the Fall 2021, DHSP began facilitating an equity-driven lottery process for afterschool seats. This led to a better measure of demand for afterschool seats. At the same time, Cambridge experienced increased challenges in hiring and retaining staff to work in afterschool programs. In Spring 2022, DHSP presented to the City's Human Services Committee explaining that in order for Cambridge to provide additional afterschool programming, it would have to work as a collective to determine a path forward, requiring system-level engagement of OST stakeholders: families/caregivers, OST providers (including DHSP and non-profit organizations), and CPS.

Increasing access to high-quality, affordable out-of-school time programming emerged as a community priority. In Spring 2023, the City Council issued a policy order to guide Cambridge's efforts to develop a plan that achieves the goals of:

- o Providing an afterschool seat for every child in Cambridge who requests one.
- o Expanding seats in school-based afterschool programming.
- o Ensuring that every child who needs transportation to an afterschool location receives it.
- o Improving pay/benefits for program staff to aid in retention and recruitment.

As part of the on-going implementation of the council order, the City of Cambridge, in partnership with the Cambridge Public Schools, undertook a study to better understand the existing array of out-of-school time options available to children in grades K-8 and to evaluate potential models for expansion.

This study was initiated by the Agenda for Children OST, which worked with key partners to map out a process to examine OST expansion opportunities for Cambridge. The purpose of the study was to better understand the unmet need in Cambridge by fully examining the demand for afterschool seats and the current capacity to meet that demand.

Demand — Capacity = Gap

(need for afterschool seats) (existing available seats) (unmet need)

In February 2024, the City of Cambridge hired a collaborative team of consultants to conduct the OST Expansion Study. WithInsight and Resonance Data Collective partnered to bring together their expertise in out-of-school time, equitable evaluation, systems change and community engagement to lead the study with the Agenda for Children OST. This report summarizes the process and methods the study utilized as well as the findings and recommendations that were generated as a result of the process.

Equity-centered Values and Approach

The City of Cambridge is committed to advancing equity for its residents. This commitment is not new – there is a long history of valuing and celebrating diversity and advancing equity in the city. More recently, the City developed Envision Cambridge, the citywide roadmap to the year 2030, designed through a participatory process to "promote inclusive and sustainable growth." It surfaced seven citywide goals, three explicitly lifting up the need to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion:

1. **Access to Opportunity**: Provide access to opportunities for all people regardless of differences.
2. **Art and Culture**: Cultivate a city where artistic expression and cultural traditions are integrated into all aspects of civic life.
3. **Civic Engagement**: Empower all people to participate in public life.
4. **Health and Wellness**: Ensure access to resources that support holistic health, wellbeing, and extended life.
5. **Learning and Play**: Encourage lifelong learning and enriching opportunities for play and recreation.
6. **Racial Justice**: End race-based disparities and achieve racial equity.
7. **Sense of Belonging**: Strengthen our social connections and provide a safe and welcoming community.

Afterschool programs directly address five of the seven goals: Access to Opportunity, Arts and Culture, Health and Wellness, Learning and Play, and Sense of Belonging.

Furthermore, all of the key partners in the OST Expansion Study are aligned in centering diversity, equity, and inclusion. The mission of Agenda For Children OST specifically identifies equity as core to its purpose: To convene, catalyze and support the youth-serving community in Cambridge *for the shared purpose of increasing equity*, access and innovation and sustaining the highest quality OST opportunities and experiences for all children, youth and families. Cambridge Public Schools has an anti-racist vision and mission statement,[2] in addition to its Office of Equity, Inclusion and Belonging tasked with advancing strategies that are anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive. DHSP has a set of Race and Equity Guiding Principles as well as a commitment to an "equity-driven lottery process" which was reflected in the study's Request for Proposals.

To align with these values and principles, the Project Team intentionally designed the study in a way that centers equity in its purpose and process. The approaches, frameworks, and guidance used to understand and address inequities in the system are discussed in the following section about the study's process and methodology.

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[2] Cambridge Public Schools. (n.d.). Office of equity, inclusion & belonging. https://www.cpsd.us/cms/One.aspx?portalId=3042869&pageId=71376491.

Process & Methodology

This section outlines the process in which the Project Team facilitated the OST Expansion Study, as well as the data collection methodology. The Project Team utilized a phased approach to manage the complexity of the project, as a multifaceted, year-long process that involved many people and organizations across the city. There were three major phases to the OST Expansion Study outlined in Table 3. Due to the ongoing nature of continuous learning, relationship- and movement-building, these phases at times occurred in a braided fashion. For simplicity, we describe each as a distinct phase.

Table 3. Phases of the OST Expansion Study

PHASES		
1	Foundation setting (pg. 12)	o Determined stakeholder groups and levels of engagement. o Solidified and prioritized study questions. o Developed problem definition and study plan.
2	Gap analysis and data collection (pg. 20)	o Conducted data collection and analysis. o Led data walks to make meaning of results. o Identified key themes across data sets.
3	Recommendations and action plan (pg. 27)	o Utilized data walks to identify recommendations. o Prioritized strategies and developed action steps. o Summarized findings, documented recommendations, and wrote final report.

See the study's progression on the Agenda for Children OST's website.

Foundation Setting Phase

The purpose of the Foundation Setting Phase was to develop a solid foundation upon which to scaffold the project. The Project Team identified people and organizations to lend their expertise to steward the study, illuminate important perspectives to center, and develop a shared vision and north star. The following sections describe the process and rationale in our approach.

Intentional Collaboration and Stewardship

We adopted an intentional approach to seek out diverse perspectives and engage with partners across the OST ecosystem. Many throughout the OST ecosystem have important roles to play in articulating root causes of inequities and developing equitable expansion solutions. We facilitated a collaborative process with individuals across nonprofit organizations, DHSP, and CPS to ensure that those who work in or interact with the OST ecosystem were closely involved in defining the problem, interpreting data, and developing solutions.

To respect their time and expertise, as well as honor time and budgetary constraints, we utilized a scaffolded approach to collaborate with diverse stakeholders (see Table 4 for additional details). Overall project stewardship included three defined bodies:
- o Composed of staff from the Agenda for Children OST and the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP), as well as project consultants, the **Project Team** was responsible for overall project management, convening stakeholders, and communication.
- o The **Steering Committee** was made up of OST Executive Directors and Division Heads and CPS District Leaders, and other individuals whose formal positions lent them a systems perspective.
- o The **Advisory Group** was made up of representatives across DHSP staff, CPS Administrators, Principals, and Family Liaisons, and OST Program Managers and Directors who brought an "on the ground perspective."

During the foundation setting phase, the Project Team launched the Steering Committee and Advisory Group to act as project stewards. It was important to prioritize this in the beginning of the process in order to build relationships amongst stakeholders. The Project Team convened the Steering Committee and Advisory Group in a braided fashion with each group meeting bi-monthly during the other's off month. While each group met separately, the Project Team cross-pollinated ideas across both groups to enable iteration and to ensure their efforts were complementary and collaborative. Both the Steering Committee and Advisory Group contributed to the problem definition, data interpretation, and developing solutions.

Table 4. OST Expansion Project Stewardship

	Project Team	Steering Committee	Advisory Group
Role	o Managed the project and monitored progress. o Finalized the study questions and plan. o Identified and made connections as needed. o Led public communication.	o Provided input on the study questions and design. o Identified, recruited and engaged key stakeholders. o Engaged in meaning making and action planning.	o Represented the voices of the OST and CPS community. o Identified, recruited and engaged participants for data collection. o Engaged in meaning making and action planning.
# People	7	12	37
Commitment	Met weekly for the first 3 months and then once per month.	4 meetings and 3 joint meetings with Advisory Group.	4 meetings and 3 joint meetings with Steering Committee.

Centering the Child and End User

Initial launch meetings with the Steering Committee and Advisory Groups quickly surfaced a powerful shared value at the center of their collective efforts in the OST community – that *the well-being, growth, and success of the children in our care is at the center of all we do. We all have a role to play*. And, *those closest to the issues hold the solutions*.

To understand how the existing system can better serve children and their families, the Project Team convened the Steering Committee and Advisory groups to "map" the many people and roles who play a part in nurturing young people in the afterschool and school day ecosystems. We used a child-centered approach to illustrate their relationship to the child. The child was intentionally placed in the middle to maintain our value of centering children and families and to align with our approach focused on the user experience. As shown in Figure 1, these individuals and roles radiate out from the child at the center based on how closely they serve the child in their role.

The Steering Committee and Advisory Group used the individuals and roles identified in this map to ground the project. Centering the child and understanding the perspectives of those closest to the child set the tone for an approach and process throughout to focus on the end user or users – in this case, the child (and their caregivers by proxy). They also acknowledged the important and proximal role that OST frontline youth workers, OST directors, school teachers, principals have with children.

Subsequently, the Steering Committee and Advisory Group identified the need to understand the experiences with afterschool from each of these unique vantage points:

- o Parents and Caregivers
- o OST Frontline Youth workers
- o OST Directors
- o School Teachers
- o Principals

As will be subsequently described in the Gap Analysis and Data Collection phase, the study prioritized the perspectives of the groups named above in its data collection. In Figure 1, these groups are highlighted in purple boxes to show that they participated in focus groups and surveys.

Figure 1. Stakeholder Mapping and Prioritization of Stakeholder Perspectives
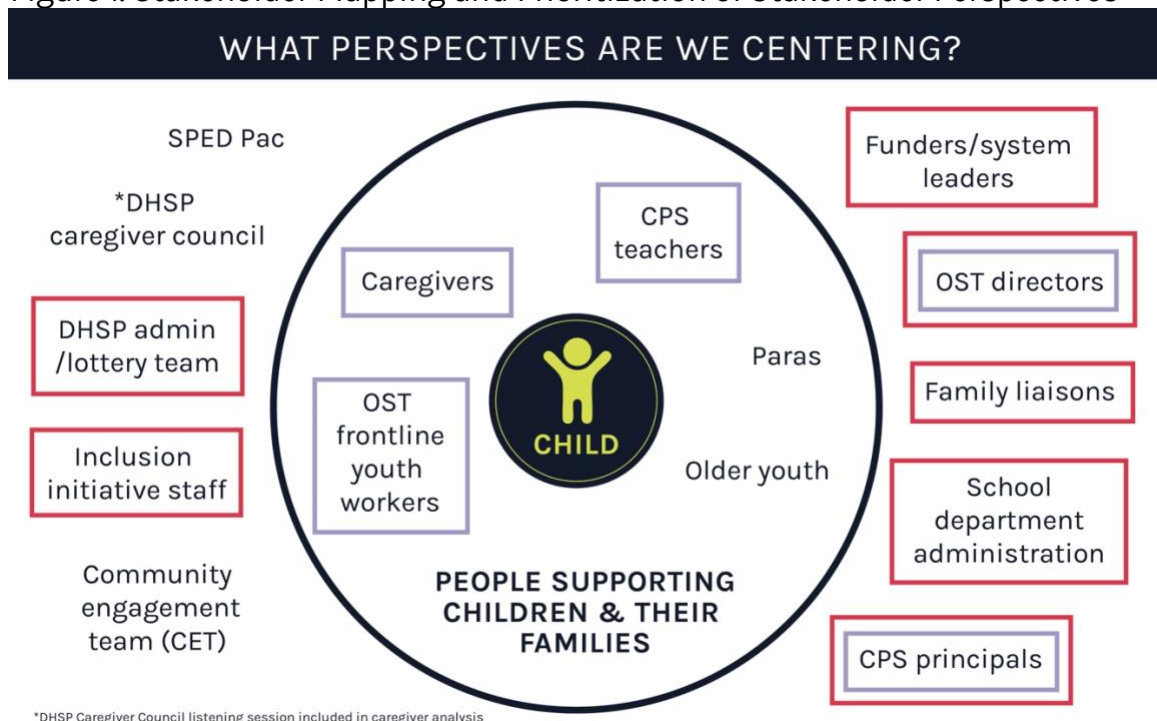
We used this child-centered stakeholder map to articulate the people and roles who are a part of the OST community. And, as it illustrates, there are many other individuals and roles that play a part in supporting those who most directly support children. Those roles include, Family Liaisons, Community Engagement Team Staff, Inclusion Initiative Staff, DHSP Admin and Lottery Staff, as well as many others. Many were involved in the Steering Committee and Advisory Group and are highlighted in red.

Articulating a Shared Vision

This study offered a rare opportunity for partners to collaborate across the OST, school, and city systems to improve services for children and families across the city.

With its deep and wide relationships as a longstanding citywide intermediary, Agenda for Children OST was instrumental in bringing together staff across school and afterschool sectors, departments, and programs. The Project Team is proud to unveil a shared vision – developed over the course of 18 months with 53 stakeholders – for an equitable and just OST ecosystem to serve children and families in Cambridge.

The Project Team used design-thinking and participatory methods to facilitate visioning conversations with the Steering Committee and Advisory Group to articulate a shared north star for the future of the OST ecosystem. The Project Team also conducted asset-mapping activities to identify strengths and resources within the City and the existing ecosystem to build upon or leverage. Additionally, we facilitated root cause analysis to develop a working hypothesis for the reasons leading to inequities and shortcomings in the existing system. Collectively, the relationship-building and activities in the Foundation Setting phase set the direction for the study and how it would be accomplished in the subsequent phases.

Ideal Future State

The ideal future state articulates a collective shared vision for an OST ecosystem that equitably serves children, youth, and their caregivers in Cambridge. This desired future state was used subsequently as a "north star" to guide both stakeholder groups in data exploration and strategy development.

This vision embodies the equity-driven values shared among many stakeholders in the OST ecosystem. It reflects the principle of targeted universalism - setting goals for all and recognizing the need to prioritize marginalized families. The ideal future state emphasizes the importance of centering the end users (i.e., children and families) and designing systems that work together effectively to meet their needs.

Ideal Future State of the OST Ecosystem

Choice and opportunity for all

- Decision-making is influenced by input from stakeholders most impacted by decisions.
- All families have access to the information they need to access OST opportunities.
- All families have the opportunity to access expanded care in the school year and in the summer.
- All children have the opportunity to attend an OST program, including students who come mid-year.

Improved integration with schools

- The city of Cambridge honors all accomplishments of young people in and out of school. It feels like one holistic community celebration.
- OST is valued by all educators, counselors, school staff, etc.
- School and OST teachers and directors work collaboratively to support the needs of all families.
- Schools all start and end at the same time; transportation is not a factor/barrier.
- All students have transcripts and a success plan that incorporates OST and travels with them.
- The variety of programs/opportunities are available across all schools.

Programs based on needs

- OST includes care, skill-building, academics and enrichment for all children - focus on "the whole child."
- We have a clear understanding of competencies that are enhanced during OST.
- There are a variety of options that allow students to explore their interests and the world.

Equitable system design

- An equity lens is used to disrupt and impose change. The most marginalized families are prioritized.
- "All children are known" and the city can offer appropriate solutions to struggling families.
- The OST system has the resources and support to expand to meet the needs of Cambridge families.

Valued Workforce

- All OST staff work a minimum of 30 hours per week with benefits and competitive pay with related fields.
- Salaries are increased. OST profession is valued and respected.

Fishbone Diagram

To supplement the ideal future vision, the Project Team worked with the Steering Committee and Advisory Group to develop a detailed map of how Cambridge could collectively achieve the ideal future state. The fishbone diagram is the product of a series of root cause analyses facilitated to better understand the challenges in the OST time ecosystem. During the process, Steering Committee and Advisory Group members expressed their desire to use asset-based language to describe the problem definition. As a result, this articulation of challenges and barriers was then used to develop the fishbone as a constructive, asset-based map of conditions needed to reach the desired future state. Both the ideal future state and fishbone diagram were foundational products that guided the Steering Committee and Advisory Group throughout the study. They were printed on large posters and hung up during meaning-making sessions to ensure that recommendations aligned with the desired vision.

"FISHBONE" DIAGRAM: ACHIEVING THE IDEAL FUTURE STATE

ADEQUATE RESOURCES

There is adequate funding to support a thriving OST ecosystem.

There is adequate and reliable space for each program and classroom to function productively.

There is adequate funding to ensure there are enough OST seats for every young person who needs one.

There are funding and structures to support a thriving and consistent workforce.

THRIVING WORKFORCE

There is adequate staffing for all programs. Programs are able to recruit and retain qualified staff.

OST teachers / frontline youth workers feel valued as educators.

All OST staff are taken care of by their employers; they are able to earn a living wage, have access to employee benefits, and are supported in maintaining work-life balance.

There are opportunities for professional mobility, professional development, and professional support / onboarding.

AFTER SCHOOL CARE IS ACCESSIBLE TO & MEETS THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES, ESPECIALLY THOSE EXPERIENCING MARGINALIZATION*

Every young person, especially those experiencing marginalization*, who need or want an OST seat is able to get one in a timely manner.

Application and enrollment processes are clear, intuitive, and easy to understand & navigate.

Families, especially those from marginalized groups*, are made aware of opportunities and information about OST programs. OST programs are able to communicate with families that speak a primary language other than English.

There are financial supports available to families to ensure equitable access to high quality programs.

Programs have adequate funding and resources to hire dedicated staff to provide one-on-one support for young people with special needs. Inclusion screening is not a barrier to entry.

There is a variety of high quality OST options/models available to all families in every part of the city and close to either the young person's home or school.

There are viable transportation options between school & OST to ease family logistics.

* Those experiencing marginalization include families that have low/lower-income or speak a language other than English as their primary language, as well as young people who have special needs or identify as Black or Brown.

OST IS VALUED

Parents/Caregivers value OST programs as a source of education & care.

School-based staff recognize OST teachers & frontline youth workers as partners in nurturing young people.

OST is recognized as important.

AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Listen closely to underserved populations (listen-ask-listen).

OST leaders and staff consistently seek out parents and caregivers, especially those experiencing marginalization*, for input on problems and solutions.

Decisions about OST are made with input from parents and caregivers, especially those experiencing marginalization*.

ECOSYSTEM DESIGNED FOR EQUITY & JUSTICE

The OST ecosystem is intentionally designed to counter the effects of structural inequities and systemic biases, including racism, ableism, and classism, that disproportionately impact the quality of life, education and economic opportunities, & well-being of families and young people experiencing marginalization*.

There is coordination and role clarity among the various entities within the larger OST ecosystem.

There are resources, programs, and offerings available to meet the specific needs of young people and families experiencing marginalization*.

There is training for special needs inclusion and trauma-informed practices for all staff and programs.

CHILD - CENTERED

There are supports to help the young person transition between programs as they age out.

There is a strong partnership, including structures for coordination, collaboration, and communication, between OST providers and public schools.

There is open communication between schools, families and after school program around the needs of the young person in their care.

Student Success Plans include a section about OST.

CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Gap Analysis & Data Collection Phase

The Gap Analysis and Data Collection Phase built upon the stakeholder relationships and child-centered values nurtured in the Foundation Setting Phase. The focus of this phase was to define the universe of children and programs to account for in the study, articulate study questions to guide ensuing data collection, and conduct data analysis.

Defining the Universe

A key step in the process was defining the boundaries of the study. With guidance from the Steering Committee, the Project Team made the intentional decision to focus on 5-day/week programs serving students grades K-8. The study was not a full environmental scan across the entire OST ecosystem, as there are many additional OST programs beyond the scope of this study that play important roles for children, youth and families. Because Cambridge launched the Cambridge Preschool Program in 2024-2025 and changed the purview of OST programming, we decided to not include pre-K as part of the study (see the Design Decisions and Trade-offs section for more details). We also decided to focus primarily on data from 2023-2024 because of the availability of data at the time of data analysis; the 2024-2025 school year was underway and complete datasets were not available.

Study Questions

To ensure that the study would surface insights to address the root causes of inequities in a child- and family- centered way, we used the following prompts to inspire critical reflection about the current system:
- What are the values and constraints that inform the structures that exist?
- What are the policies and procedures that guide the systems and how do they impact people's experiences?

The Project Team convened the Steering Committee and Advisory Group to consider these prompts when developing study questions to guide the OST Expansion Study. Table 5 outlines the study questions, upon which subsequent data collection methods and prioritized stakeholder perspectives were determined.

Table 5. Study Questions

Category	Question
Workforce	o What factors impact recruitment and retention of quality OST teachers?
Meeting Student Needs	o To what extent are OST staff able to meet the needs of all children (e.g., Black and Brown children, children with special needs, low-income students)?
Caregiver Perspectives and Family Needs	o How do families make decisions about the afterschool hours, weigh their options, and prioritize? o What are the key barriers to access?
Capacity	o What is the existing supply and capacity of OST programs? o Where is the potential for additional space? o Who has the capacity to expand?
Demand and Gap Analysis	o What is the demand and need for afterschool seats? o What are the funding implications to expand OST seats to meet demand?
Values and Perceptions	o What are the current perspectives of different stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, teachers, principals)?
Community Research	o What can we learn from other communities that have gone through similar expansion efforts?

Data Collection Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach that included both qualitative methods to dig into user experiences, challenges to expansion and root causes, as well as quantitative methods to assess important factors like capacity and demand. The Project Team identified data that would be needed to answer the study questions outlined in the previous section based on the stakeholder map. We further triaged what data would require original data collection and what existing data could be leveraged for the study.

Table 6 outlines the data collection methods used to collect primary data for the study.

Table 6. Data Collection Methods

Method	Participants	Timing
Focus groups and poll	Frontline youth workers	June 2024
OST program profiles	OST Directors	August-September 2024
Facilitated conversation	OST Directors	October 2024
Focus groups and poll	Caregivers	November-December 2024
Focus groups and poll	CPS principals	November 2024
Survey and focus groups	CPS teachers	November-December 2024
Caregiver poll	DHSP caregivers	December 2024
Interviews	System leaders	July 2024-January 2025

The Project Team developed data collection tools and conducted data collection and analysis for the data outlined above. The Steering Committee and Advisory Group members supported recruitment for surveys and focus groups.

As discussed in the Foundation Setting Phase section, we conducted stakeholder mapping to identify the different groups that could participate in the data collection. To answer the study questions, we prioritized the groups that were closest to the child and the user experience: caregivers, OST frontline youth workers, CPS teachers, OST directors and school principals.

We took a further step to intentionally lift up the perspectives of specific groups of caregivers. The Project Team shared previous experiences receiving input and recommendations from families in Cambridge. Those who engaged in the past overwhelmingly represented groups with more power, access and influence in Cambridge; they tended to be white and/or middle- and upper-income families already engaged in the systems. As a result, we opted for focus groups with a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling is the process of intentionally selecting participants based on their characteristics, knowledge or experiences. Our priority was to hear from families with children with special needs; Black and Brown families; families with lower income; families with children on waitlists or unenrolled; and families whose primary language is not English.

CAREGIVER PERSPECTIVES PRIORITIZED FOR FOCUS GROUPS	
1	Caregivers with children with special needs
2	Caregivers who identify as Black and Brown
3	Caregivers with children on waitlists or not currently enrolled
4	Caregivers with low or lower-income
5	Caregivers whose primary language is Haitian Creole
6	Caregivers whose primary language is Spanish
7	Caregivers whose primary language is Amharic

Cambridge had a substantial amount of existing data that was also leveraged for the project. For example, Agenda for Children OST designed the infrastructure for the school department to partner with OST programs to collect program rosters through its Community Partner Portal. The portal links to the CPS data system which allows for analysis on demographics, specific student groups and outcome data such as school attendance. Staff from Agenda for Children OST, CPS and DHSP collaborated to collect, collate and analyze waitlists from nonprofit programs along with the DHSP waiting pool. They worked together to connect the individuals who were in the waiting pool with the Community Partner Portal data and determine how many unduplicated children remained unenrolled across the system. Due to long-standing efforts led by Agenda for Children OST to develop relationships, data agreements, data systems, and processes for cross-sector data collection and analysis, Cambridge had a substantial amount of existing data that was leveraged for this project.

Table 7 lists the existing administrative data that was accessed and analyzed as part of the study.

Table 7. Existing Data Utilized

Data	Sample	School Year
Waitlist/waiting pool data	28 5-day/week OST programs	2023-2024
CPS Community Partner Portal enrollment data	28 5-day/week OST programs	2023-2024
CPS enrollment data	PreK through 8th grade	2023-2024
Afterschool space usage in CPS data	18 of school-based OST programs	2024-2025
Frontline youth worker demographics	28 5-day/week OST programs	2024-2025
Agenda for Children OST scholarship administration data	5 nonprofit programs receiving City Scholarship funding	2024-2025

Response Rates and Overview of Participation

The participation and response rates for each data collection activity are outlined in Table 8. We provided incentives for frontline youth workers and caregivers to participate in the focus groups, which helped bolster participation for those groups. In addition, we relied on recruitment support from Family Liaisons, Community Engagement Team members and Advisory Group members. The descriptive statistics for each sample can be found in Appendix A.

Table 8. Response Rates and Participation Numbers for Primary Data Collection

Method	Participants	Sample
Focus groups and poll	Frontline Youth Workers	24 frontline youth workers participated in focus group sessions and responded to the poll; 9% (24/254) of employed frontline youth workers

Method	Participants	Sample
OST program profiles	OST Directors	100% (28/28) 5-day/week OST programs completed program profile
Facilitated conversation	OST Directors	16 OST directors representing 43% (12/28) of programs participated in facilitated conversations
Focus groups and poll[3]	Caregivers	43 caregivers participated in focus group sessions 47 poll respondents
Focus groups and poll	CPS Principals	8 principals participated in focus group sessions 6 poll respondents
Survey and focus groups	CPS Teachers	59 teachers responded to the survey 5 teachers participated in focus group sessions
Poll	DHSP Caregivers	257 caregivers with children enrolled in DHSP programs responded to the poll
Interviews	System leaders	3 Cambridge system leaders participated in interviews 3 system leaders from 2 other communities were interviewed

Design Decisions and Trade-Offs

There were a few trade-offs that are important to highlight about the study's methodology. Because we utilized the purposive sampling method with the caregiver focus groups, the sample represented in the data reflects the groups we intended to hear from. In terms of the other data collection methods, the sample of participants in the youth worker focus groups and principal focus groups sufficiently reflected the population. The teacher survey and focus groups, however, represented a smaller sample of teachers and their responses indicate that they are more engaged with afterschool programs compared to the average teacher. As a result, their responses may not reflect the sentiments of teachers more broadly in CPS. We encourage Agenda for Children OST to continue to engage teachers in the future to learn more about their perspectives.

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[3] Note: We used the term *poll* to refer to a brief questionnaire. The surveys that were administered as part of the study were lengthier and more comprehensive in comparison.

Our main data collection method was focus groups, which we intentionally utilized to dig deeper with stakeholders. The Project Team also made the choice to lead a collaborative and engaged study process. We invested in convening people and building relationships to create a foundation for the work moving forward. As a result of these decisions, we de-prioritized some system-wide quantitative approaches such as transportation mapping, a system-wide survey with caregivers and more detailed funding analyses.

It is important to note that the 2023-2024 data includes 116 pre-K children who participated in OST. Prior to 2024-2025, Cambridge considered pre-K children "school age." This classification exempted OST programs from licensing regulations and enabled pre-K children to enroll in OST programs. However, after the creation of universal pre-K, 4 year-olds were no longer eligible to attend school age afterschool programs. OST programs are licensed to serve school-age children, or children enrolled in school who are minimally 4 years and 9 months old. As a result of these changes, OST programs could no longer serve pre-K children starting in 2024-2025.

In 2024-2025, Cambridge underwent a significant change when it rolled out the Cambridge Preschool Program (CPP), a publicly funded universal pre-K program within the Cambridge Office of Early Childhood that provides access to free preschool for every 4-year-old and some 3-year-olds living in Cambridge. This shift impacted families and their need for coverage after regular school day hours. The publicly funded pre-K programs offered through CPS aligned with the school day, and therefore, had the same dismissal times as the school in which it is located. This created a need for some families with 3- and 4-year-olds attending a CPS program to find coverage after the school day ended, especially for those at sites with early dismissal times (e.g., 2:15pm). This study was focused on expanding OST access for K-8 students; therefore, policy makers and city leaders will need to address the need for extended care for preschool students separately.

Future Data Opportunities

Through the work on the OST Expansion Study, a new cross-agency team developed to support specific data collection, collation and analysis efforts. As described previously, staff from Agenda for Children OST, CPS and DHSP collaborated to conduct cross-system data analysis, connecting waitlist data with the Community Partner Portal data to determine how many children remained unenrolled across the system. The potential of this cross-agency team was evident in the level of information sharing and cross-system analysis that was enabled. We encourage the Agenda for Children OST to continue to spearhead these efforts and lead this data team to support the implementation of the recommendations.

We have identified several data collection improvements and additional analyses that Agenda for Children OST could undertake to enhance expansion efforts moving forward:

- o Support nonprofit programs to maintain more formal waitlists and create an annual process of submitting them to the Agenda for Children OST/CPS.
- o Create a deadline and communication plan for roster submissions through the Community Partner Portal.
- o Further explore transportation and how it impacts expansion. This could include mapping families' addresses, school enrollments and OST program enrollments to investigate transportation needs.
- o Conduct a full cost analysis across all programs to promote equity across DHSP and the nonprofit programs; document the percentage of children receiving financial support for afterschool programming. We recommend that this data is accessed from programs because their administrative data is more accurate than caregiver self-reports.
- o Reach out to additional communities nationally and in Massachusetts to learn from their expansion efforts (see Appendix B for a list of recommended communities and organizations).
- o Incorporate the perspectives of young people in future data collection efforts.

Recommendations & Action Plan Phase

During the Recommendations and Action Plan Phase, Steering Committee and Advisory Group members engaged in meaning-making across the various datasets and results to identify potential strategies to pilot and surface recommendations to achieve an equitable OST ecosystem.

In reality, the Recommendations and Action Plan Phase occurred in conjunction with the Gap Analysis and Data Collection Phase. The Project Team utilized a continuous learning approach and facilitated participatory data sessions to engage both Steering Committee and Advisory Group meaning-making as data became available. This allowed the groups to develop strategies throughout the gap analysis and continuously refine them with new data insights.

Once the full data collection was complete, the Project Team held a data webinar in January 2025, to share a summary of the data collected across all of the stakeholder groups with the Steering Committee and Advisory Group. At this juncture, we decided to merge the Steering Committee and Advisory Group so they could work together to refine the recommendations and strategies. Steering Committee and Advisory Group members attended two joint sessions to make meaning of the data across stakeholder groups and solidify the recommendations and strategies based on their findings. This step also helped to increase buy-in, as members began to identify opportunities to get involved in next phases of efforts to support OST Expansion.

We recognize that the way people interpret and make meaning of data is a reflection of mindsets and worldviews. To ensure that meaning-making would surface strategies needed for the transformative change necessary to more equitably serve children and families, we introduced two important conceptual frameworks that challenge existing norms and center equity to guide meaning-making: the Waters of Systems Change and Targeted Universalism.
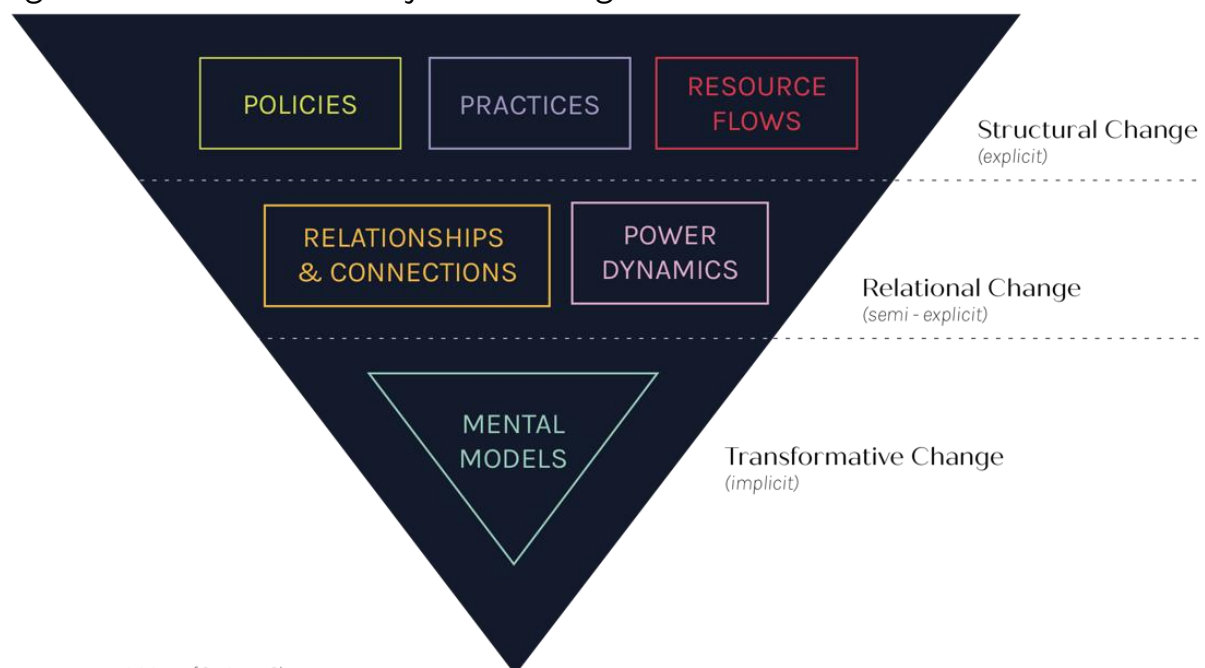
Waters of Systems Change

It is widely accepted in social and racial justice movement spaces that the inequities we see and experience in our communities are products of an inequitable system. To advance equity, we must first identify the inequities and interrogate their respective root causes. We drew from the *Waters of Systems Change*[4] as a foundational thought-piece to aid us in our discovery. The piece opens with a widely-used analogy to activate our awareness of the "water":

> *A fish is swimming along one day when another fish comes up and says "Hey, how's the water?" The first fish stares back blankly at the second fish and then says "What's water?"*

Like the second fish and its lack of awareness about the water it swims in, we are not conscious of the full system with which we interact on a daily basis. The "Six Conditions of Systems Change" (Figure 2) offers a conceptual framework for understanding the conditions (or components) that make up a system. These conditions are further defined in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Six Conditions of Systems Change

POLICIES   PRACTICES   RESOURCE FLOWS

Structural Change *(explicit)*

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS   POWER DYNAMICS

Relational Change *(semi - explicit)*

MENTAL MODELS

Transformative Change *(implicit)*

source: Waters of Systems Change

[4] Kramer, M. R., Kania, J., & Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change [Report]. FSG.

Figure 3. Definitions of Systems Change Conditions

Policies : Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.

Practices: Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities target to improving social and environmental process. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.

Resource Flows: How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.

Relationships & Connections: Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the systems, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.

Power Dynamics: The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.

Mental Models: Habits of thought - deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.

Targeted Universalism

We use the concept of *targeted universalism* to introduce two principles about achieving equity in systems change. The first is that in order to meet a population level goal or outcome, there must be targeted processes or strategies tailored to address the problem. The second is that for a strategy to be equitable, it must be *explicit* about the inequity it is addressing and *specific* to the people and the context in which they are experiencing the inequity.

*"Targeted universalism means **setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals**. Within a targeted universalism framework, universal goals are established for all groups concerned. The **strategies** developed to achieve those goals **are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies** to obtain the universal goal. Targeted universalism is goal oriented, and the processes are directed in service of the explicit, universal goal." -* [The Othering and Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley](#) [5]

Targeted universalism stands in contrast to the oft-used "a rising tide lifts all boats" idiom used by mission-based and social good organizations to suggest that a good policy or program will help everyone. While well-intended, this framing has received criticism for using a "one-size fits all" approach and failing to take into consideration the different conditions and contexts of each "boat." There may be reasons preventing one or more boats from "rising with the tide." Without attention to these boats, all boats cannot rise. In contrast, strategies developed with targeted universalism principles take into consideration "how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies" and are designed to address the specific need of each particular group. A classic example of targeted universalism is the use of

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[5] Othering & Belonging Institute. (n.d.). *Targeted universalism*. University of California, Berkeley. https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism

curb cuts.[6] While designed to make mounting sidewalks accessible for those who have a physical disability, they make streets safer not only for the intended beneficiary, but also for other pedestrians, including the elderly, people using push carts or strollers, young children, and more.

We used targeted universalism principles to ensure that the strategies we developed will address inequity in a way that is considerate of the specific needs and contexts of those experiencing the inequity. In meeting these specific needs and contexts, we seek to create conditions in which children, families and the entire community can benefit from equitable access to high-quality, affordable afterschool programming.

Findings

The findings are organized by the study questions and their categories. We have highlighted the common themes that arose across stakeholder groups, as well as the unique perspectives that were shared.

WORKFORCE

Frontline youth workers are the individuals who work directly with children and deliver youth programming on a daily basis. They are essential for expansion. As a result, the study sought to better understand the factors that contribute to the recruitment and retention of frontline youth workers.

> *"Current research shows that skilled and knowledgeable program staff are the backbone of program quality and are key to desired positive youth outcomes. However, the OST workforce has historically been expected to provide quality services in environments characterized by unclear professional pathways, persistent part-time hours, low wages, and minimal benefits."*
> *-- National Afterschool Association, OST Job Quality Standards*

Overall, 24 frontline youth workers participated in five focus group sessions. Participants trended younger in age; nearly half (46%) said they were 18-25 years, 29% were 26-34 years-old, and 25% were 35 years and older. Relatedly, only 33% of participants had been in the field for more than 3 years. Half (54%) worked fewer than 20 hours per week, 17% worked 21-29 hours per week, while 29% worked 30+ hours per week at their OST job. A majority (63%) lived in Cambridge.

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[6] Stanford Social Innovation Review. (n.d.) *The Curb-Cut Effect.* Stanford University. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect

What factors impact recruitment and retention of quality OST teachers?

- o Youth worker focus groups and poll
- o OST Program profiles
- o CPS principal focus groups and poll

Priorities for Frontline Youth Workers

The focus groups with frontline youth workers provided insights into the factors that impact recruitment and retention. Focus group participants were asked to rank the factors that influence whether they would accept an OST position from most important to least important. Figure 4 displays the data from their responses, highlighting the top factors: compensation, flexibility, benefits and organizational culture and climate.

Figure 4. Compensation and flexibility were the most important factors for focus group participants when accepting an OST position.
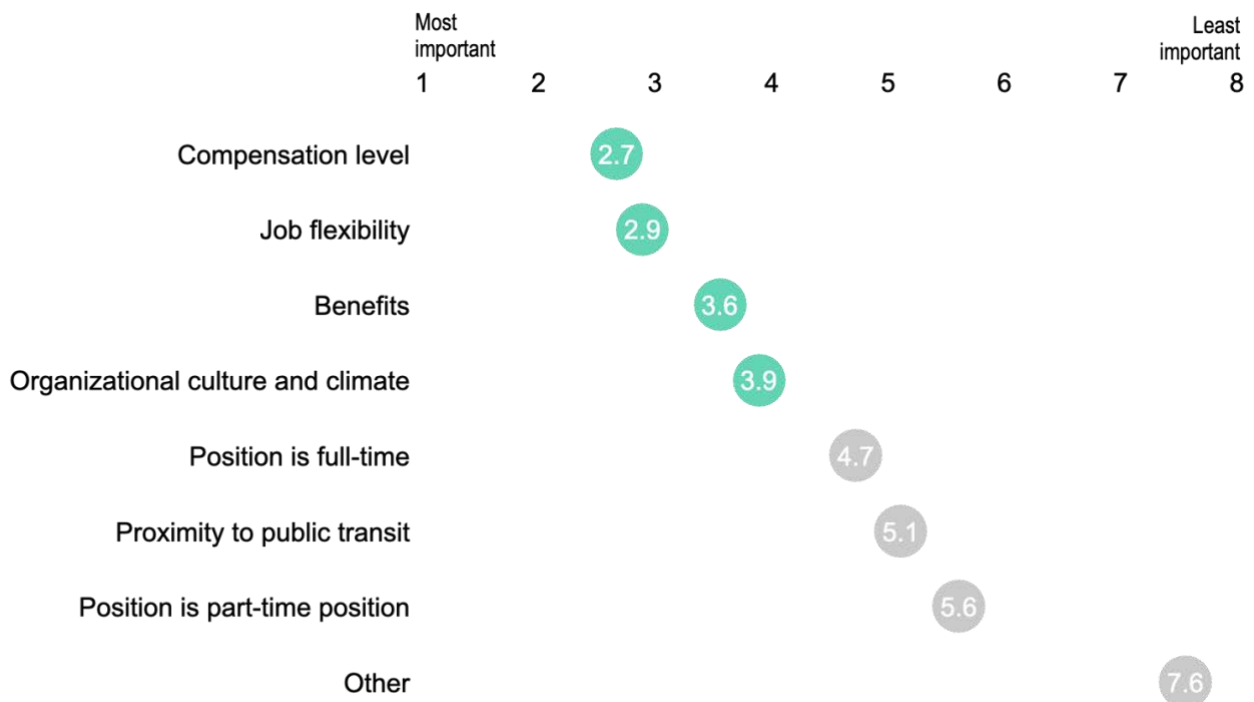
The focus group discussions provided context on why these factors are important for them. The youth workers explained that their total take-home pay is not sufficient to keep up with increasing living expenses. As one participant shared, "I want to say that I want to be here long-term, but honestly I can't say that anymore... As mentioned, the cost of living...the pay rate isn't keeping up with it at all. And, that just means having to move up, work more hours or just work at a different sector industry all together."

Many of them shared that they would like more stability and job security; for some this means having a full-time position. Flexibility was also important for the focus group participants. Some need flexibility in their job because of their home context and responsibilities. For example, afternoon working hours are compatible with the current situation and responsibilities for students or individuals with another part-time job earlier in the day. However, as individuals' home context changes, the need for benefits or a higher take-home pay may take priority.

Frontline youth workers identified vacancies and staff turnover as a challenge to organizational culture. The inability to retain staff creates instability as the organization becomes understaffed. They explained how the staff becomes overworked because of reduced staff capacity, and, in some cases, is unable to take time off due to the lack of coverage. One focus group participant shared that because almost every position has turned over since she started, the culture changed significantly; as a result, she did not feel the same connection or support in the workplace.

Barriers to Recruitment and Retention

In the program profiles, OST directors reported the top barriers to youth worker recruitment from their perspective:
1. Compensation level
2. Positions are not full-time
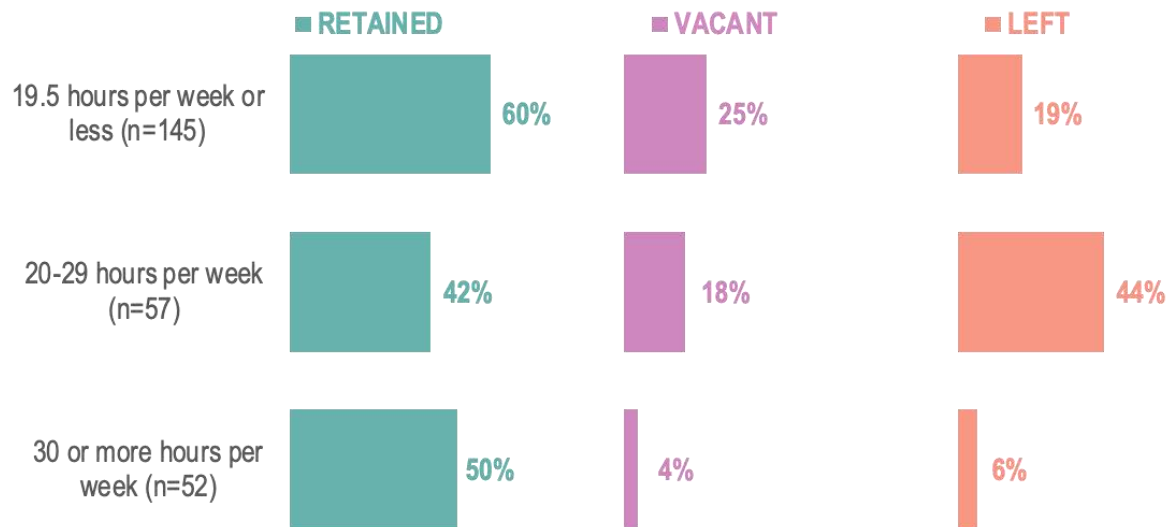3. Not being able to provide benefits

The barriers identified by OST directors do not exactly align with what we heard from youth workers. Compensation level and the lack of benefits align with what youth workers shared in the focus groups. However, the desire for full-time positions[7] was not rated as important as flexibility by the youth workers. The focus group discussions revealed the importance of individual circumstances. There are individuals who would like the stability and increased compensation of a full-time position. However, there are others who prefer the flexibility of a part-time position because of their current contexts (e.g., students, have another part-time job). The employment and vacancy data shared by OST program directors shows that there is a need to increase the number of full-time positions; however, it is important to continue to maintain flexible part-time positions.

In Figure 5, full-time positions (30+ hours/week) have the lowest vacancy and attrition rates compared to the part-time positions. Staff who worked 20-29 hours per week had the highest attrition rate (44%) compared to staff who worked 19.5 hours or less (19%) and those who worked 30 or more hours per week (6%). This suggests a desire for full-time status and accompanying benefits. The project team hypothesized that

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[7] The study utilizes 30+ hours per week as full-time because DHSP considers frontline youth workers who work 30+ hours per week as full-time positions with benefits. For DHSP, staff who work 20-29 hours are not considered full-time, but they receive benefits.

employees with 20-29 hours/week desire full-time hours and need more working hours to make ends meet; a second job is likely not a sustainable arrangement.

Figure 5. Positions with 19.5 hours or less had the highest retention rate (60%) but also the highest vacancy rate (25%); positions with 20-29 hours had the highest attrition rate (44%).

	■ RETAINED	■ VACANT	■ LEFT
19.5 hours per week or less (n=145)	60%	25%	19%
20-29 hours per week (n=57)	42%	18%	44%
30 or more hours per week (n=52)	50%	4%	6%

Recruitment of frontline staff is certainly a concern for afterschool programs. In the program profiles, more than two-thirds of programs reported they were very or moderately concerned about staffing shortages for the 2024-25 school year. The focus group discussions provided insights into recruitment strategies, probing about what draws individuals into the youth work field:

o Many participants identified an interest in working with young people and/or in the field of education as something that motivated them to join the field.
o Numerous youth workers desired a connection to the community, and several of them had personal experience as a prior participant in afterschool and youth programming.
o The mission-driven work of the OST sector was appealing to them, as one participant articulated: "Other factors that influenced my decision [to join OST] was the mission and values of my organization…really aligning with my personal values."

We also asked the youth workers to identify any barriers to staying in the field. Many participants explained that they do not see a career path. They have a desire for more responsibility and professional support, but their current position does not provide that in a way that demonstrates how they could move up within the sector. Low compensation that does not reflect their value was also brought up as a barrier. One youth worker shared: "I have been looking for roles that keep me in…an organization that does similar work, but gives me more responsibility and leadership. I feel ready to take on a higher role. But, something that I've found challenging is that there are so many entry level roles and there's fewer [roles] that are a step above that. And then

another thing is finding ones where I feel sufficiently compensated has been a challenge."

In the program profiles, OST directors reported the hourly wages for their part-time and full-time frontline staff in the 2023-2024 school year. Figure 6 displays the minimum and maximum hourly wages for each program.

Figure 6. The lowest wages are the same for full-time and part-time frontline staff; full-time frontline staff have a higher maximum hourly wage.


It is important to examine frontline youth worker wages compared to similar positions in the education and childcare sectors. We pulled wage data on two comparable positions: paraprofessionals and preschool teachers. Paraprofessionals serve as a teacher's assistant in a school day classroom, providing one-on-one or small group support to students who need additional help with their learning. In Cambridge, paraprofessionals are unionized and have a contract with the school district through the Cambridge Education Association (CEA). The wage data represented in Figure 7 was retrieved from the salary schedule for the 7-hour paraprofessional role in the 2024 union agreement.[8] One key difference between paraprofessionals and frontline youth workers is that frontline youth workers,

[8] Cambridge Education Association and Cambridge Public Schools. (2024). *Agreement Between The Cambridge School Committee And The Cambridge Education Association Unit E - Paraprofessionals.* https://cdnsm5-ss5.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_3042785/File/for_staff/collective_bargaining_agreements/2024-26/2024-26_CEA_UnitE_Contract.pdf

especially those who serve in the lead teacher role, are fully responsible for their classroom, in contrast to the support role that paraprofessionals play.

The second comparable role is head preschool teacher. The City of Cambridge runs preschool programs and recently updated its wage ranges with the shift to universal preschool. The City increased its wage range to provide higher rates for employees with a bachelor's or master's degree. Figure 7 demonstrates how the wages for frontline youth workers lag behind the wages for these similar positions. This triangulates the finding that low compensation is a central challenge to recruiting and retaining quality frontline youth workers.

Figure 7. Wages for frontline youth workers are substantially lower than comparable positions in the education sector including paraprofessionals and preschool teachers.
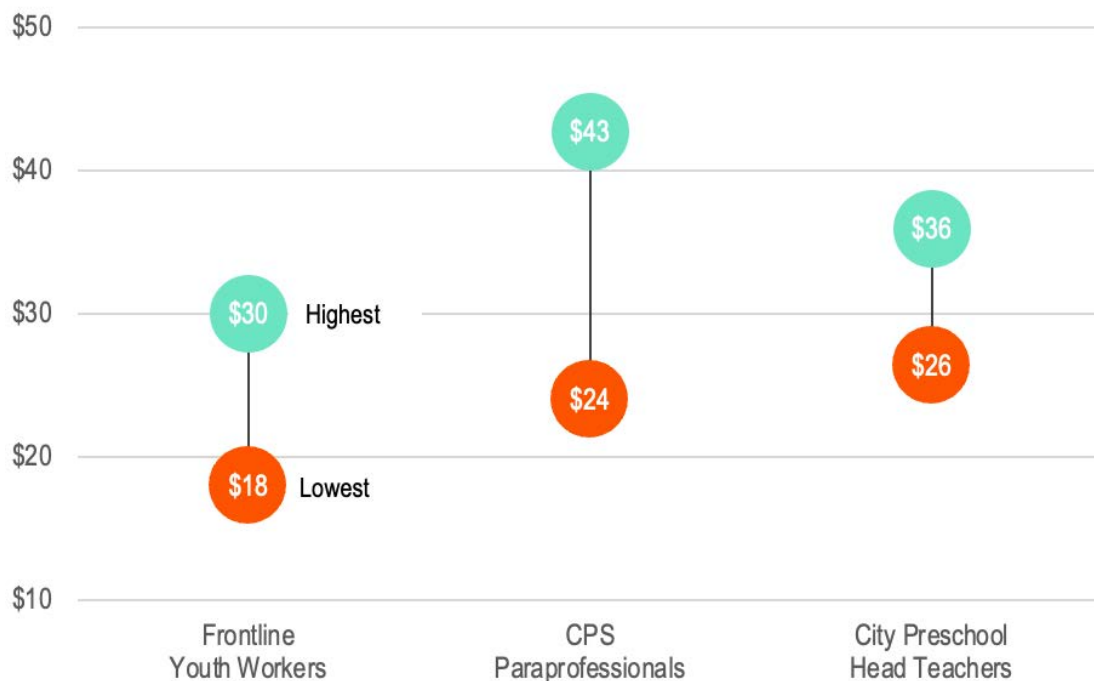
The focus groups with frontline youth workers also surfaced several administrative and program-level improvements that could increase employee satisfaction. Several participants shared payroll issues they had experienced such as lengthy delays in receiving their paycheck or missing a week's pay. Some explained how they do not have access to their employer's payroll system, so they do not have access to their pay stubs.

Another challenge expressed by frontline youth workers was the inability to utilize benefits. Several participants expressed that information about benefits is difficult to access; one asserted, "It's in the fine print." One frontline youth worker mentioned that they have never been able to access reimbursement for public transportation because no one would give them the contact information. Another shared that they are entitled

to tuition reimbursement, but had never been told outright. They had to seek out and ask for that information. This leads to a lack of transparency and accessibility about job-related benefits. One even felt they were discouraged from taking sick time or accessing workers' compensation. Several more acknowledged their own lack of knowledge about benefits, especially when they came into their role. Because they were in college or recent graduates when they took the role, they had little experience in the workforce.

As they became more aware of the types of benefits available to working professionals, it became a more important factor. One participant felt benefits were important because "it feels like you have more rights as an employee when you have a certain amount of benefits." Another participant expressed a desire for employers to provide more information and transparency about the benefits they offer and what they entail. According to the program profiles, however, 62% of Program Directors said their program provides an overview of employee benefits and how they work. There is not only a need to provide better information upfront, but also on an ongoing basis, as employees' contexts change.

Several focus group participants expressed a desire for formalized feedback loops with leadership. They appreciated the opportunity to participate in the focus group sessions for the OST Expansion Study and wished their organizations offered a similar process. One frontline youth worker shared that there was little accountability for leadership to actively seek feedback from staff, citing a defensiveness when they had given feedback in the past.

Additionally, a number of focus group participants said they want consistent performance reviews to support their professional growth. The program profiles revealed that 62% of programs provide annual performance reviews for their frontline youth workers, demonstrating an area of improvement for some programs. These program-level and administrative issues represent some short-term, straightforward ways to improve organizational culture and climate and employee satisfaction.

In summary, compensation is the top challenge impacting the recruitment and retention of frontline youth workers. Additional factors include flexibility, access to benefits, a visible career path and organizational culture. An individual's personal context shapes what they prioritize beyond adequate compensation, and those priorities can shift over time as their context changes. As a result, a mix of part-time positions that offer flexibility and full-time positions with full benefits is needed across the system. There is evidence that additional full-time positions are desired, and the ability to offer benefits to part-time positions could make them more desirable and decrease turnover. Regardless of the position type, low compensation reflects a lack of value for and investment in frontline youth workers. Increased compensation is the primary factor that will contribute to improved recruitment and retention. Together, offering more full-time position opportunities and improved compensation will increase the stability of the OST workforce which will have significant benefits for children and the quality of the programs.

MEETING CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Children are at the center of the stakeholder map as the primary users of afterschool care. The Advisory Group and Steering Committee identified specific groups on the margins that often have less access to high-quality afterschool experiences: Black and Brown children, children with special needs, children from families with low income, and multi-language learners. We wanted to understand the extent to which afterschool programs are meeting their needs and intentionally prioritized talking to caregivers from these groups to learn more about their experience.

STUDY QUESTION:

To what extent are OST staff and programs able to meet the needs of all children (e.g., Black and Brown children, children with special needs, children from families with low income, multi-language learners)?

RELEVANT DATA SOURCES:

o Youth worker focus groups and poll

o OST program profiles

o CPS principal focus groups and poll

o CPS teacher survey and focus groups

o Caregiver focus groups and poll

o Frontline youth worker demographics

A key theme that arose throughout the different data sources was the challenge of effectively serving students with special needs - both at the program level and system level. This challenge was brought up across stakeholder groups: caregivers, frontline youth workers, OST directors, CPS teachers and principals. When asked about the challenges of working with afterschool programs, both principals and teachers identified programs' ability to effectively serve students with special needs as a core challenge. One principal articulated, "There are a lot of kids who are not able to access afterschool programming because of either some aspect of their disability or IEP that can't be supported in afterschool or simply because they are having a behavioral struggle...and we haven't yet figured out how to think collaboratively about supporting kids in an out-of-school time setting so that they can also access those opportunities. I think that's critical."

The Diversity and Specificity of Special Needs

We held a focus group session specifically for caregivers with children with special needs to hear about their experiences. The focus group included caregivers who have children currently enrolled in programming and caregivers whose children are on waitlists or not currently enrolled. Their experiences highlighted the unique challenges that these families are facing, as demonstrated in the case examples on page 39. The

group of students with special needs is very diverse and includes a wide array of needs - from medical (e.g., the need to administer insulin) to physical (e.g., the need for quiet space without loud noises) to social-emotional (e.g., the need for one-on-one support in order to engage in program activities). These experiences highlight that we must clearly identify the specific needs of each child and determine the appropriate support, expectations, and resources required for that child to participate in afterschool programming.

> "Provision of services will be determined by the individual needs of the program participant, not by the availability of programs or resources." - OST Inclusion Policy

Programs are often under-equipped to respond to both the breadth and specificity of needs that fall under the category of "special needs." As frontline youth workers shared, when there is no inclusion specialist on staff, the program cannot accommodate the child. This has led to children being turned away or left in the waiting pool indefinitely. In at least one case, a family was not able to obtain a seat for their child several years in a row because programs did not have the resources to provide the necessary accommodation for the child. One parent left the workforce as a result. Another caregiver, moreover, expressed frustration about different policies and standards of care for children with special needs between school and afterschool.

The youth worker focus groups also emphasized that some students with special needs in programming were not having their needs met. Focus group participants shared that they struggle with behavior challenges and expressed a desire for more coordination with caregivers and school day staff to better support students (e.g., getting access to IEPs). They identified the need for additional staffing to reduce ratios, including specialized staffing with training and expertise to support students with special needs. They explained how staff shortages and vacancies exacerbate these challenges, which reinforces the need to increase staff capacity overall.

Finally, frontline youth workers expressed a desire for better coordination with school staff to support students with special needs and implement inclusionary practices, including access to technology, sharing of relevant student information, inclusion in the school-wide communications, and shared professional development. Many of the needs frontline youth workers raised require coordination and partnership at both the school/program and system level. However, without more funding to adequately staff programs, programs will not be able to meet one-on-one staffing requirements or maintain a manageable staff-to-child ratio to effectively support children with special needs.

Case Example 1:

"Our grandson is not in the afterschool program now because we have had a really difficult time getting access. He's in third grade now, but in kindergarten he had to leave. They said that he could come back when they got a full-time aid for him... they never got a full time aid. He couldn't go to after school. In first grade, they said he could come. He never got even to start because they never got a full-time aid. And I might add that he does not have a full-time aid as part of his IEP or in his classroom.

In second grade we tried to set it up...to allow him to come on a Tuesday and Thursday. We thought it was all set up over the summer and then that person forgot to tell the after school and so on the first day of school our grandson thought he was going to after school and nobody had a record that he was supposed to go. And at that point for that year we actually gave up. And so now what happens is my daughter, who went to part-time work, meets him after school and they stay in the school playground until the after school comes out and then he can play with the children in the after school. So it has not been easy access for us for him to be able to attend after school."

-Grandparent of a CPS student

Case Example 2:

"They [weren't] able to aid her... at first...they didn't even want her in the afterschool program because they said '...she takes insulin and ...we don't have anybody here that can give her insulin.' But...the good thing for us and I advocated for her, that...she's able to administer her own insulin. She just needs to be provided a clean area where she can get that insulin. But I understand if it was...a younger child, it might have been a problem... So...at first she wasn't even going to be able to be in afterschool. But once we got past that, it was more so...do you all have things to make sure that her insulin is cold [on field trips]? Because it must stay cold. And so [they were] like, 'Well, we're not sure if we're going to be able to bring her.'

...and so I was furious because I was like, why should my child have to miss out? This is Cambridge, come on, you know what I'm saying? You can't get a small cooler for her ...with all the resources that we have here, you mean to tell me that my kid has to miss out on something because you don't basically have the aid for her? You can't aid her in bringing her medicine with her because it has to stay cold. And so, I mean I made a big stink out of it and they kind of got it together, but I, I provided a lot of it myself too. Like I would bring in ice packs and because I don't want her to feel like she can't do something just because of, you know, she's got a disability. No way. Not in Cambridge. If we were somewhere where, you know, there's no money, there's no resources, that's not Cambridge.

-Parent of a CPS student

Adequately Trained and Staffed Workforce

A central aspect of supporting students with special needs is ensuring that the workforce is effectively prepared and positioned to meet the needs of all children. In the program profiles, 93% of programs reported that they have a policy for how to support students with special needs. When asked how they prepare and support staff to work with students with special needs, they most commonly said through professional development and information sharing about student needs. Caregivers expressed a desire for additional training for staff. One said, "If they're going to further expand, it does need to be quality staff. That's been the challenge – is well trained staff…especially trained staff to address children with special needs." Another shared, "It would be [ideal] to have people trained to handle the variety of special needs that children come with and that those children, our children, would feel welcome in the program… and be able to fully participate in afterschool programs in a way that they should."

There was shared agreement across the 28 programs that they do not have the resources or capacity to support all students with special needs. DHSP programs do have staff positions dedicated to provide direct support to students with special needs; the nonprofits reported in the OST program profiles that they do not. At the systems-level, DHSP has three inclusion staff centrally located, who support staff and children across all DHSP programs. They also support caregivers to navigate the OST system. This seems to be an effective model that may be expanded. One caregiver explained how the DHSP inclusion manager worked with the family to ensure the child could participate in the program: "Thankfully, we were able to connect with the [inclusion manager] who went above and beyond to make time for us, hear our concerns, and work to adjust the plan in a way that made afterschool available to our child. Without his efforts, we firmly believe that our child would not be in afterschool right now. Our hope going forward is that the collaboration between the inclusion initiative and families can grow in the way our experience did. It would lessen the stress families experience and make them feel like they have a partner in the process, not a barrier to access."

DHSP also has frontline staff dedicated to supporting students with special needs. These staff help lower ratios and provide one-on-one support; however, they do not have specialized skills. The frontline youth worker focus groups surfaced challenges in those roles being implemented as intended. Frontline youth workers in the focus groups were frustrated that frontline inclusion staff were not trained or required to have specific expertise, although they received a higher hourly wage. They also shared examples where frontline inclusion staff were not used as intended and were instead serving as substitutes or covering for the front desk. Focus group participants expressed a desire for shared problem-solving with management. They emphasized that everyone needs to be trained in inclusion practices, all frontline and inclusion staff, and be supported to address challenges as they arise.

Diverse Staffing to Reflect Student Diversity

Another way of thinking about meeting children's needs is examining to what extent OST staff reflect the backgrounds of participants. There is evidence that a diverse teacher workforce benefits all students, particularly students of color. Research demonstrates that students of color benefit from having a same-race teacher, including academic outcomes, improved attendance, a greater sense of belonging, and lower rates of discipline.[9] We accessed and collated demographic data for frontline youth workers in the 2024-25 school year from the 28 5-day/week programs (22 DHSP programs and the 6 nonprofit programs). As a comparison, we pulled race and ethnicity data for educators from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education district profiles; the most recent data available was from the 2023-24 school year. Figure 8 demonstrates how frontline OST staff are more diverse compared to CPS educators and better reflect the backgrounds of CPS students.

Figure 8. OST staff are more diverse and more closely reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of CPS students.

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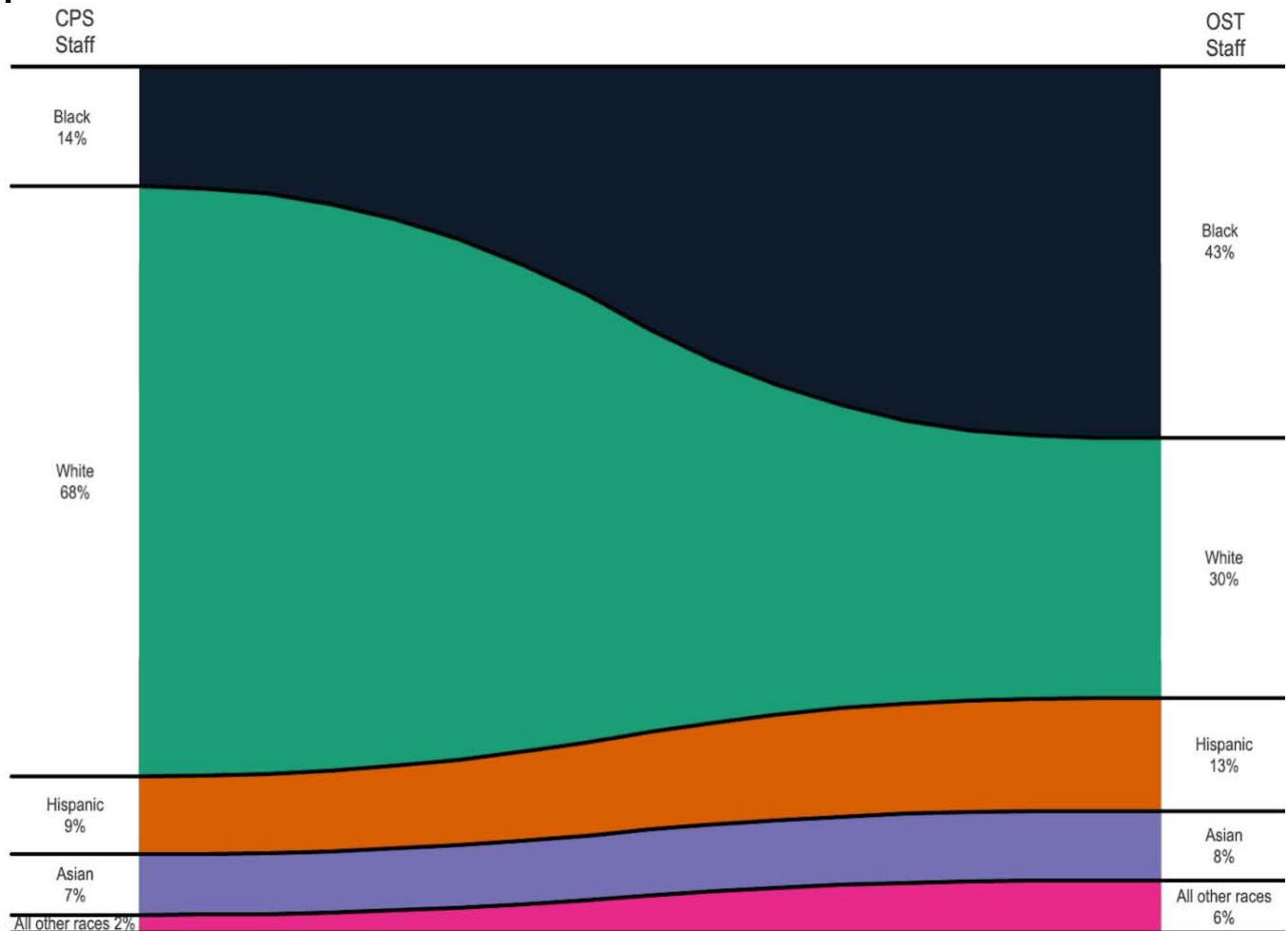
[9] National Council on Teacher Quality. (2025, February 11). *Teacher diversity*. Teacher Diversity. https://teacherdiversity.nctq.org/

Afterschool Supports Multi-Language Learners

The Advisory Group and Steering Committee identified multi-language learners as a specific group to learn from about their experiences with afterschool programs. Three of the caregiver focus group sessions were geared toward families whose primary language is not English. We held focus groups in the three most common languages of CPS families: Spanish, Haitian Creole and Amharic. These sessions were led by CPS Family Liaisons who are native speakers from those communities; Community Engagement Team (CET) members from the City who have relationships with caregivers in each of these communities and are native speakers of their respective languages supported outreach and caregiver recruitment.

Through the language-specific focus groups, we heard about the important role that afterschool plays for these families. Caregivers explained that afterschool programs are a way to reinforce language acquisition. Their children get additional exposure to English and have opportunities to practice their oral language skills. One caregiver shared [*translated from Haitian Creole*], "when they spend more time at the school and more time with other children who are speaking and teachers who are speaking the language, this allows the child to decipher the language better. The child becomes more engaged with the language and learns it quickly and this helps the child to better develop." Caregivers in the language-specific focus groups emphasized the importance of the academic support that OST programming provides. They shared that they are unable to help their children with homework because of language barriers, and without the academic support and space for homework help in afterschool, their child would fall behind.

Additionally, the caregivers in the language-specific focus groups viewed afterschool programs as a space to engage in a variety of activities and connect with peers. As one caregiver explained [*translated from Haitian Creole*], "She does art. She does a lot of beautiful things. She's explaining to me a bunch of nice things that her friend does. It gives my child a desire to participate in afterschool… I think it's also an outlet where the child can make friends, develop friendships and socialize."

In summary, the major challenge we heard across stakeholders in meeting student needs is the ability for afterschool programs to effectively serve students with special needs. The caregivers from the other groups we engaged with (i.e., Black and Brown children, children from families with low income, and multi-language learners) who had children enrolled in afterschool programs felt that overall the program was meeting their children's needs. Because OST programming offers distinctive benefits to children with special needs and those whose primary home language is not English, it is a serious equity concern when children with these lived experiences are unable to receive an afterschool seat.

CAREGIVER PERSPECTIVES & FAMILY NEEDS

Parents and caregivers are their children's first and closest educators. To better understand the ways in which participation in OST supports both children and their caregivers in Cambridge, as well as how the current system could improve, we held a series of focus groups and accompanying polls to solicit feedback from caregivers. We prioritized reaching out to those with the following perspectives: caregivers with children with special needs, caregivers who identify as Black and Brown, caregivers whose children are on waitlists or not currently enrolled, caregivers with low or lower-income, caregivers whose primary language is Haitian Creole, Spanish, or Amharic.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

How do families make decisions about the afterschool hours, weigh their options, and prioritize? What are the barriers to access?
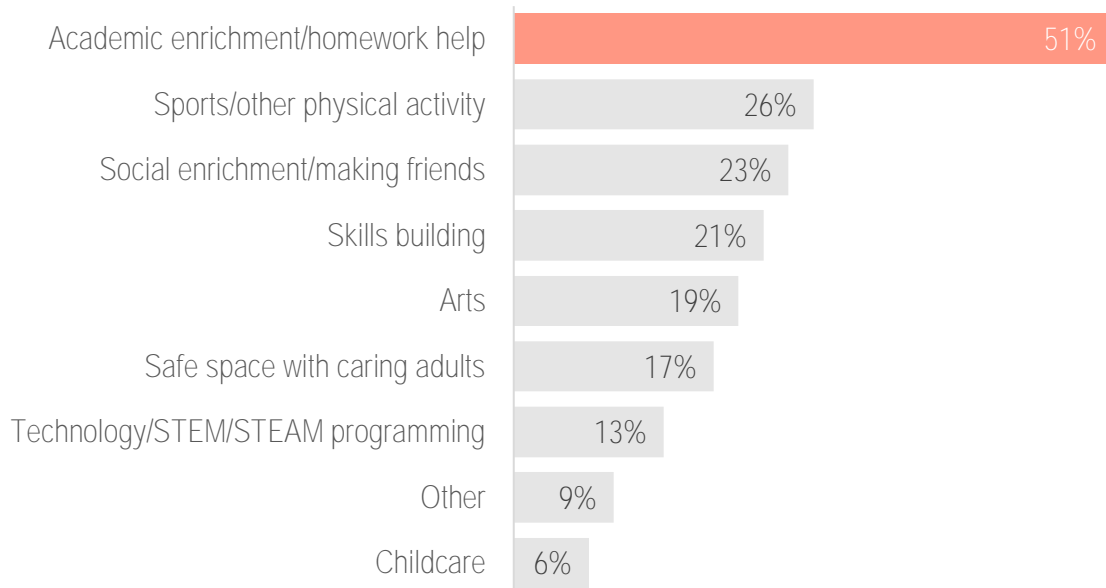
RELEVANT DATA SOURCES:

o Caregiver focus groups and poll

o OST program profiles

o CPS principal focus groups and poll

o CPS teacher survey and focus groups

o Youth worker focus groups and poll

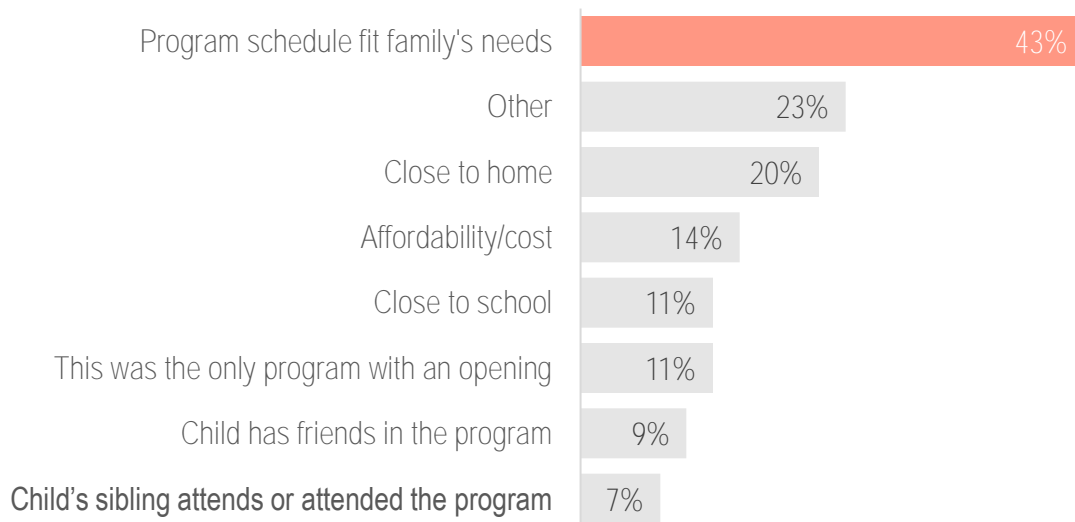## Caregivers' Program and Scheduling Preferences

We polled caregivers about the most important factors to them when selecting an afterschool program for their child or children. Academic enrichment/homework help was most frequently selected as most important, with over half (51%) of caregivers indicating this choice. Sports and other physical activity (26%), social enrichment/making friends (23%), skills building (21%), arts (19%), and safe space with caring adults (17%) were also identified as important factors for afterschool program selection. Interestingly, only 6% indicated childcare as an important factor. This may be due to different interpretations of the question, as one might *seek out afterschool* in part for childcare, but *select a program* based on more specific programmatic offerings or characteristics. In contrast to poll data, the importance of afterschool as a form of childcare for working caregivers was a central theme across nearly all focus groups.

Figure 9. Academic enrichment/homework was one of the most important factors that caregivers prioritized when selecting an afterschool program.

Factor	Percentage
Academic enrichment/homework help	51%
Sports/other physical activity	26%
Social enrichment/making friends	23%
Skills building	21%
Arts	19%
Safe space with caring adults	17%
Technology/STEM/STEAM programming	13%
Other	9%
Childcare	6%

When we asked caregivers *why* they chose their child's current afterschool program, a majority (43%) indicated that the program schedule was a major factor. The program's proximity to their home, as well as affordability/cost also factored into their choice. The other category included the need for childcare as working parents, academic support and reinforcement, opportunities for their child to learn or improve their English, socialization with peers, and keeping their child busy and away from screens.

Figure 10. Program schedule was the top reason for selecting a program.

Reason	Percentage
Program schedule fit family's needs	43%
Other	23%
Close to home	20%
Affordability/cost	14%
Close to school	11%
This was the only program with an opening	11%
Child has friends in the program	9%
Child's sibling attends or attended the program	7%

Program schedule came up as an important factor when selecting an afterschool program in both the focus group conversions and polls. According to the poll, 54% of caregivers said they need afterschool programming for their child or children on 5 days per week. Another 20% said they need 4 days per week of afterschool care. Overall, 74% of caregivers expressed a need for full-time care, while a smaller proportion of caregivers (26%) said they needed 3 days or less of afterschool care.

We subsequently polled caregivers whose children were enrolled in DHSP afterschool programs about their schedule preferences. DHSP staff shared examples of children who were not attending all of the days for which they were enrolled, so we created a two-question poll to better understand the scope of the issue. The results were similar to the focus group poll, with 80% expressing a preference for 4-5 day programming, while 20% preferred part-time programming (3 days or less). An overwhelming majority of those who preferred full-time programming needed afterschool to run from school release until 5:30 p.m. or 6 p.m. (90%) when they are able to leave work to pick-up their children as opposed to 9% who wanted afterschool care for only two hours per day. This preference was also shared amongst those who wanted part-time care: 60% prefer afterschool to run until 5:30 p.m. or 6 p.m., while 31% only needed two hours of afterschool programming. This data highlights the dual nature of afterschool: while many caregivers desire afterschool programming for academic support and social enrichment, many also rely on OST as an essential childcare service.

Some shared that the current system felt "all or nothing" resulting in their getting "shut out" of afterschool programming. They expressed that offering "seat sharing" could optimize the number of children who could receive regular care. One recalled that prior to COVID-19 caregivers could more flexibly select the days their schedule required for part-time care: "I think we should bring back the structure where we can pick days of the week we need. For example, I only need Monday and Friday but I'm forced to take a Wednesday spot, which is very valuable to many parents but we never use it." Another expressed frustration citing an example of a friend who took their kid out of their afterschool program for weekly private math, as they would have gladly sent their child on that day. Another caregiver admitted that their child's full-time enrollment was more than they needed with their three-day hospital shift: "Please bring back the ability to select specific days for afterschool. My work schedule at the hospital is Tuesday/Thursday/Friday, and the only way to get those covered is by paying extra for all 5 days, instead of just the 3 that I need." The coordination, staffing and planning for these types of structural changes may be complex and require additional data to understand feasibility given the potential operational burden for programs.

Logistical Ease

Caregivers frequently expressed a desire for logistical ease surrounding drop-off/pick-up. Several issues influence the logistical ease a family experiences, including:
- o Program's proximity to home.
- o Transportation from school to afterschool programs.
- o Sibling preference.

A program's proximity to home (20%) and, to a lesser extent, its proximity to school (11%) are factors that are important to caregivers when selecting a program. Concerns about pick-up/drop-off logistics resonated with many caregivers across multiple focus groups. One caregiver suggested that transportation was a parent's "biggest headache" and that not having support with transportation was their "biggest fear." Transportation from school to afterschool programs was important, as well as having a program near their home.

The CPS Transportation Department offers transportation for students in pre-K through 5th grade who reside more than 1 mile from school and to students in 6th-8th grade for those who reside 1.5 miles or more from home. While there is no formal system to bus children from school to their afterschool program (for those who are not attending a co-located program), caregivers may submit a form to change their child's bus stop from home to a stop at or near their afterschool program. CPS does not provide transportation home from the afterschool program. More information can be found on the CPS Transportation Department website.

Caregivers with multiple children in particular shared concerns about logistical burdens, particularly when only one of their child receives an afterschool slot. Caregivers with one or more children at home experience challenges with managing multiple drop-off/pick-ups, helping their kids with homework, and keeping them off screens during the final hours of their workday.
- o Approximately half (48%) of caregivers who participated in the focus groups had more than one child in grades K-8.
- o Of those with two children (44%), only a quarter had both children enrolled in afterschool.
- o One third had one child enrolled, while 42% had none of their children enrolled in afterschool.
- o Among those with three children (4%), none had afterschool care for all of their children.

One caregiver shared challenges about having afterschool care for only one of their children. While they were glad to have an afterschool placement for one of their children, this set-up still required them to do pick-up twice every day and entertain their second child until the second pick-up, causing significant disruptions to their ability to work as a single parent. Others echoed that it was not only important for *both* of their children to be enrolled in afterschool, but also important for them to be in the *same* program.

"I would say the top priorities are cost, location, that they're both in it, because currently, one's in and one's not…which is even worse than not having it because then I have to go once to get one and then…two hours later go back to get the [other] one. I'm a single parent. So it's just a lot of logistical things. And I would say the fourth thing would be Wednesday because [it] is a shorter day." - Caregiver

Data from the Community Partner Portal allowed us to examine the number of children who attended afterschool programming at their school site. In 2023-2024, 59% of children who were enrolled in 5-day/week programs participated in a program based in their school building. Many caregivers expressed this preference, as explained by one parent: "...the problem is that the program is not able to accommodate all kids in a school...I think every kid should be able to get a spot at their school...we would take anything as long as the kids get a spot at their school. I think this is the priority for a school system, to be able to accommodate all kids for afterschool in their own school."

Challenges with Program Application

We also asked caregivers if they experienced any barriers to accessing afterschool programs. Cost, transportation logistics, and staffing to accept students with special needs surfaced again as barriers. In addition, **caregivers across multiple focus groups discussed challenges related to communication about application deadlines and completion of the application.** Several learned about deadlines after they passed. They suggested reaching out to caregivers early and often, especially since many are not thinking about afterschool for the next school year as early as April of the current school year. Moreover, many suggested utilizing a variety of communication mediums to reach caregivers, including sending information and forms home in backpacks or sending information via text with links to the website or application. For those whose primary language is not English, many had trouble accessing and completing the online application as they were not adept at using computers. According to the program profiles survey, only 7% of programs reported that they make materials available to families in languages other than English.

There were also other caregivers who simply preferred the option to "come into the establishment and do the paperwork right there and hand them everything they need." Some also felt that the application was unnecessarily long and intrusive, especially for those with lower incomes. Advisory Group members shared anecdotal evidence that the multi-step process of submitting a lottery application and then a separate enrollment form if selected from the lottery was confusing for many caregivers. They shared that caregivers, unaware of the multi-step process, often missed enrollment deadlines even if they applied to the lottery. Several also had issues with the online application systems used by DHSP programs including Trax, citing that it was not clear if their application and/or enrollment forms were accepted.

> "Applications are stressful...sometimes they're like 15 pages that need...proof of your life, your income, make sure the kids are yours, [you're] a resident of the United States...about 20 things... You need...six to eight weeks of stubs. And, you know that gets overwhelming sometimes... they [are] always doing long applications and that...holds us back, especially when you're low income. You [are] always doing long applications." - Caregiver

"I have two kids. 9 and 11... I have a hard time because of the language barrier. I don't know how to fill out the application and always get the application after the deadline has already passed. Because of that, I did not participate last year. Now, because [the Family Liaison] helped me, I am able to participate. Now one of my kids goes to the afterschool program. But one of my kids didn't get in the program. Still in the waiting list." - Caregiver [Translated from Amharic]

Caregivers offered recommendations to address these challenges they raised about accessing afterschool care for their children. Regarding the application timeline and process, caregivers suggested having more dedicated support. Many expressed gratitude for family liaisons who not only shared information about afterschool programs and reminded them of application deadlines, but also helped them fill out the application online. This was especially helpful for caregivers whose primary language was not English or who were not familiar with computers. Caregivers also suggested hiring an application coordinator to help other caregivers and hosting fun in-person application events. Using multiple forms of communication was also previously discussed.

"I just think that...having somebody there to be supportive for you when you fill an application out or having an application coordinator or something...that can meet you halfway would be helpful...make it easier or make it a fun event...like a cookout and tell people to come do this because we're signing up for people for this year. So come on. And the kids go jumping playing and mom is over [here] sitting down filling out paperwork and someone else is watching the kids or something... Make it fun...make it easier. Like a smooth transition..." – Caregiver

Waiting Pool

The "waitlist" was also a big topic of discussion, with many caregivers expressing confusion about their status. Many wanted to know their child's standing in order to gauge their chances of a placement and whether or not they would need to make alternative arrangements. There was frustration that there was little to no communication or updates about status changes. Regarding receiving a spot off the waitlist late into the school year, one caregiver shared that they had already found alternative care for their child and that they were already "locked into [their] routine and [childcare program] deposits by then." There was also a desire for more transparency about how "waitlist" decisions are made. One caregiver shared, "Knowing where you stand on the waitlist would be helpful. It would also be super helpful to know...how many people apply for each of these things and how many people...were guaranteed a spot because of last year... There needs to be some thought to...people [who] have to make other arrangements."

It is a misunderstanding that the DHSP afterschool lottery uses a "waitlist." Rather, those who are offered a seat during the initial lottery are placed into a "waiting pool." When a seat becomes available, DHSP identifies all the children in the Waiting Pool whose 1st, 2nd or 3rd choice site selection and child's grade match the seat that is available. DHSP then offers the seat to a priority income child (i.e., <65% median HUD income) with the lowest lottery number first. If there are no priority income children waiting for that seat, they offer the seat to a general income child (i.e., >65% median HUD income) child with the lowest lottery number first. It is important to note that DHSP has dedicated priority seats that cannot be filled by a general income student. Part of its mission is a 30% priority income threshold at all sites. Later in the lottery, if no priority applicants are waiting for that site, we will fill dedicated priority income seats with general applicants from the waiting pool. Therefore, there is no "next in line order" for those who did not receive a seat initially.

A few caregivers raised concerns about mid-year enrollments for new students. Due to limited space, there are often no openings for students who transfer into CPS mid-year. This means that caregivers settling into a new city and home may need to wait until the following year for an afterschool seat. Teachers and principals also observed this phenomenon, sharing that families who come mid-year are some of the most marginalized and are in greatest need of afterschool for their children.

Affordability

Caregivers also cited cost as a significant factor. Nearly a half of caregivers (45%) said they received some form of financial assistance for afterschool care, whether through a state voucher, scholarship, or sliding scale fee.[10] Even for families who did not report that they receive financial assistance, cost remains a barrier. Without access to city and nonprofit programs, the alternative is a much more expensive and prohibitive private care route (i.e., private afterschool programs, sitters/nannies). Unable to afford private care, many find ways to "make do" as best they can by juggling childcare with their jobs or relying on family members.

Impact on Caregivers

One caregiver expressed frustration over the impact that lack of afterschool availability has had on their career. Because they were unable to secure an afterschool seat for their child and unable to afford full-time private care, they had to drop from working full-time to part-time. Citing the cost of private alternatives, caregivers prefer expanded access to city and nonprofit programs. One further explained that city and nonprofit programs better aligned with school schedules, holidays, and weather-related closures.

When we asked caregivers about the impact of not having afterschool programming on their family, the resounding response was about the ability to work and support

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[10]Note: DHSP staff explained that caregivers may not be aware that their payments are calculated based on a sliding scale, impacting the self-reported numbers in the caregiver poll. As a result, the percentage of caregivers reporting that they receive some form of financial aid might be higher.

their family financially, as well as overall caregiver stress. Several who were not able to secure a slot went from full-time to part-time working status or left their job completely – this was especially true for those whose children have special needs or for those who were in the waiting pool year-after-year. Those who were able to secure their children an afterschool seat expressed gratitude, sharing that they would otherwise be unable to work. They also shared that afterschool programs helped to alleviate stress and caregiver burden, as they felt reassured that their kids received academic support and other forms of enrichment. This was especially true for single parents and those whose primary language was not English.

Caregiver Quotes

"If my family didn't have access to after school programs, I would likely be unable to work, which would worsen our situation significantly. As a single mom without nearby family support, I rely on friends and community resources."

"Because she doesn't speak English, she cannot help her children with their homework. So not being in afterschool, where they get that help, is the biggest negative impact for her family." - Shared through an interpreter for a Pashto speaking caregiver

"After school really helps with working moms...life is tough, you're working...you come home, you're tired. So it's really good when my kid is in an after school program because she's actually had a chance to do some fun things, go outside, run around, you know, do some artwork... As parents, you know, it's a little sad, but sometimes when we don't always have that energy or time after work to kind of do these things with kids. So it really helps out in that area...and she does her homework there too. So all those things are really good for me."

"So it was like running from the office to pick up...you're all...stressed out and not very nice to your kids. So the kid has you in those hours where you can catch up. But it's not like we really can give our attention to them... We're working on the laptop... So this relationship was just like, so stressful to both the kids and us...It was really challenging and it built [a] frustrating relationship between the parents and the kids, which was unnecessary. So once [we] got the program, things got better... I can imagine if you don't find a program...for the kids, being a working parent, it can be... It is really stressful."

"The main point is, they help with homework. And when you go to work, you don't have to worry about...where to put your kids or leaving your kids to your friends or anyone. When you balance it with your work, it is really helpful for your kids and yourself. Even for the kids it is really good. If they have to do activities, homework. You don't worry about leaving them there. That's very useful for me." [Translated from Amharic]

Revisit Preference Criteria and Expand Programming

In the focus groups, caregivers offered solutions to serving more students. In the short-term, caregivers suggested revisiting the preference criteria for the DHSP Afterschool Program Lottery to make it more equitable. In the long-term, they said programming should be expanded to eliminate the waiting pool and ensure everyone who wants to participate in afterschool programs can, reiterating the caregiver voices whose advocacy efforts contributed to this study being commissioned.

Many caregivers expressed a desire for more nuanced considerations when determining lottery preference. For example, one caregiver felt it was unfair that, as a single parent and a middle-income earner, they were "lumped at an income level with the two doctor households" who could afford private care. They suggested further stratification of income along with family context for prioritization in the afterschool lottery. Indeed, the spectrum of caregivers needs across Cambridge is diverse, and it is worth considering the many different caregiver and family contexts discussed in this section:

- o Students with special needs.
- o Families with low-income.
- o Solo caregivers / single parents.
- o Caregivers with multiple children.
- o Caregivers whose primary language is not English.
- o Working caregivers who lack job flexibility (ie: cannot work from home).
- o Families whose children have been in the waiting pool for multiple years.

Across many focus groups, caregivers expressed that every child should be able to access afterschool programming. According to one caregiver, the city "shouldn't have this problem…[considering a] city of their size and the budgets that they have." Several others advocated that the city "need[s] more seats at the end of the day" in order for "us all to have access so everyone can pursue their work…and for [the] kids. It's about getting everyone off the waitlist."

Overall, caregivers strongly advocate for access to afterschool programs due to their critical role in supporting working families' economic needs and providing essential developmental opportunities for children. They emphasize that increasing availability and ensuring equitable access would benefit both parents and children by alleviating stress related to childcare arrangements and enhancing children's educational experiences outside regular school hours.

"In my case, because of not finding an afterschool program, both of them were going to different schools… It's hard for me to pick both of them in a 5-minute difference. These things are not only affecting the kids but also affecting the parents. My husband wasn't home for 3 months. It was only me picking up the kids, so I had to leave the kid at home, ask a friend for help. It was a very hard time for me. Not having access to this program is really hard for the family again. Some small kids, you can't leave [them] with somebody. These programs should be available for everybody. Like you guys said, instead of [a] lottery system, it should be accessible for everyone." - Caregiver whose primary language is Amharic (Translated from Amharic)

In summary, caregivers want their children to flourish across many developmental domains. They also need to work. This underscores the multifaceted nature of Cambridge's OST ecosystem, which provides academic, social-emotional and youth development support for children as well as essential childcare for their caregivers.

Capacity

In order to expand the afterschool system, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of its current capacity. The Project Team defined the boundaries of the study, focusing on programs that provide full-time care (programming 5 days per week) for grades Kindergarten through eighth grade. The study was designed to document the current capacity of those programs as well as the potential for increased capacity and additional space.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

What is the existing supply and capacity of out of school programs?

What is the potential for additional space? Who has the capacity to expand?

RELEVANT DATA SOURCES:

- OST program profiles
- CPS Community Partner Portal enrollment data
- CPS school building space analysis
- CPS principal focus groups and poll
- CPS teacher survey and focus groups
- Facilitated conversation with OST directors

OST enrollment numbers were available through the Community Partner Portal, the CPS-based database where OST programs enter their enrollment data to connect it to the CPS student information system. The CPS Student Data Coordinator worked with Agenda for Children OST and DHSP staff to merge the DHSP program enrollment data together with the nonprofit data in the Community Partner Portal. We identified the 5-day/week programs in the Community Partner Portal system and analyzed that data set to determine 2023-2024 school year enrollment.

Current Capacity

In 2023-2024, there were a total of 28 programs that provided afterschool programming 5 days/week in Cambridge. Of the 28 programs, 6 were nonprofit programs and 22 were run by DHSP. The nonprofits included Cambridge YMCA, Community Art Center, Dragonfly Afterschool, East End House, Cambridge Community Center, and Maria L. Baldwin Community Center. These 28 programs budgeted for 1,953 seats for the 2023-2024 school year. In total, they served 2,086 students throughout the 2023-2024 school year. The difference between the numbers

is likely due to a combination of seat sharing and student turnover. Figure 11 shows these 2,086 students broken down by grade level. Over half (56%) of the students served in 2023-2024 were in grades K-3. As a reminder, the 2023-2024 school year was the last year where pre-K students attended afterschool programs; starting in 2024-2025, children must be five years old to enter Kindergarten in Cambridge and participate in afterschool programs.

Figure 11. Over half of the 2,086 students served were in grades K-3.
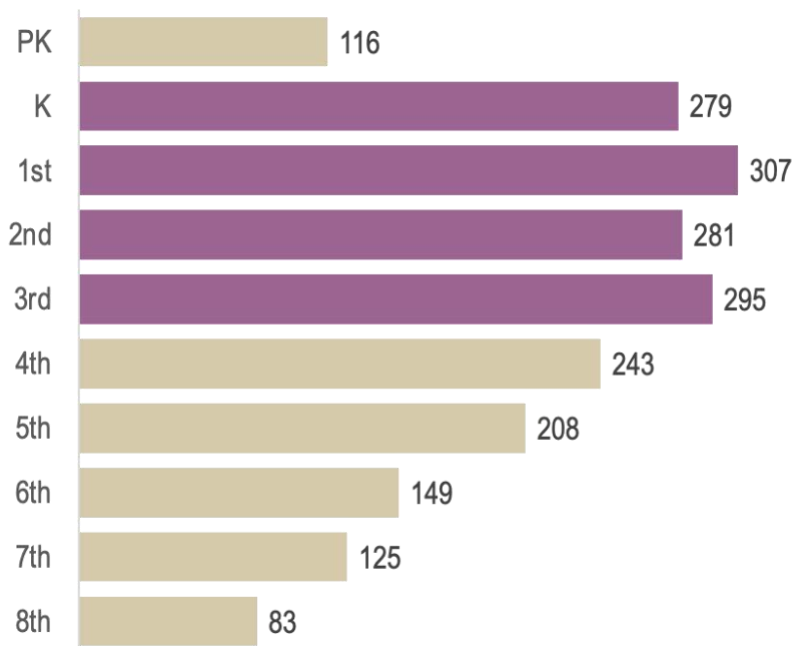
In terms of program size, programs served on average 70 students. In 2023-2024, the King Open Extended Day program was the largest, with 220 afterschool seats, while the Morse Afterschool Childcare K-2 program was the smallest with 18 afterschool seats.

As one principal articulated, there was not enough capacity to serve all families who needed afterschool program in 2023-2024: "There are a lot of out-of-school time providers in the city of Cambridge…and I think one of the challenges is even with all of the different programs there's still not enough seats." The majority of programs (75%) maintained a waitlist for the 2023-2024 school year. In the program profiles, OST directors reported the most common reasons why they were unable to move children off of the waitlist. The top reason was that the program was at capacity – all existing seats per the staff-to-student ratio were filled. Insufficient staffing was also a factor. When programs are unable to hire enough staff, children are forced to wait until the staff positions can be filled. While some spots do open up throughout the school year, the spots that open up do not always meet families' needs. For example, sometimes a spot will open that is 2-3 days per week and families decline the spot because they need full-time care; or a seat may open up for a ten-year- old and the caregiver in need has a six-year-old.

In the program profiles, OST directors reported whether their seats would increase for the 2024-2025 school year. Seven programs (4 nonprofit programs and 3 DHSP programs) projected that their number of seats would increase by an estimated 108 additional seats. When compared to the total number of seats budgeted for 2023-2024, this represents a 6% increase. It is important to note that the City has been funding scholarships through the Agenda for Children OST for seats in nonprofit programs for children from low-income families, which has contributed to the nonprofit programs' ability to serve more children over time.

Additionally, OST directors reported the barriers that prevent them from serving more children, which are displayed in Figure 12. Programs reported that not enough space and hiring staff were moderate to significant barriers to serving more students, with space rated as the most significant barrier. Retaining staff, transportation, and challenging enrollment processes were only slight barriers to serving more students according to the program profiles. Not enough demand was also an option, but programs reported this was not a barrier.

Figure 12. Not enough space and hiring staff are the biggest barriers to serving more children.
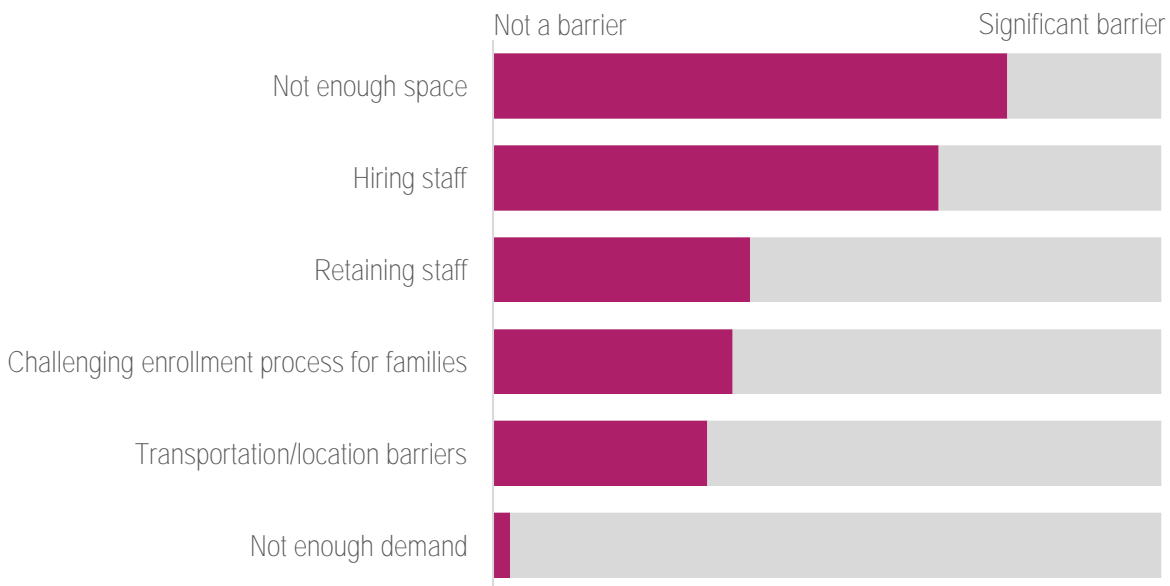

Space Sharing

As part of the study, we conducted a space analysis with space usage data from the City and CPS operations departments. The space analysis focused on elementary schools during the 2024-2025 school year because this is the information that was available through administrative records. It is important to note that we do not have space data from the three nonprofit programs that are not school-based. An analysis of their space capacity will be important in the future as expansion plans are built out.

All 12 elementary schools hosted at least one 5-day/week program. There were a total of 18 5-day/week programs that were hosted by the schools; five buildings hosted more than one program. In total, there were 348 classrooms across the 12 elementary schools. The 28 5-day/week programs utilized 18% of those classrooms during the 2024-2025 school year. Half of the elementary schools (6) had classrooms that are specifically dedicated for 5-day/week afterschool programs. Figure 13 shows OST access to classrooms in 2024-2025; 17 classrooms were dedicated for 5-day/week afterschool programs and 46 were shared classrooms - classrooms that were used by 5 day/week programs but not fully dedicated for afterschool programs. This indicates that there is the potential for additional space.

Figure 13. The vast majority of classrooms (82% or 285 of 348) were not available for 5-day/week OST programs.
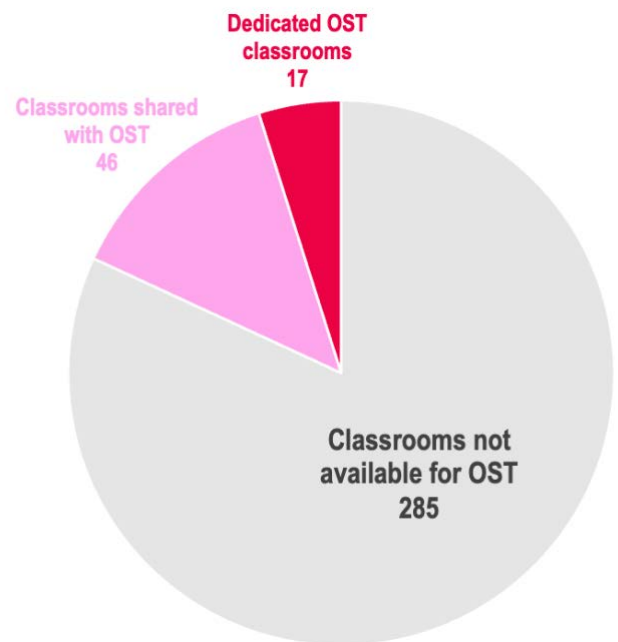
In addition to classrooms, there were other school spaces used by afterschool programs. All of the 18 school-based programs utilized the gym for programming, while 13 programs used the cafeteria. Five programs used the auditorium for afterschool activities. These common spaces were more fully utilized compared to classrooms. The classrooms most commonly shared were specialist classrooms (e.g., art and music classrooms); regular classrooms were the most underutilized space in school buildings.

The data from teachers showed that some are open to space sharing if specific conditions are met. About a quarter (24%) of teachers who responded to the survey currently share their classrooms with afterschool programs. When asked how open they are to sharing their classroom, over half (52%) of all respondents reported they are very or somewhat open to sharing their classroom, as shown in Figure 14. Teachers articulated the need for clear expectations and accountability from both afterschool program staff and school leadership alike. Teachers sometimes need space during afterschool times, for prep, conferences, and other events. If these needs can be communicated proactively and accounted for, many teachers seem willing to share their classrooms. Teachers also emphasized that space sharing should go both ways. A few teachers explained that there are dedicated OST spaces in their building which they are unable to use during the school day. They would like sharing space to be a practice for both school staff and OST programs.

Figure 14. Over half of responding teachers reported they are very or somewhat open to sharing their classroom.
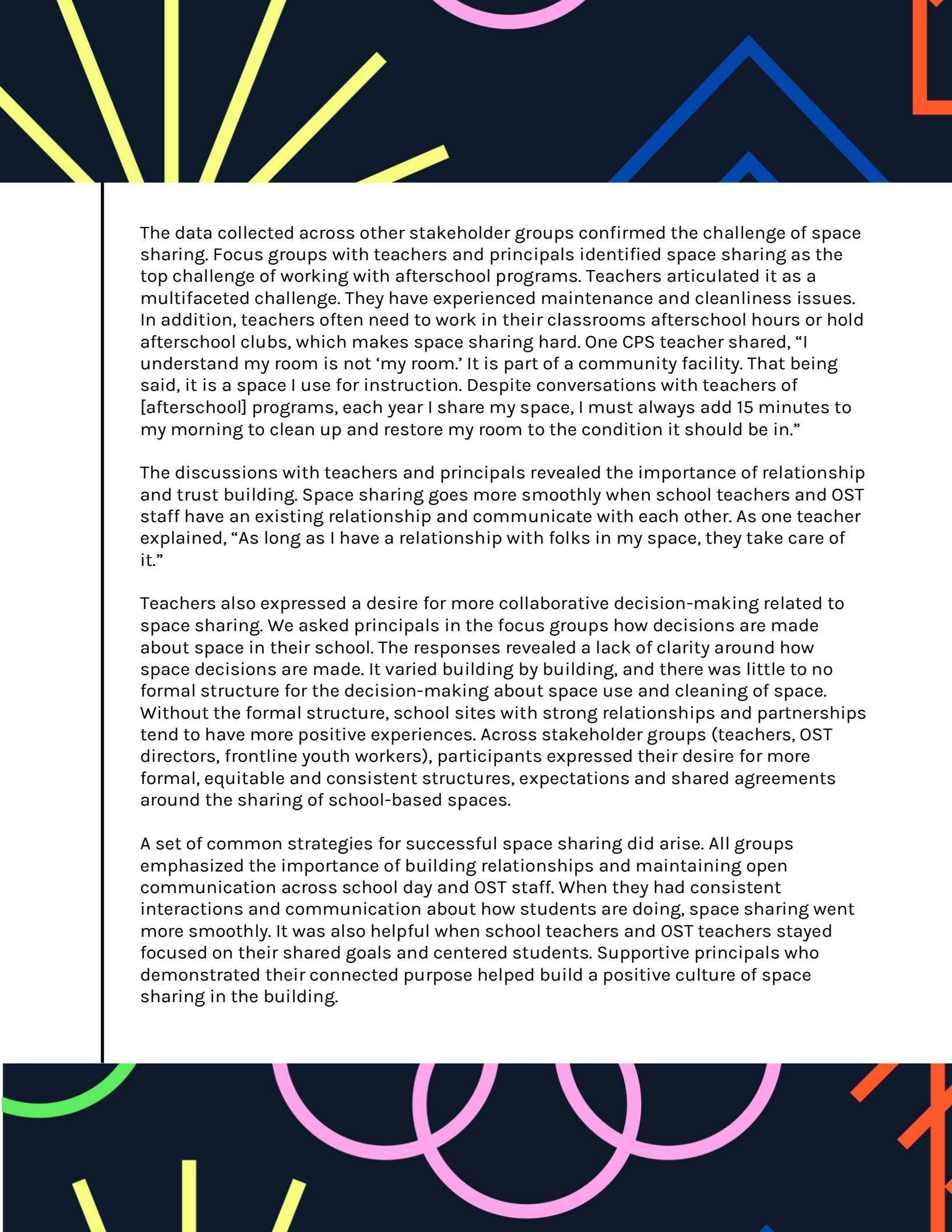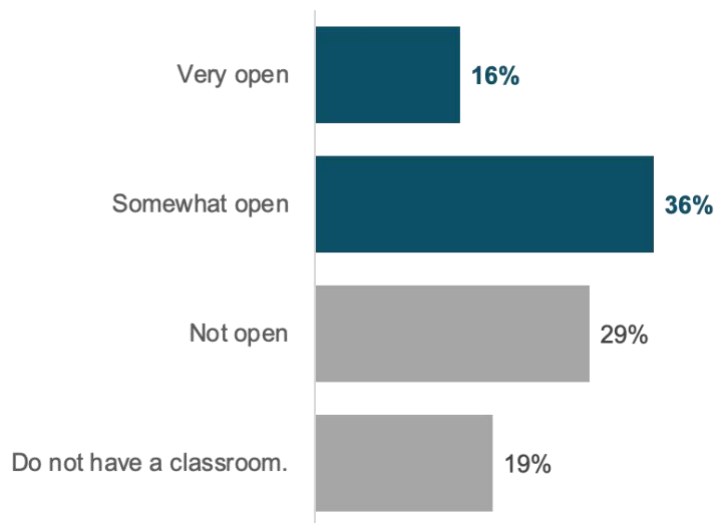

The openness of some teachers suggests that there is an opportunity to expand space by gaining access to additional classrooms. During the principal focus groups, we asked participants how open they are to expanding afterschool space at their schools. All principals (n=6) were very or somewhat open to expanding afterschool space at their school, as shown in Figure 15. Those who selected somewhat shared that they have more limited space available compared to other schools. In the conversation with City and CPS leaders, they expressed their optimism about and commitment to figuring out a solution to increase space for afterschool programs.

Figure 15. All principals were very or somewhat open to expanding afterschool space at their school.

The facilitated conversation with OST directors focused on the challenges of sharing space in school buildings. OST directors described the impact of limited access to space, which leads to overcrowding and the inability to run high-quality, stable programs. Many directors shared examples where they lost access to certain rooms or facilities with little to no notice. Scheduling conflicts or unexpected events often force programs to adjust on the spot, causing interruptions to programming. In some cases, they resort to using hallways or lobbies when there is insufficient access to classroom spaces. OST directors identified a lack of communication from school day staff, territorial behavior from some school staff and challenges with custodians and their contracts as common causes for these scenarios.

The data collected across other stakeholder groups confirmed the challenge of space sharing. Focus groups with teachers and principals identified space sharing as the top challenge of working with afterschool programs. Teachers articulated it as a multifaceted challenge. They have experienced maintenance and cleanliness issues. In addition, teachers often need to work in their classrooms afterschool hours or hold afterschool clubs, which makes space sharing hard. One CPS teacher shared, "I understand my room is not 'my room.' It is part of a community facility. That being said, it is a space I use for instruction. Despite conversations with teachers of [afterschool] programs, each year I share my space, I must always add 15 minutes to my morning to clean up and restore my room to the condition it should be in."

The discussions with teachers and principals revealed the importance of relationship and trust building. Space sharing goes more smoothly when school teachers and OST staff have an existing relationship and communicate with each other. As one teacher explained, "As long as I have a relationship with folks in my space, they take care of it."

Teachers also expressed a desire for more collaborative decision-making related to space sharing. We asked principals in the focus groups how decisions are made about space in their school. The responses revealed a lack of clarity around how space decisions are made. It varied building by building, and there was little to no formal structure for the decision-making about space use and cleaning of space. Without the formal structure, school sites with strong relationships and partnerships tend to have more positive experiences. Across stakeholder groups (teachers, OST directors, frontline youth workers), participants expressed their desire for more formal, equitable and consistent structures, expectations and shared agreements around the sharing of school-based spaces.

A set of common strategies for successful space sharing did arise. All groups emphasized the importance of building relationships and maintaining open communication across school day and OST staff. When they had consistent interactions and communication about how students are doing, space sharing went more smoothly. It was also helpful when school teachers and OST teachers stayed focused on their shared goals and centered students. Supportive principals who demonstrated their connected purpose helped build a positive culture of space sharing in the building.

DEMAND AND GAP ANALYSIS

In order to measure the gap in services, we need to quantify the demand for afterschool seats. We calculated the demand for afterschool seats and then compared it to the existing capacity to measure the gap. We used that calculation to estimate the funding needed to fulfill the gap.

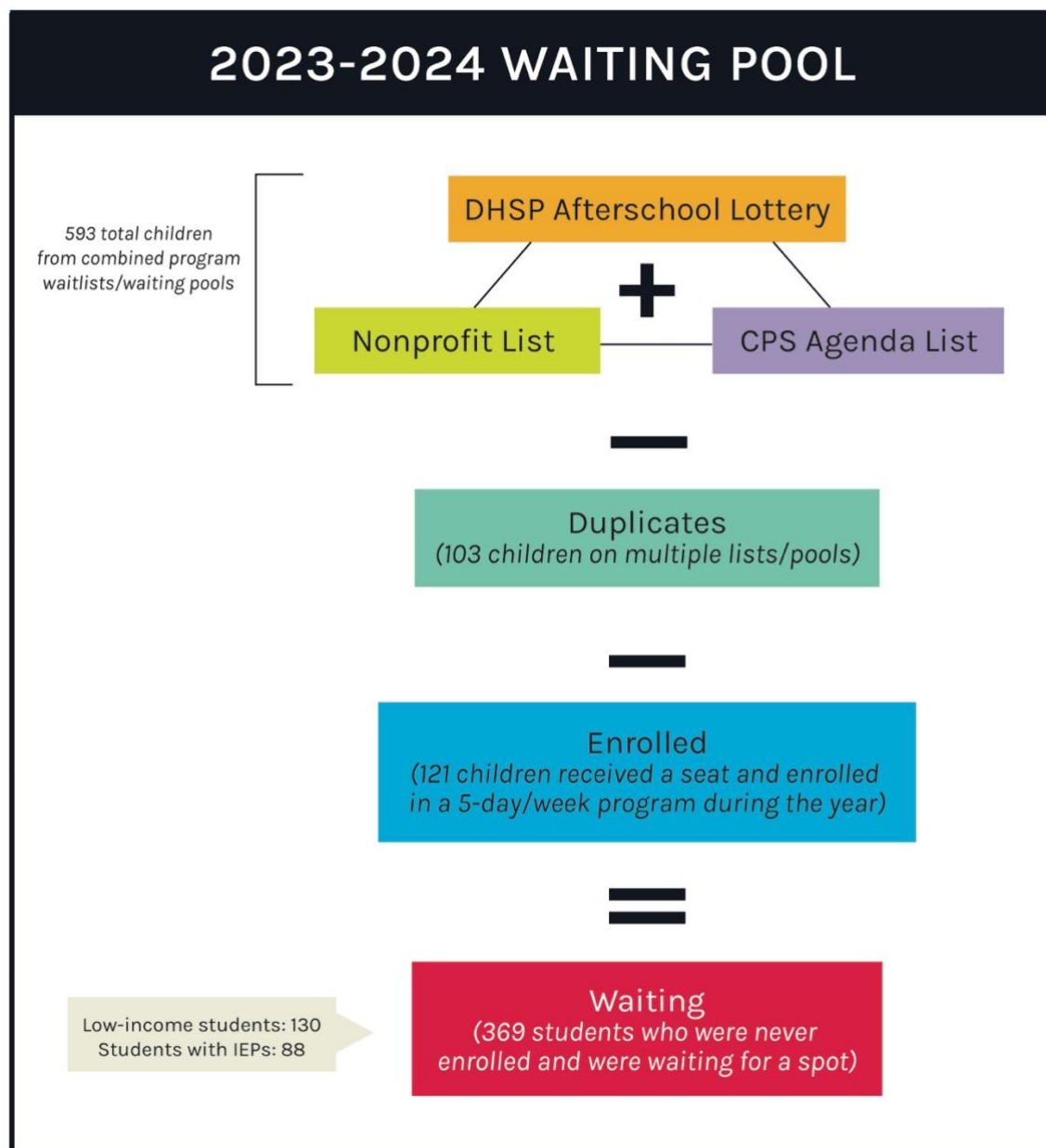| STUDY QUESTIONS:	RELEVANT DATA SOURCES:
What is the demand and need for afterschool seats?	o Caregiver focus groups and poll o OST program profiles o CPS Community Partner Portal enrollment data
What are the funding implications to expand OST seats to meet demand?	o Waitlist/waiting pool data o Interviews with system leaders o Agenda for Children OST scholarship administration data

One way to measure demand is to examine the number of children whose families expressed an interest in 5-day/week programming. In order to estimate this number, we added the total number of children enrolled in a 5-day/week program with the total number of children who remained in the waiting pool for a 5-day/week program for the 2023-2024 school year. It is important to note that this calculation assumes that anyone who wants an afterschool seat applied for one. As explained in the capacity section, the 28 5-day/week programs served 2,086 students in the 2023-2024 school year.

We also needed to determine how many children applied for an afterschool seat but did not receive one. These children are unenrolled and constitute the waiting pool. We collated and cleaned the lists of children waiting for 5-day/week afterschool programming from DHSP, the 6 nonprofit programs[11] and Agenda for Children OST. Many children waiting for a seat applied to multiple programs, with one child having applied to four. We removed duplicates and matched all students to their complete CPS student record. In total, 369 children were waiting for a seat and were never enrolled in a 5-day/week program in 2023-24. Figure 16 depicts how this number was calculated. Of those 369 children, 130 (35%) were from families with low income and

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[11] Note: Two of the nonprofit programs had more limited waitlists that were not fully maintained throughout the year.

88 (24%) were students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).[12] This means that total demand in 2023-24 was 2,455 children in grades pre-K[13]-8 (2,085 served + 369 waiting for a spot). The OST system was able to meet 85% of the known demand in 2023-2024.

Figure 16. 369 children were waiting for a seat and were never enrolled in a 5-day/week program in 2023-2024; 130 were low-income and 88 had IEPs.

2023-2024 WAITING POOL

593 total children from combined program waitlists/waiting pools

DHSP Afterschool Lottery

+

Nonprofit List

CPS Agenda List

−

Duplicates
(103 children on multiple lists/pools)

−

Enrolled
(121 children received a seat and enrolled in a 5-day/week program during the year)

=

Low-income students: 130
Students with IEPs: 88

Waiting
(369 students who were never enrolled and were waiting for a spot)

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[12] Note: In the US, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is required for every student with a disability who is found to meet the federal and state requirements for special education. The IEP is designed to provide the child with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
[13] Note: OST programs are no longer serving pre-K students starting in 2024-2025 because of the licensing change and introduction of the Cambridge Preschool Program.

Figure 17 displays the breakdown of students who were waiting for a seat and were never enrolled in a 5-day/week program by school.

Figure 17. Graham and Parks, Peabody and Amigos had the highest percentage of students in the waiting pool who did not receive a seat in 2023-2024.
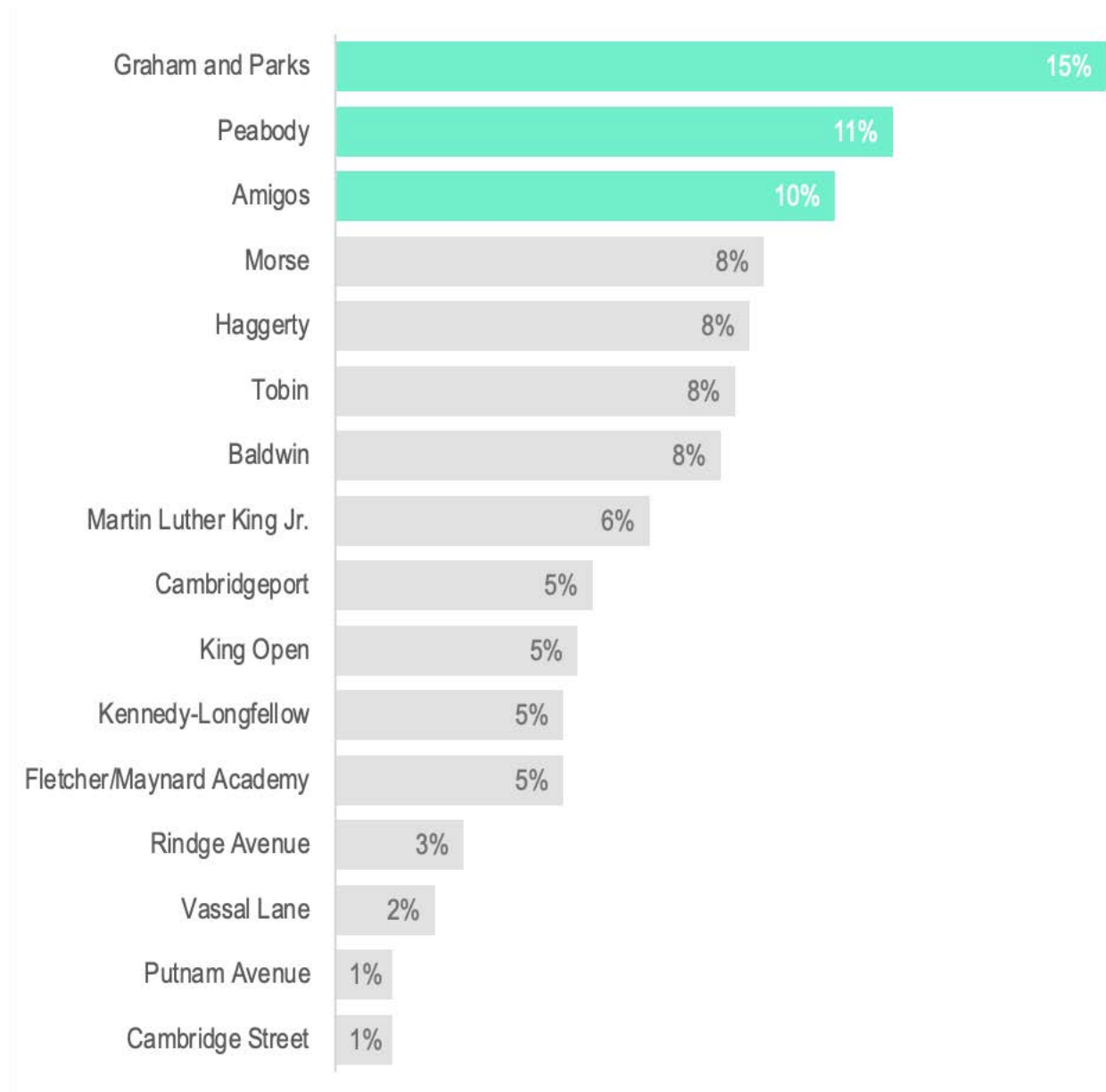
Funding to Close the Existing Gap

We used three calculations to model the funding needed to close the existing gap in services based on:

- cost of fully subsidized seats.
- cost of current median household income DHSP tuition rates.
- cost of current average DHSP tuition payment.

If the gap in services was 369 children in 2023-2024, we can estimate the amount of funding required to close the gap. Expansion would require a combination of DHSP and nonprofit programs adding more seats. On average, a full-time (5-day/week) school-year seat from September through June costs approximately $8,400 per child.[14] The estimate is calculated at $35/day for 190 afterschool days and $70/day for 25 full days (i.e., vacation weeks and some holidays when school is closed but OST programs are open for families).

The total cost for 369 children to have a school-year seat would be **$3,099,600** (= 369 x $8,400).

Because not all of the seats would be fully subsidized, we estimated the amount of money that families would pay in tuition payments. We calculated this using two cost models:

- o **DHSP Tuition Rates Using Median Household Income for Cambridge:** DHSP utilizes a sliding scale (see Appendix C) for its tuition rates. To calculate an average payment, we utilized the most recent median household income for Cambridge. In 2019-2023, the median household income was $126,469 in 2023 dollars.[15] We then took the average of the maximum and minimum payments depending on family size for that income band: A **$267.33 payment per month is the average** of a $365.82 monthly payment for a two-person household and a $168.84 monthly payment for a six-person household. For 369 children, that would equate to an estimated **$986,447.70** in family tuition payments annually.
- o **Average DHSP Tuition Payment:** Another way of estimating family payments is to use the current average tuition payment. During the 2024-2025 school year, the **average monthly tuition payment for DHSP programs was $264.20**. That would result in **$974,898.00** in family tuition payments annually for 369 children.

These calculations are outlined in Table 9.

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[14] Note: This figure mirrors the average DHSP rate and was the negotiated rate used to reimburse nonprofit programs for City sponsored scholarship seats.

[15] U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Cambridge City, Massachusetts. (n.d.). https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cambridgecitymassachusetts/RTN131217.

Table 9. Calculations for Funding Required to Fill Existing Gap

Method	Estimated Annual Income from Tuition Payments	Remaining Annual Funding Needed to Fill Gap	Total
Median Household Income	$986,447.70	$2,113,152.30	$3,099,600.00
Current Average DHSP Tuition Payment	$974,898.00	$2,124,702.00	$3,099,600.00

The two methods of calculation produced similar results; closing the existing gap in demand would cost the City and nonprofit organizations about **$2.1 million per year**.

A Method to Estimate Growth in Demand

As part of the study, we researched afterschool expansion efforts in other communities across the United States and conducted interviews with system leaders in OST intermediaries. One system leader shared her experience undertaking a landscape analysis of their local OST ecosystem. A key component of their process was defining demand, which she described as one of the most complicated questions they grappled with. Over time, they shifted their focus from measuring demand to figuring out how to serve all children. Another community explicitly set its goal as universal afterschool, which they defined as "everyone who wants a seat has a seat." Because this is an ambitious goal, they are piloting universal access with a subset of schools to learn what works and determine how to scale it across the system.

These conversations with other communities provide insights into how Cambridge can approach expansion planning. The study findings show evidence that demand may in fact be higher than what we calculated for the 2023-2024 school year. As outlined in the Caregiver Perspectives and Family Needs section, there are numerous barriers that families face in the application and enrollment process. Some caregivers shared that these barriers prevented them and others they know from following through on the enrollment process. Therefore, we should calculate future demand with the assumption that more caregivers will apply for afterschool programming for their children as the system improves and becomes more user-friendly.

As shown in Table 10, demand for afterschool programming was higher in the elementary grades since caregivers tend to rely on it more for childcare.[16] To project

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[16] Note: Students in the upper grades have higher participation rates in OST according to Community Partner Portal data, but lower participation in 5-day/week programs.

demand more accurately into the future, the calculation should account for increases in applications as access for families improves. As an example, we calculated potential demand in Table 10, assuming an average increase of 5%. According to CPS projections, enrollment will stay relatively stable through the 2028-2029 school year, so there should not be significant changes in demand due to enrollment. However, Cambridge recently passed new housing zoning regulations which may impact future student enrollment.[17] These projections will need to be updated as the impacts become clearer.

In this example, the projected number of children needing an afterschool seat is 2,516. This represents a 21% increase (430 additional seats on top of the 2086 seats available in 2023-2024). In the program profiles, programs reported planning to add an additional 108 seats for the 2024-2025 school year, representing a 6% increase from 2023-2024. Assuming programs in fact added these seats, that leaves a gap of 322 seats (430 -108 = 322). This is a sample calculation for how future demand could be estimated based on the expectation that more caregivers will submit applications as accessibility improves.

Table 10. Projected Increase in Demand

Grade Level	2023-2024 Enrollment	2023-2024 Demand	Projected Demand (+5%)	Number of Estimated Children
Kindergarten	47%	62%	67%	394
Grade 1	55%	67%	72%	402
Grade 2	51%	60%	65%	355
Grade 3	55%	61%	66%	359
Grade 4	49%	55%	60%	294
Grade 5	40%	46%	51%	265
Grade 6	33%	35%	40%	182
Grade 7	30%	32%	37%	156
Grade 8	21%	23%	28%	110
			Total	2,516

The growth of the OST system will need to occur over a multi-year period to fill the gap. As demonstrated in the other study findings, space and staffing will need to be secured in addition to funding. The strategies to accomplish this will require time as they involve systemic changes. We have laid out a gradual plan to expand OST seats

[17] Cambridge Public Schools School Committee. (2024, April 2). FY 2025 adopted budget. https://cdnsm5-ss5.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_3042785/File/departments/administration/financial/budget/fy2025/CPS_Adopted_Budget_FY25_WEB.pdf

over time in Table 11. We anticipate the initial two years (2025-2026 and 2026-2027 school years) will focus more on the changes needed to prepare for expansion to ensure space and staffing are in place. As a result, we project limited expansion opportunities (an estimated 25 additional seats per year). In the following three years, the system will be able to add more seats. If the system can work toward creating about the same amount of seats added from 2023-2024 for three years (~100), the projected increase in demand would be met by the 2029-2030 school year.

Table 11. Timeline to Meet Demand

School Year	Number of Planned Additional Seats	Estimated Number of Total Seats
2024-2025	+108	2,194
2025-2026	+25	2,219
2026-2027	+25	2,244
2027-2028	+75	2,319
2028-2029	+97	2,416
2029-2030	+100	2,516

In order to calculate the financial implications of this gradual plan, we would need to account for potential changes in compensation, benefits, programming costs, etc. If the recommendations in this report are enacted (see the Recommendations section for more details), the cost per seat will increase, above and beyond typical annual cost increases. These projections are beyond the scope of this study but are suggested as a next step in the planning process.

Values & Perceptions

STUDY QUESTION:

What are the current perspectives of different stakeholders?

RELEVANT DATA SOURCES:

o Youth worker focus groups and poll
o Caregiver focus groups and poll
o CPS principal focus groups and poll
o CPS teacher survey and focus groups
o Facilitated conversation with OST directors

OST programming offers not only holistic academic enrichment and youth development opportunities, but also essential childcare services. However, those who have worked in the OST field have described feeling undervalued and underpaid. Like early childhood workers, their value and expertise are often overlooked. In the City of Cambridge, however, early childhood education has come to be regarded as a crucial component of student success,[18] as evidenced by significant investments of public funding. Starting in the 2024-2025 school year the Cambridge Preschool Program provided free preschool programming for all 4-year-olds and some 3-year-olds. There is an opportunity to learn from the creation of the Cambridge Preschool Program, as the OST system strives to be recognized for the essential childcare and youth development role it provides to the city, especially for children whose families may benefit from additional supports (i.e., non-English speaking households, single parents, low- or lower-income families). Parallel to the early childhood field, there is ample evidence on the impact of OST on academic and youth development outcomes.[19]

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[18] McCoy, D. C., Yoshikawa, H., Ziol-Guest, K. M., Duncan, G. J., Schindler, H. S., Magnuson, K., Yang, R., Koepp, A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2017). Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium- and Long-Term Educational Outcomes. Educational researcher (Washington, D.C. : 1972), 46(8), 474–487. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17737739

[19] Afterschool Alliance. (2021, April). The Evidence Base for Afterschool and Summer. https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/The-Evidence-Base-For-Afterschool-And-Summer-2021.pdf

Caregivers, Teachers, and Principals Value OST

We wanted to understand how different stakeholders perceived OST and its role in supporting children's learning and development. In focus groups with caregivers, teachers, and principals, we asked each about the value they thought OST brought to the young people in their care. Resoundingly, caregivers stressed the importance of afterschool programming. As discussed in the Caregiver Perspectives and Family Needs section, access to afterschool has a profound impact on caregivers' ability to work, as well as their stress and mental health. Especially among caregivers whose primary language is not English, many agree that afterschool supports their children's academic success through homework support, English language acquisition, as well as improved connection with peers and teachers.

Overall, this sentiment was shared by teachers and principals as well. Many recognize OST programs as valuable extensions of learning environments where children can develop academically and socially while providing safe spaces for them outside regular school hours. In fact, 88% of teachers and 100% of principals agreed that afterschool programs are very valuable for their students.

"I think the idea of, you know, developing a skill, working on it such that it is performable and then being able to stand up in front of people that you care about to perform is a whole, that's a whole process. And I know a lot of students have benefited from that… It just adds this breadth to what a kid's day experience is. I think you've probably heard from a lot of people that what kids are experiencing in school is shifting. It's more and more scripted, it's more and more controlled… 60 minutes of math from this book that their teacher has to read word for word. There's a lack of flexibility, independence, creativity. And, I think afterschool is a space where kids get to be more themselves or where there's more space for self expression. And, in many cases when it's an interest-based program…there is choice where kids can say okay, right now these are the three classes that are offered. I'm picking this one because this aligns with my interests. [It] is just very different than the options that kids have during the school day." - Teacher

"For children in particular, it gives students another opportunity to extend their learning through different enrichment activities. That's also very crucial for students' child development... Many of our families are working two, three jobs. So it also gives students a safe place to be that they're engaged and you know nothing's more important for families than safety." - Principal

"I think from my lens, I see two really clear benefits and roles for afterschool. One is that it provides childcare so that a parent can work. And the other is that it introduces students to a lot of other opportunities that they might not have in the school day." - Teacher

Relationship Building and Cross-training

In addition, a vast majority of teachers (96%) and principals (100%) describe their relationship with afterschool staff and program as very or somewhat positive. These positive sentiments are promising, especially in light of the space sharing tensions discussed in the Capacity section that may arise with school-based programs. However, teachers and principals also shared observations about the variability in the standards of afterschool programs and the perceived professionalism of frontline staff. While some principals were impressed by the behavior management skills of afterschool staff, some felt programs needed more evidence-based standards. There was discussion about the need for better training and alignment with school expectations to ensure consistency in student behavior management and program quality. Many were open to the idea of cross-training OST staff and teachers, as well as inviting OST staff to classroom observations during the school day.

"There's definitely a different set of expectations...at least for our program, there's a vibe of looseness... That can be beneficial, but, for most kids, it feels like it's too loose. And, you know, there's a philosophy underpinning some of that looseness. But, I don't think that there's enough, there's enough sort of evidence based kind of approaches underpinning that. And, I don't think that they have an expert on hand... I think I'm the most qualified to give them advice, and it's not really my place... Even somebody like [the program manager] is always trying to sort of coordinate, but [they are] not an instructional person... At times I've gone and offered, 'Here's some management stuff' and things like that. And, they've been like, 'Wow, that's so helpful.' I'm like, 'Whoa, that's pretty basic.' But, I felt like I need to do that: here's how you scan, here's how you supervise. You might want to consider a timeout procedure. It doesn't feel like they kind of know what to do, but their staff is too young to implement it. The procedures and the systems...in the programs here are just pretty underdeveloped."
– Principal

"I see the program that's run at [my school]. I am extremely impressed with the behavior management, with the systems and structures they have in place… I do find that the folks that are working in the after school program are very skilled. Matter of fact, the paraprofessional that we just hired for this school year that's been part of DHSP, he's actually one of the stronger paras and he just started with us this year. So there's things that I see that he knows how to do and he's doing and interacting with students without official training from us… So I'm actually extremely impressed with what I see happening…at [the afterschool program in my school]. And we have a very long wait list. It's like if one person moves or leaves…people are knocking on the door to get in the program." - Principal

As discussed in the Workforce section under Findings, frontline youth workers are often underpaid and lack benefits, which creates challenges for stabilizing the workforce. When turnover is high because of limited career pathways and low wages, professional development and experience suffers. Even the best professional development will not solve the problem with persistent turnover. The example of the principal that hired a DHSP staff member as a paraprofessional demonstrates how well-trained staff often leave for better paid positions. This is a scenario where a shared staffing model could serve as a win-win for both the school and the OST program. This also makes the case for needing to address compensation and professional development simultaneously.

In Their Own Words: Youth Worker Perspectives

We also asked frontline youth workers about the importance of OST. While academic support/homework help came up, some alluded to the tensions between structure and student needs during afterschool hours, citing that some kids need space to expel pent-up energy and socialize after a long day at school.

"I feel like [for] some of the kids…being [in] after school is hard, maybe even harder because the kids just came from school and they're back in another school. Like, they just don't want to do anything at that point, which is understandable, but it's also just harder." - Frontline youth worker

Many spoke passionately about the importance of having a safe space and trusting adults for kids:

"I think it's very impactful…we've said it before and we heard it before… We're not really school, we're not really home. We're in between both. So, we give [kids] the opportunity to…talk to us more…[they] feel more comfortable. It gives the kids a third place to be…or maybe a first place to feel safe, because you never know what's going on. So I think it's very impactful." - Frontline youth worker

> *"Having an additional set of trusted adults in your life is nice to have for the kids and for families, too. Also...something I've observed working in OST is just like how much these kids grow up near each other and...near some of these same families through...grade school and then into high school. So, it's kind of cool to see community building and lasting friendships being made...students are finding their crowd."* - Frontline youth worker
>
> *"I started in an after school program [as a student]. And, then [worked] as a teen in the program and now becoming a lead teacher. So yeah, I want to get back to the community and to be a positive role model."* - Frontline youth worker

This "third space" between home and school where many kids return year after year builds community and lasting friendship as they progress through school. In fact, when we asked why they chose to become a frontline youth worker, many talked about the impact afterschool had in their own lives. Because of their experience in afterschool and investment in Cambridge where many grew up or have lived a long time, they wanted to "give back" and be a role model for young people. As discussed in the Meeting Children's Needs section, exposure to adults that mirror the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body cannot be understated for student learning and development. In this regard, OST compensates for the relative lack of diversity in the CPS teaching field and creates a bridge to the larger community.

LEARNING FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

A component of the study was to conduct research on other communities across the United States who have undertaken similar expansion efforts. We had interviews with systems leaders in two cities to gather qualitative information about their experience leading expansion efforts. Much of their guidance involved how to conceptualize demand and plan for increasing demand over time (see the Demand and Gap Analysis section for more details). Through connections with other OST intermediaries and funders, we gathered a list of recommended cities that Cambridge can conduct follow-up conversations with to learn more about their OST systems and how they have undertaken expansion (see Appendix B). These conversations will be especially beneficial as Cambridge moves into the implementation phase. We have outlined a few communities with particularly relevant initiatives.

Alexandria, VA ALX Beyond is the OST intermediary for the city, which provides supports and professional learning to a network of 100+ OST providers. In 2023, it conducted a landscape study entitled Increasing Opportunities for Alexandria City Youth. The study found that less than 35% of students/families reported being

engaged in OST activities. Their conclusions reflected many of the findings in this study:
- o There is a need for a coordinated, community-based approach.
- o There are geographic gaps in OST offerings and opportunities to provide activities in additional locations.
- o They need better communication and promotion of OST offerings.
- o Top barriers and challenges to participation include not knowing about program offerings, transportation, and cost.
- o OST youth workers need training in inclusive practices, supporting students' social-emotional needs, addressing behavioral issues and engaging families.

Washington, DC In 2023, the D.C. Policy Center published a capacity and needs assessment of DC's OST system, which comprises 150 different organizations that offered 474 different afterschool and summer OST programs and collectively provided 30,360 afterschool seats at the PK3 through grade 8 level during the 2021-2022 school year, which represented 44% of PK-8 grade students.

For the gap analysis in this study, researchers defined four potential metrics of need and modeled expansion scenarios based on corresponding policy goals:
- o *The universal coverage metric* would provide sufficient subsidized OST capacity for every child or young person who attends a public school in D.C.
- o *Broad income-based targeting*, i.e. targeting low-income children and youth close to or under 300 percent of federal poverty line (FPL), using Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) eligibility as a proxy.
- o *Targeting based on "at-risk" status.*
- o *Narrow income targeting*, focused on children and youth living in households under the FPL.
- o DC Policy Center *Needs assessment of out-of-school time programs in the District of Columbia*

They further stratified results by ward and found that the capacity gap was most disproportionately concentrated in the same two wards across all four models. They found similar inequities when they analyzed the number of available afterschool seats within walking distance to a child's home address. Wards with the highest proportion of Black and Brown residents and low-income families had the greatest stretches of "seat deserts."

They also conducted surveys and listening sessions with caregivers and found similar themes to this study. Among the greatest barriers to OST participation were:
- o Cost and affordability.
- o Lack of transportation options.
- o Difficulty getting to the program.
- o Difficulty finding programs and enrolling.
- o Difficulty finding accommodation for children with special needs.

Interestingly, the study found that overall, caregivers with low-incomes generally wanted OST because of the learning and enrichment opportunities it offered for their children, while a greater proportion of caregivers with upper-incomes sought out OST for childcare purposes. As a result of this study, DC Action, a citywide convener OST and advocacy group, successfully advocated for sustained funding. Leveraging the praise of DC's universal preK program, advocates have utilized the findings from this report to develop a funding and growth strategy to build towards universal OST.

Denver, CO The Denver Afterschool Alliance provides equitable and inclusive supports to the afterschool community, putting providers and professionals at the center of its work. In 2023, they conducted a community survey with over 1,300 Denver residents. Their learnings parallel many of the learnings of this study. In Denver, demand for afterschool seats far exceeds supply with caregivers describing it as a "race," a "lottery," a "competition." Caregivers also expressed how vital afterschool is; 77% of caregivers said that without their afterschool programs, they would have to cut work hours or stop working. They need programs with:
- Operating hours and weeks that match work schedules.
- Greater flexibility.
- Affordable costs.
- Availability and open slots.
- Locations in their neighborhoods and schools.

Moreover, their access to these programs depends on their:
- Financial means to pay for programs.
- Neighborhood.
- Time to find information about programs.
- Capacity to navigate the enrollment process.
- Transportation to and from programs.

St. Paul, MN Sprockets, the OST intermediary in St. Paul, is housed within the City of St. Paul. Its focus is on improving the quality, availability, equity and effectiveness of OST learning. Sprockets has a variety of useful resources and insights:
- In 2013, Sprockets conducted a transportation study to strengthen transportation to OST programs. The report was followed by the creation of a Transportation Toolkit that programs can use to access and improve transportation for their participants. Another local initiative is The Loop, which transports youth between three parks, a library and a community partner site. Its goal is to make culturally relevant programming more accessible.
- In 2021, Sprockets conducted a 10-year evaluation, which highlighted some of its successes and challenges related to its goal of improving OST access. The evaluation found that Sprockets' data supports helped programs better capture participant demographics and identify gaps. However, Sprockets' partners said it was a challenge to understand the big picture. They want to better measure who is and is not being served across the OST ecosystem. The evaluation recommended that Sprockets collaborate with schools to get a full picture of OST participation and gaps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of the recommendations was a participatory process. We utilized the Waters of Systems Change framework to provide a shared schema to think and talk about Cambridge's OST ecosystem and to develop strategies that address the root causes of inequity. The guiding questions below helped Steering Committee and Advisory Group members make sense of data results in relation to the systems change framework and helped both groups to develop strategies that address structural root causes:

- o What are the values and constraints that inform the structures that exist?
- o What are the policies and procedures that guide the systems and how do they impact people's experiences?

During focus groups, we asked each stakeholder group to share ideas that could address the challenges they had raised and the root causes of inequities. Appendix D outlines the ideas generated across the focus groups and identifies the groups that shared each idea. These ideas, along with the other data generated throughout the gap analysis, were shared with the Advisory Group and Steering Committee during several meaning-making sessions. Guided by the Waters of Systems Change framework, Advisory Group and Steering Committee members used this information to develop the recommendations and strategies in this report.

There are five major focus areas that were developed into recommendations throughout the study. For each recommendation, the Advisory Group and Steering Committee created a list of strategies that align with the categories in the Waters of Systems Change framework. Details about the strategies and aligned actions for each can be found in Appendix E.

There were common themes that cut across the focus areas:
1. One common theme that emerged was the need to ensure that all expansion strategies are designed with an equity lens. This is vital to ensure additional seats are accessible to students and families experiencing marginalization.
2. Since the study findings revealed that the school and afterschool systems need to be better coordinated, many of the strategies generated by the Advisory Group and Steering Committee focused on developing better alignment and coordination across school and out-of-school time.
3. Additionally, the strategies should increase the understanding of the value and role of OST programs across stakeholders. As demonstrated in the Waters of Systems Change, mental models are the deeply held beliefs or ways of thinking that often hinder change. To change systems, we need to ensure that the stakeholders in the systems have a shared understanding of the role of OST and how it contributes to child well-being, growth and future success. Steering Committee and Advisory Group members emphasized the importance of nurturing the whole child in partnership with caregivers, families and schools.

BUILDING SYSTEMS PARTNERSHIPS

Develop shared goals and better coordinate across CPS and OST systems to center the well-being of children, youth and families.

STRATEGIES:

○ Develop a shared mantra or purpose to unite school day and afterschool staff.
○ Develop shared goals and learning outcomes for youth development across school and afterschool to foster shared ownership and commitment.
○ Create systems, structures, and spaces that enable coordination between school and afterschool.
○ Identify each organization's contributions and role in implementing the strategies and working toward the shared goals.

Currently, the school day and OST programs exist within two separate systems, CPS and the OST ecosystem. And, as one Steering Committee member pointed out, the OST ecosystem is not one cohesive system itself. In the interview with system leaders, the City Manager, Superintendent of Schools and Assistant City Manager for Human Services described the need to work together more strategically to break down the silos between the two systems. As a citywide intermediary, Agenda for Children OST has worked to improve coordination across the OST system and with CPS. It will need to be involved - in partnership with CPS, DHSP and the nonprofit providers - to effectively advance these strategies and improve systems coordination.

The findings from the study highlighted the need to better coordinate across the two systems at all levels. Frontline youth workers expressed a desire to work more closely with school day staff and share information about children's experiences in and out of school. CPS teachers and principals also asked for more opportunities to build relationships with afterschool staff and work together to inform programming. One CPS teacher explained, "I think that doing relationship building somehow between afterschool staff and day school staff would be really great. Even if it's just you come in half an hour early and you pop into some classrooms to see your kids in the classroom so that they're seen as your kids, our kids."

This quote reveals the importance of shifting mindsets alongside changes in practice and investments in relationships. While the recommendations and strategies for systems coordination include changes in policies and practice, they also go deeper. Advisory Group and Steering Committee members recognized the need for a shared mantra or purpose (e.g., "We serve the same children and families

and want the best for them!"). When school day and OST staff recognize their shared values, goals and purpose, the structures for better coordination can be leveraged.

Structures for better coordination include policies that allow OST staff to visit during the school day; consistent meetings and communication between OST providers and school staff; and inviting OST staff to parent-teacher conferences. These practices will increase interactions, strengthen relationships, build trust and ultimately improve both systems. Better coordination across the school day and OST programs is a theme that cuts across all of the recommendations; the strategies for the other four recommendations include ways to improve collaboration, communication, relationships and access to information between the school day and afterschool. We decided to call this out as its own recommendation because it requires dedicated effort to work across two different systems. In addition, it ensures that coordination is happening at all levels - from systems leaders to frontline staff – all while staying centered on the students shared across the systems each and every school day.

RECOMMENDATION#2:

EQUITY IN ENROLLMENT

Design expansion strategy through an equity lens to ensure additional seats are available and accessible to students and families experiencing marginalization.

STRATEGIES:

o Adopt an equity-based, targeted universalism approach to ensure equitable expansion with the goal of serving all children and families who want to participate.
o Align processes for registration, enrollment and waiting pools across OST programs.
o Create a single registration and waiting pool system using a "Common App approach" for all programs.
o Create a system of support to identify students needing placement and to help families to register, navigate the process and coordinate financial aid.
o Develop a method to facilitate continuous family and caregiver feedback about how enrollment systems are working in order to keep upgrading processes and systems to better serve them.

As Cambridge plans for expansion, it is essential to make decisions with an equity lens. One of our guiding principles in strategy development was targeted universalism (see page 29 for more details). The recommendations we developed are to benefit all groups; however, we examined how different groups are experiencing the system in order to identify targeted strategies for each group. The study prioritized hearing from specific caregiver groups, with a focus on students and families who experience marginalization. As the number of afterschool seats increases, it will be important to ensure that the students and families experiencing marginalization have access to those seats. The interview with the City Manager, Superintendent of Schools and Assistant City Manager for Human Services reinforced the importance of this; they articulated their commitment to increasing the availability and access of afterschool seats for the families most in need. The findings from the study provided insights into how to make afterschool programs more accessible, specifically the application and enrollment process. Many of the barriers that caregivers shared were challenges with the application and enrollment process. From not knowing what is available to confusion about deadlines, caregivers described the process as burdensome and unclear.

The strategies for equity in enrollment take a user-centered approach and are designed to streamline the application and enrollment process. If OST programs can align their registration, waiting pools and enrollment processes, there will be more transparency and better coordination. This will be a step toward the goal of a single registration system, similar to the "common application" used in college admissions or the "common grant" used in philanthropy. The Cambridge Preschool Program developed a universal application process for its mixed delivery system, an example from which the OST system can learn. Caregivers also recommended that programs consider sibling preference and preferences for single parents/caregivers. As OST programs align their enrollment procedures, there will be an opportunity to revisit how applicants are prioritized and incorporate these additional factors.

Nevertheless, some families will still need additional support to fully complete the enrollment process. As a result, one strategy is focused on developing a system of support to identify students needing placement and to help families navigate the process. With any new process, it is important to create methods for users to provide feedback. It will be important to develop feedback loops so that families can share how the new processes are working for them and suggestions for improvements. Both of these strategies - placement support and feedback processes - will require additional capacity across the system (e.g., individuals with time dedicated to working one-on-one with families and gathering feedback from them). Currently, CPS family liaisons, Agenda for Children OST staff, DHSP lottery team members and the Community Engagement Team (CET) all play a role in supporting families with enrollment processes. OST program staff often support families with application and enrollment steps as well. It will be important to assess the current capacity across these roles and determine how additional support can be created. We anticipate that as these strategies are implemented and accessibility improves, we will find that there is more need for OST programming than we were aware existed.

SHARING SPACE

Improve space sharing between CPS schools and OST programs in order to serve more children across the city.

STRATEGIES:

o Create space sharing expectations, agreements, practice, structures, and incentives; designate an individual in each building to coordinate space needs and usage between school and afterschool staff and leadership.
o Foster the "community" aspect of space and establish all school space as shared student space.
o Foster a positive, coordinated, and more integrated working relationship between OST and school teachers.
o Identify additional space for OST programs and expansion.

As discussed in the Capacity section, finding additional physical space is an important prerequisite for the OST system to expand in order to meet the current service gap and to grow as accessibility improves. Stable and secure space is required in order for organizations to run high-quality programs. However, frontline youth workers, teachers, and principals independently surfaced challenges sharing physical space in their respective focus groups. This recommendation was developed to improve the experience for both afterschool and school staff when sharing physical space, and, subsequently lead to better relationships to enable them to work more collaboratively to support young people in their care.

The strategies developed for this recommendation speak to the desire from both program and school-based staff for equitable and clear instructions, protocols, and expectations regarding sharing classroom space. Some suggestions include having a designated individual in each building to coordinate space needs and usage between school and afterschool staff and leadership, such that changes to space availability can be communicated with ample notice. Other suggestions include using physical checklists to return a classroom to its original state. The need for district-level resources and guidance have also surfaced in order to support principals so they are not "stuck in the middle" trying to negotiate with their teachers and being a good partner to afterschool programs. System-level ideas range from incorporating sharing physical space with OST programs as a component of school equity audits to developing an MOU template with space usage and cleaning agreements, including custodial responsibilities and contracts that cover OST time.

Finally, strategies for this recommendation undergird the need to treat school space as shared space – shifting from "mine" to "ours" – where young people learn and grow

and to foster a sense of "community" amongst adults who support children in Cambridge as opposed to dividing space usage by school or afterschool needs. Holding meet-and-greets or an orientation between school and afterschool staff at the beginning of each school year can help build relationships early on and give those sharing classroom space an opportunity to discuss expectations. Scheduling regular check-ins between school and afterschool staff can also encourage better communication and coordination throughout the school year, not only for space usage, but also for supporting student needs. Agenda for Children OST Network Coordinators should be leveraged to support these strategies, as they are well-positioned to facilitate participation in these types of schools-based opportunities. Ultimately, these strategies seek to shift mindsets about afterschool in order to build stronger, more productive relationships between the school and afterschool communities.

"And sharing space, I think, is really the biggest rub because, I mean, we can get proprietary. Anybody can get proprietary about their space, but there is something about getting it set up and organized for the next day and then needing to do it again the next morning. That feels tricky. And I think the answer is probably open communication and also clarity that your room doesn't belong to you." - CPS teacher

RECOMMENDATION #4:

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Ensure equitable access to and positive experiences in afterschool for students who have special needs.

STRATEGIES:

o Center disability justice and empowerment. Utilize a child-centered model to coordinate care and support across school, afterschool, and home.

o Understand the breadth of "needs" that students with special needs experience and develop programs/policies/partnerships/supports to meet those needs, including communication, data sharing and IEP access.

o Ensure appropriate resources are available to provide adequate support to children with special needs (e.g., lower ratios significantly; ensure adequate staffing; secure appropriate space; design more expansive staffing models).

o Create incentives, requirements, and opportunities to ensure all staff are trained to support children with special needs; CPS and OST coordinate to offer and aligned professional development for staff across both systems.

Ensuring that children have a safe place to learn and grow after school is at the heart of the OST field and, as such, has been the fuel for the study. We asked caregivers, frontline youth workers, teachers, and principals about how and the extent to which the system was able to meet the needs of children who come from backgrounds that may have less access to education and learning resources: Black and Brown children, children with special needs, children from families with low income, multi-language learners. Across all stakeholder focus groups, serving students with special needs surfaced as the most prominent shortcoming in the system. In fact, many children who are struggling in afterschool may not have specific diagnosed challenges.

Based on the findings shared in the results section, Steering Committee and Advisory Group members developed a set of strategies to *ensure equitable access to and experiences in afterschool for students who have special needs*. One of these strategies involves improving care and coordination across school, afterschool, and home to best serve the child. This includes, for example, using a case management approach to help school and afterschool coordinate and implement individualized plans for children in their care. Creating agreements and protocols to enable afterschool staff to have access to individualized education plans (IEPs), school attendance, and transportation are also ways to support coordinated care. Hiring additional coordinator positions with dedicated time to work with families with children who have special needs can help caregivers navigate complex systems as another way to connect caring adults in the school, afterschool, and home environments. This strategy also seeks to use a "nothing about us without us" framing to center disability justice and inclusion and empower families.

Focus group findings also illuminated challenges related to meeting the breadth and specificity of different "special needs" students might have. Without an understanding of what special needs exist and what each requires, blanket policies do little to properly guide programs in their planning and preparations. Therefore, this strategy seeks to understand the breadth of special needs and differing abilities, and subsequently design programs and identify resources specific to their needs. Creating policies about serving children with special needs in afterschool programs can also help create necessary infrastructure. Many expressed interest in resurrecting the Inclusion Advisory Team as a designated body to coordinate efforts across the city. Caregivers also advocated for aligning policies, standards and practices across the school day and afterschool to improve experiences for children and ensure children with special needs can effectively participate in afterschool.

Finally, ensuring that there are adequate resources to serve children with special needs and that all staff are trained to support children with special needs are also important strategies. Lowering student-to-staff ratios and providing adequate staffing – both inclusion supports as well as for general frontline staff – ensures that staff can address issues and dedicate one-on-one time with children in real time. Shared staffing or new staffing models, such as staggered start times, could allow more full-time staff to work both during the school day through the end of afterschool programming. This would create cohesion across the school day and

afterschool and support cross-training efforts. Cross-training staff in behavioral and inclusion practices better prepares all staff and programs to create supportive environments for all children. Strategies that work well for children with special needs are often effective strategies for all children; providing staff with this training will help them become better educators for all.

RECOMMENDATION #5:

STRONG OST WORKFORCE

Build a stable, professional workforce of frontline youth workers to deliver high quality services and to accommodate additional demand for afterschool programs.

STRATEGIES:

- Improve administrative systems, benefits/pay, and culture/work-life balance to attract and retain staff.
- Build professional pathways and integrated staff development.
- Foster strong partnership between school and afterschool.
- Utilize a shared staffing model to expand access to full-time, benefited status, where appropriate.

Having a strong OST workforce is critical for OST expansion. Without the frontline youth workers whose job is to nurture and guide children in afterschool programs, caregivers would lose access to critical childcare services and students would lose access to youth development and academic support. Steering Committee and Advisory Group members elevated the need to build a stable and professional workforce of frontline youth workers in order to deliver high quality services and to ensure programs operate at maximum capacity.

OST directors shared challenges with retaining and recruiting staff. According to frontline youth workers, the most important job factors that influence their decision to accept an OST position are compensation, job flexibility, benefits, and organizational climate. Many cited Cambridge's cost of living as a challenge and indicated a desire for a living wage that enables them to live in or nearby the city. To make ends meet, many frontline youth workers shared that they took on second and third jobs. Some also took on a second job in order to obtain health benefits. As discussed in under Workforce in the Findings section (Figure 5), staff who worked 20-29 hours per week had the highest attrition rate (44%) compared to staff who worked

19.5 hours or less (19%) and those who worked 30 or more hours per week (6%), suggesting a desire for more hours or full-time status and accompanying benefits.

When asked what prevented them from staying in the field, few opportunities for career advancement came up frequently. One frontline youth worker shared that they had been in the field for several years starting as an assistant and didn't see further growth past their current role as lead teacher. Several others observed that the roles that offered the wage, benefits, and job flexibility they desired were scarce. Many also expressed frustration with the administrative infrastructure, citing late paychecks and having no access to an electronic pay stub, W-2, and other financial information.

In addition, the disconnect between school and afterschool infrastructure also created challenges leaving frontline youth workers unable to access critical logistical information (e.g., attendance and bus information), important information about their students (e.g., student progress and well-being), and the school they share space with (e.g., important building and school schedule announcements). Many also expressed the feeling that their job was undervalued and that the role they played in a child's learning and development were not recognized. While teachers and principals who participated in their respective focus groups held the importance of the role of youth workers in high regard, some felt the professional experience and training varied within the profession. Several suggested inviting afterschool staff to observe school day teachers in their classrooms as a form of professional exchange. OST directors and frontline youth workers echoed this desire as well, advocating for more opportunities to collaborate and build relationships with school day staff.

Strategies developed for this recommendation address the need to attract and retain talent by increasing benefits and pay and improving career prospects for those who want to stay in the field. This includes ongoing professional development and mentorship, building off Agenda for Children OST's existing efforts focused on professional growth and learning opportunities for OST staff. Increasing staffing levels to provide coverage for staff to take time off or to enable schedule flexibility also surfaced to address concerns about burnout and workplace culture. Improving basic administrative infrastructure to enable staff to access their employment, benefits, and pay information and providing an orientation and overview of benefits were also identified as low hanging fruit to tackle.

Finally, several strategies address the need to foster better integration between school and afterschool – this pertains to technology and access to relevant student information, inclusion in the school-wide communications, as well as shared professional development and cross-training opportunities, especially in supporting students with special needs and inclusionary practices. There may be situations where a shared staffing model across school and afterschool, in which part-time afterschool staff are hired into part-time school day roles or vice versa, presents an opportunity to help staff reach a 40-hour work week and potentially qualify for benefits. Moreover, shared staffing could foster a stronger sense of community between school and afterschool. Several principals expressed interest in this idea, as

they felt the rapport OST staff have with students would benefit the children during the school day. System leaders explained that a shared staffing model could introduce more complex funding considerations and power dynamics (i.e., around who serves as the primary employer). While these initial structures may be challenging to set up, they can be addressed. The King Open Extended Day[20] staffing model is an example that has been successfully implemented in Cambridge. Together, these strategies work towards creating full-time positions with full benefits to balance the mix of part-time positions across the system.

COMMITMENT TO CAMBRIDGE CHILDREN

The study is not the end, but rather, just the beginning of the work ahead. Over the last year, the study convened school and OST partners across Cambridge to develop a shared ideal future state for an OST ecosystem that equitably serves children and families. Throughout the process, we heard loudly from caregivers about the urgent need to serve more children in afterschool. We also identified the barriers that are preventing equitable access to out-of-school time. The next phase of the work will need to focus on disrupting the structures and practices that this study, and the community members who contributed to it, identified as standing in the way of equitable access. It is clear that key stakeholders agree all Cambridge children and youth who want to attend OST programs deserve to benefit from and enjoy them.

The study facilitated expansion recommendations through creative problem-solving and trust-building between school and OST staff. The next phase should build off this foundation, as the implementation of the strategies will require people from across the school and afterschool ecosystems to work together. This work will require investments and support at the macro- and micro-systems levels.

SYSTEM LEVEL INVESTMENTS

At the macro-level, systems leaders must endorse cross-sector initiatives and direct resources necessary for collaboration. Approvals for data-sharing, time needed for planning meetings between school and out-of-school time leaders, resources for conducting shared training, increased compensation for staff, and other strategies described in the recommendations all require different degrees of support from systems leaders.

Moreover, system leaders hold the key to funding decisions. Sustaining the depth of collaboration needed for systems change requires dedicated resources and staff for

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[20] Note: The King Open Extended Day (KOED) is a unique collaboration between CPS and DHSP, designed to link the school-day and after-school experiences of children and families. KOED is an afterschool program that is completely integrated into the King Open School.

planning, convening, and facilitation. Agenda for Children OST has demonstrated its unique role in being able to bridge the two systems and create spaces for collaboration and relationship building. Throughout the study, it played the role of convener and it will need to continue to serve in that role. Dedicating resources and investing in the capacity of Agenda for Children OST will be critical to implementing the recommendations, including convening working groups to follow through on the strategies developed by the Steering Committee and Advisory Group.

Funding will also determine the speed and degree to which the City will be able to close the existing gap and meet anticipated afterschool demand as access improves. The ability for programs to strengthen the workforce of frontline staff through improved pay, benefits, and full-time opportunities, including through shared staffing models, are largely dependent on system-level funding investments.

ACTION AT THE MICRO-LEVEL

At the micro-level, the work will require an ongoing commitment from individuals, programs, and schools to implement the strategies. Already, the Advisory Group and Steering Committee have prioritized action steps to bring the recommendations to fruition. During their final session, we asked members to select the strategies they think should be prioritized moving forward. Each member was given five votes, and the full results of the sticker voting activity can be found in Appendix G. Table 12 outlines the strategies with the most votes from highest to lowest.

Strategies from each recommendation area were represented in the top priorities. The number one priority was to increase compensation for frontline youth workers and address the administrative challenges they have experienced. The strategies that rose to the top all involve building tangible structures for collaboration:
  o Space sharing agreements.
  o A coordinated registration process.
  o Systems for increased collaboration across school and afterschool.
  o Partnerships to meet the breadth of needs of students with special needs.

In order to build these structures, it will be important to continue the cross-system convenings that have occurred throughout the study phase of the expansion project, as it moves into the implementation phase.

Within each strategy are a set of aligned actions (see Appendix F) that address different components of the Waters for Systems Change. In addition, these aligned actions cross the individual-, program-/school-, and system-level spheres of influence. While system-level investments are necessary for systems change, small actions play a necessary role. Long before the streets of Cambridge were paved, there were cow paths. Likewise, the actions at micro-level illustrate where there is social and political will for change and can incubate and pave the way for the necessary change ahead.

Table 12: Top 8 Strategies Prioritized (of 21 Total) at Joint Advisory Group and Steering Committee Meeting, *listed in rank order*

TOP STRATEGIES
STRONG OST WORKFORCE Improve administrative systems, benefits/pay, and culture/work-life balance to attract and retain staff.
SHARING SPACE Create space sharing expectations, agreements, practice, structures, and incentives.
EQUITY IN ENROLLMENT Facilitate program and sector coordination across the OST system for registration, waitlists and enrollment.
BUILDING SYSTEMS PARTNERSHIPS Create systems, structures, and spaces that enable coordination between school and afterschool.
SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS Understand the breadth of "needs" that students with special needs experience and develop programs/policies/partnerships/supports to meet those needs.
SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS Create incentives, requirements, and opportunities to ensure all staff are trained to support children with special needs / CPSD & OST coordinate to offer and align PD for staff across both systems.
EQUITY IN ENROLLMENT Create a single registration and waitlist system using a "Common App approach" for all programs.
SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS Center disability justice and empowerment. Utilize a child-centered model to coordinate care and support across school, afterschool, and home.

This report is the culmination of convening, relationship-building, and problem-solving by dedicated adults who work on the frontlines with children and youth in programs and schools, as well as those who work behind the scenes in central office and administration roles. That these individuals volunteered their time, energy, and expertise through their own volition, demonstrates a strong commitment to serving the best interests and needs of children and families. In an ecosystem, no one organization can create change on its own but, collectively, and with a shared vision and commitment to the well-being of children, they can work in sync to realize equitable afterschool expansion in the city.

Appendices

Cambridge OST Expansion Study

Summary, April 2025

Forward

Letter to the Community

We are excited to share with you the Cambridge Out of School Time (OST) Expansion Study Report developed in collaboration with OST providers, colleagues across the School Department and Department of Human Service Programs and families. While Cambridge is fortunate to offer more affordable OST options than many communities, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable high-quality experiences across our community.

As the report details, the pandemic and its aftermath reshaped the OST landscape, bringing both positive strides towards equity and new barriers to service delivery. The report focuses on the OST programs that provide learning and care 5 days a week until 5:30 or later. This includes currently 28 different programs provided by the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP) and community-based nonprofit providers.

A major strength of this report was the deep engagement with a range of stakeholders. The Steering Committee led by the Agenda for Children Co-Directors, Susan Richards and Khari Milner, included school, City and community program leaders. The Advisory Group, which met throughout the study, included principals, family liaisons, district staff, and OST staff and leaders so that their perspectives could be included. There were 10 focus groups with caregivers including many caregivers of children with special needs so that their voices would be centered here.

The key recommendations of the Study provide a road map for first shoring up the existing Out of School Time system and then for phased expansion over the next several years. Before we can expand, we need to begin to address the critical challenges which impede our current provision of services:
1. Adequate space for out of school time programs,
2. Appropriate pay and benefits for OST staff,
3. Barriers to access for some children with special needs,
4. Complex application and enrollment processes for families, and
5. Deeper partnerships between school and OST staff to support children.

It will take the deep commitment of our teams to address the challenges listed above. The engagement of critical partners in the study sets us up well for the next phase of work.

While we are aware of the potential budgetary limitations over the next several years, the City proposed budget for FY26 includes support in two areas here. The DHSP budget includes city funding to replace the current ARPA funding for scholarships for 91 low-income students attending five community nonprofit programs. The proposed budget also includes funding for additional supports that will allow DHSP to better meet the needs of some additional children with special needs.

We look forward to working with all of our partners as we begin the next phase of the work.

Yi-An Huang
City Manager
City of Cambridge

Ellen Semonoff
Assistant City Manager, Human Services
City of Cambridge

David Murphy
Interim Superintendent
Cambridge Public Schools

⬮ Recognition

Gratitude for Community Engagement

WithInsight, Resonance Data Collective and Agenda for Children Out-of-school Time (OST) would like to express our appreciation for the individuals and organizations who participated in this project. The project was a participatory process that would not have been possible without their contributions and perspectives.

We are especially grateful for the caregivers, youth workers, teachers, principals, and OST directors who participated in focus groups, completed surveys and shared their experiences. Special thanks to Louis Costa de Beauregard who served as a Harvard Kennedy School of Government Intern and helped build the groundwork for the project during the summer of 2023.

Thank you to the Steering Committee and Advisory Group, which guided the project and were made up of nonprofit OST leaders, Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP) OST leaders, Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) district leaders, and CPS school leaders and staff.

This document serves as a brief summary of the study findings. The full report includes the names and organizations of the individuals who served on these groups and helped move the work forward. The full report can be accessed at https://www.agendaforchildrenost.org/publications.html.

Image: Some members of the Advisory Group and Steering Committee.

Introduction

WHAT IS OST?

Out-of-school time (OST) refers to periods when children are not in school, including after school, during vacations, and summer breaks. OST programs offer constructive and enriching activities that support children's development. Research has shown that afterschool programs, a key part of OST, benefit children by enhancing academic, emotional, and social growth, while also providing a safe, structured environment. For caregivers, these programs offer essential support, helping them manage work, family, and personal responsibilities.

OST IN CAMBRIDGE

The Cambridge OST Ecosystem consists of a variety of afterschool and summer programs serving youth. It is a mixed-delivery system which includes community-based nonprofit organizations and city-run programs led by the Department of Human Services Programs (DHSP) and extended-day and summer programs administered by the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS).

Caregivers can apply for a seat for their child or children in one of the 28 5-day/week afterschool programs by submitting an application to the DHSP afterschool lottery for city-run programs or applying directly with the organization for nonprofit programs. In addition, CPS teachers and staff can refer students to OST programs the district runs as well as to a City-sponsored seat in a non-profit program.

NEED FOR OST EXPANSION

Although afterschool programs offer significant benefits for children and families, many face barriers to access, including high costs, limited availability, and transportation issues. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these challenges by causing staffing shortages and reducing program capacity. As demand surged during the return to in-person work and school, many families were left without needed afterschool care.

In Spring 2023, the City Council issued a policy order instructing the City of Cambridge to explore ways to expand the capacity of afterschool programs to ensure a seat "for every child in Cambridge who requests one." The City of Cambridge, in partnership with Cambridge Public Schools, commissioned this study led by WithInsight and Resonance Data Collective, alongside the Agenda for Children OST. This report presents findings and recommendations from that year-long, community-driven study.

Process & Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to better understand the unmet need in Cambridge by fully examining the demand for afterschool seats and the current capacity to meet that demand. The three major phases of the study are outlined in Table 1.

Demand (need for afterschool seats) **—** **Capacity** (existing available seats) **=** **Gap** (unmet need)

Table 1. Phases of the OST Expansion Study

PHASES		
1	Foundation setting	o Determined stakeholder groups and levels of engagement. o Solidified and prioritized study questions. o Developed problem definition and study plan.
2	Gap analysis and data collection	o Conducted data collection and analysis. o Led data walks to make meaning of results. o Identified key themes across data sets.
3	Recommendations and action plan	o Utilized data walks to identify recommendations. o Prioritized strategies and developed action steps. o Summarized findings, documented recommendations, and wrote final report.

Foundation Setting Phase

The purpose of this phase was to build relationships amongst stakeholders and to develop a solid foundation upon which to scaffold the project. This phase emphasized *intentional collaboration and stewardship* to engage the many people – across nonprofit organizations, DHSP, and CPS – who play important roles throughout the OST ecosystem in articulating root causes of inequities and developing equitable expansion solutions. The study utilized *child-centered mapping* to acknowledge the important and proximal role that caregivers, OST frontline youth workers, OST directors, school teachers, principals have with children and to ensure that the solutions address the real-world experiences of those interacting with children in the OST and school day environments.

Gap Analysis & Data Collection Phase

The focus of this phase was to articulate study questions and methods; data collection and analysis were conducted to answer these questions. Table 2 below shows the *study questions* developed to ensure data collection would generate insights to better understand the current capacity, demand, and unmet need for afterschool seats in Cambridge. This study used a *mixed-methods approach*, combining qualitative methods to explore user experiences, challenges to expansion, and root causes, with quantitative methods to assess factors like capacity and demand. The study made a deliberate effort to highlight the perspectives of specific caregiver groups. *Purposive sampling* was used to intentionally select participants based on characteristics, knowledge, or experiences of interest. Our goal was to hear from families with children with special needs, Black and Brown families, lower-income families, families on waitlists or not enrolled, and families whose primary language is not English.

Table 2. Study Questions

Category	Question
Workforce	o What factors impact recruitment and retention of quality OST teachers?
Meeting Student Needs	o To what extent are OST staff able to meet the needs of all children (e.g., Black and Brown children, children with special needs, low-income students)?
Caregiver Perspectives and Family Needs	o How do families make decisions about the afterschool hours, weigh their options, and prioritize? o What are the key barriers to access?
Capacity	o What is the existing supply and capacity of OST programs? o Where is the potential for additional space? o Who has the capacity to expand?
Demand and Gap Analysis	o What is the demand and need for afterschool seats? o What are the funding implications to expand OST seats to meet demand?
Values and Perceptions	o What are the current perspectives of different stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, teachers, principals)?
Community Research	o What can we learn from other communities that have gone through similar expansion efforts?

Recommendations & Action Plan Phase

The study facilitated participatory data sessions to engage stakeholders in meaning-making as data became available. We utilized the following conceptual frameworks to center equity and systems change when developing strategies and recommendations: The "Six Conditions of Systems Change" from the *Waters of Systems Change* provided a shared schema to think and talk about Cambridge's OST ecosystem and to develop strategies that address the root causes of inequity. *Targeted universalism* introduced two principles about achieving equity in systems change: 1) In order to meet a population level goal or outcome, there must be targeted processes or strategies tailored to address the problem, and 2) For a strategy to be equitable, it must be explicit about the inequity it is addressing and specific to the people and the context in which they are experiencing the inequity.

Findings & Recommendations

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

OST is Critical for Child Learning and Development

Caregivers stressed the importance of afterschool programming and its many benefits on student learning and child development. In fact, 51% of caregivers polled said that academic enrichment and homework help were a top priority for selecting a program. Especially among caregivers whose primary language is not English, many emphasized how afterschool supports their children's academic success through homework support, English language acquisition, as well as improved connection with peers and teachers. Caregivers from low-income households made similar observations about the role of afterschool in their children's academic and social growth. **Several caregivers also shared that afterschool programs kept their children busy and limited unnecessary and unwanted screentime at home.**

"When they spend more time at the school and more time with other children who are speaking and teachers who are speaking the language, this allows the child to decipher the language better. The child becomes more engaged with the language and learns it quickly and this helps the child to better develop." - Caregiver (translated from Haitian Creole)

"Because she doesn't speak English, she cannot help her children with their homework. So not being in afterschool, where they get that help, is the biggest negative impact for her family." - Shared through an interpreter for a Pashto speaking caregiver

"Afterschool really helps with working moms…life is tough, you're working…you come home, you're tired. So it's really good when my kid is in an afterschool program because she's actually had a chance to do some fun things, go outside, run around, you know, do some artwork… As parents, you know, it's a little sad, but sometimes when we don't always have that energy or time after work to kind of do these things with kids. So it really helps out in that area…and she does her homework there too. So all those things are really good for me." -Caregiver

Frontline youth workers described afterschool as a "third space" for children, where they can feel safe, trusted, and supported outside of school and home.

"I think it's very impactful…we've said it before and we heard it before… We're not really school, we're not really home. We're in between both. So, we give [kids] the opportunity to…talk to us more…[they] feel more comfortable. It gives the kids a third place to be…or maybe a first place to feel safe, because you never know what's going on. So I think it's very impactful." - Frontline youth worker

Many teachers and principals agree that OST programs are valuable extensions of learning environments where children can develop academically and socially while providing safe spaces for them outside regular school hours. In fact, 88% of teachers and 100% of principals agreed that afterschool programs are very valuable for their students.

"For children in particular, it gives students another opportunity to extend their learning through different enrichment activities. That's also very crucial for students' child development… Many of our families are working two, three jobs. So it also gives students a safe place to be that they're engaged and you know nothing's more important for families than safety." - Principal

"I think the idea of…developing a skill, working on it such that it is performable and then being able to stand up in front of people that you care about to perform…that's a whole process…[that] lot of students have benefited from… It just adds this breadth to what a kid's day experience is… What kids are experiencing in school is shifting. It's more and more scripted…and controlled… There's a lack of flexibility, independence, creativity. And, I think afterschool is a space where kids get to be more themselves or where there's more space for self expression. And, in many cases when it's an interest-based program…there is choice where kids can say okay, right now these are the three classes that are offered. I'm picking this one because this aligns with my interests. [It] is just very different than the options that kids have during the school day." - Teacher

OST is Essential Childcare for Working Families

Caregivers emphasize that afterschool programs are crucial for childcare and reducing caregiver stress. Many shared how the lack of access to afterschool has had a profound impact on their ability to work, with some having to reduce their working hours or leave their jobs entirely due to the inability to secure care for their children. The impact of not having afterschool care was particularly hard on single parents and caregivers of children with special needs, as it increased stress and financial strain. Caregivers described afterschool as vital for supporting both the children's needs and their ability to work and manage their daily responsibilities, expressing relief and gratitude when they secured a spot for their child.

The study explored how well current OST offerings meet family needs and identified key priorities and barriers.

Caregiver Priorities:
- Most families need care **4–5 days per week**, preferably **until 5:30 or 6 p.m.**
- **Flexibility** (e.g., part-time options or seat-sharing) is important for families with varying schedules.
- Proximity to home, transportation, and ease of logistics—especially for **single caregivers** or those with **multiple children**—are major considerations.
- Families prefer programs located at school sites to **simplify logistics** and support **continuity for children**.

Barriers Identified:
- **Application Process:** Families—especially low-income and non-English-speaking—struggle with language barriers, poor communication, unclear deadlines, and a confusing, tech-heavy application process.
- **Waitlist Issues:** Caregivers voiced frustration with lack of transparency about waitlist status, late placements, and no mid-year enrollment—making it difficult to plan or accommodate newly relocated families.
- **Cost:** While some families receive financial aid, many cannot afford private alternatives and rely on city/nonprofit programs. When spots are unavailable, families "make do" by piecing together childcare support.
- **Transportation:** Lack of formal systems to get kids from school to off-site programs creates challenges.

Overall, caregivers emphasized the need for more accessible, affordable, and better-communicated OST options that align with their work and family needs, especially for those most marginalized.

Current Capacity of the OST System

Supply =	Number of 5-day/week seats offered in DHSP and nonprofit afterschool programs during a given school year
Demand =	Number of children who applied for a 5-day/week afterschool seat in the same school year
Gap =	Number of children who applied for a 5-day/week afterschool seat but were not offered one during the same school year

During the 2023–2024 school year, 28 afterschool programs in Cambridge — 6 nonprofit and 22 DHSP-run — had the **capacity for 1,953 full-time (5-day/week) seats** for K–8 students but **served 2,086 children** due to seat sharing and turnover, **covering 44% of CPS students**. Most served students were in grades K–3. **Demand** was calculated by adding enrolled students (2,086) to those who applied but weren't placed (369), totaling **2,455 applicants** and revealing that **the system met about**

85% of known demand. However, actual demand is likely higher, especially among low-income and non-English-speaking families who face barriers to applying. A total of 490 students were placed in the waiting pool, with only 121 later receiving a seat—leaving a **service gap of 369 unplaced children**. This underscores a significant shortfall in available afterschool seats despite the city's wide range of OST providers.

"There are a lot of out-of-school time providers in the city of Cambridge and... even with all of the different programs there's still not enough seats." - Principal

Funding OST Expansion

To close the existing gap in afterschool services, an estimated **$3,099,600** is needed to provide full-time (5-day/week) seats for the **369 children in the waiting pool** during the 2023-2024 school year. This amount accounts for the cost of **$8,400 per child**. However, because families contribute tuition based on their income, the study also calculated family contributions using DHSP data, which helped estimate the funding required after factoring in these payments. The analysis suggests that the City and nonprofit organizations would need **approximately $2.1 million per year to fully close the demand gap, based on the estimated family contributions**.

As discussed previously, many families expressed that barriers prevented them and others they know from following through on the enrollment process. Future demand calculations should account for an expected increase in applications as access for families improves. The study used a 5% projected increase in demand across each grade level as an example calculation to account for improved application processes. This calculation estimates that the potential number of children needing an afterschool seat will be 2,516, an increase of 430 additional seats. While programs planned to add a total of 108 seats in 2024-2025, this still leaves a gap of 322 seats.

The growth of the OST system will need to occur over a multi-year period to fill the gap. The study anticipates limited expansion opportunities in the initial two years (2025–2026 and 2026-2027) with systems leaders focused on securing space and stabilizing staffing. Table 3 below offers an example of how expansion could roll out.

Table 3. Timeline to Meet Demand

School Year	Planned Additional Seats	Estimated Total Seats
2024-2025	+108	2,194
2025-2026	+25	2,219
2026-2027	+25	2,244
2027-2028	+75	2,319
2028-2029	+97	2,416
2029-2030	+100	2,516

Furthermore, the study notes that future financial planning must consider rising costs, including increased compensation and program improvements, which fall outside the scope of this report but are recommended next steps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While funding is a critical component of seat expansion and closing the gap, systemic changes will take time and require coordinated strategies. As a result, stakeholders developed five recommendations to address root causes:

1. Building Systems Partnerships
2. Equity in Enrollment
3. Sharing Space
4. Supporting Students with Special Needs
5. Strong OST Workforce

These recommendations and associated strategies aim to build on what is working and change what is not to ensure successful and sustained expansion when funding becomes available. These recommendations are not listed in order of importance and should be worked on simultaneously.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

BUILDING SYSTEMS PARTNERSHIPS

Develop shared goals and better coordinate across CPS and OST systems to center the well-being of children, youth and families.

STRATEGIES:

- Develop a shared mantra or purpose to unite school day and afterschool staff.
- Develop shared goals and learning outcomes for youth development across school and afterschool to foster shared ownership and commitment.
- Create systems, structures, and spaces that enable coordination between school and afterschool.
- Identify each organization's contributions and role in implementing the strategies and working toward the shared goals.

The study revealed a clear divide between the school day and afterschool programs, with each operating as separate systems. At the systems-level, leaders, including the City Manager and Superintendent, emphasized the need for strategic collaboration to

bridge this gap. Agenda for Children OST has been instrumental in fostering coordination and must continue facilitating engagement among CPS, DHSP, and nonprofits to advance this work. At the school and program level, both frontline workers and educators expressed a desire to align efforts, citing improved communication and relationship-building across both systems as essential. Recommendations included policies that encourage regular collaboration, such as school visits by OST staff, joint meetings, and participation in parent-teacher conferences. Ultimately, a shared commitment to serving the same children and families is key to strengthening both systems and creating more cohesive support for youth.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

EQUITY IN ENROLLMENT

Design expansion strategy through an equity lens to ensure additional seats are available and accessible to students and families experiencing marginalization.

STRATEGIES:

o Adopt an equity-based, targeted universalism approach to ensure equitable expansion with the goal of serving all children and families who want to participate.
o Align processes for registration, enrollment and waiting pools across OST programs.
o Create a single registration and waiting pool system using a "Common App approach" for all programs.
o Create a system of support to identify students needing placement and to help families to register, navigate the process and coordinate financial aid.
o Develop a method to facilitate continuous family and caregiver feedback about how enrollment systems are working in order to keep upgrading processes and systems to better serve them.

As Cambridge prepares to expand its afterschool programs, equity must be a central focus, guided by the principle of targeted universalism—aiming to benefit all while addressing the unique needs of marginalized groups:
   o **Multi-Language Learners (MLLs):** Afterschool programs help MLL students with **English language development** through interaction and immersion. Caregivers appreciate the **academic support**, especially with homework, which they often cannot assist with due to language barriers. However, many caregivers with

limited English proficiency especially struggled with access to information about afterschool and completing the online applications due to **language barriers,** with only 7% of programs offering materials in languages other than English.

o **Children with Special Needs:** Caregivers cited examples of their children being **excluded due to lack of support or resources** to meet the specific needs of their children's disabilities or medical/social-emotional needs.

o **Students of Color:** Frontline OST staff are **more racially and ethnically diverse** than CPS teachers and better reflect the student population, which research shows benefits students of color. A diverse workforce helps foster a stronger sense of belonging, better academic outcomes, and more culturally responsive programming.

Of the 369 children who remained in the waiting pool and did not receive an afterschool seat in school year 2023-2024, 35% were from low-income families and 24% had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Because OST programming offers distinctive benefits to children with special needs and those whose primary home language is not English, it is a **serious equity concern** when children with these lived experiences are unable to receive an afterschool seat. The study surfaced areas where additional attention may be necessary to improve equity for children and families experiencing barriers to accessing and thriving in afterschool programs. Without increased investment in staffing, training, and inclusion infrastructure, the OST system will continue to fall short in serving the students who need it most.

Recommendations include creating a more user-friendly, unified registration system, aligning waitlists, and prioritizing preferences for siblings and single parents. Recognizing that some families will still require additional support, the strategy calls for ongoing opportunities for feedback and increased staffing—particularly for frontline positions that support families directly with navigating enrollment processes. Leadership across city departments is committed to ensuring that as more afterschool seats become available, the families who need them most are able to access them. The study also emphasized the importance of improving access for underrepresented caregivers by addressing barriers in the application and enrollment process, such as confusion about deadlines and limited program transparency.

SHARING SPACE

Improve space sharing between CPS schools and OST programs in order to serve more children across the city.

STRATEGIES:

o Create space sharing expectations, agreements, practice, structures, and incentives; designate an individual in each building to coordinate space needs and usage between school and afterschool staff and leadership.
o Foster the "community" aspect of space and establish all school space as shared student space.
o Foster a positive, coordinated, and more integrated working relationship between OST and school teachers.
o Identify additional space for OST programs and expansion.

Secure, stable space is essential for running high-quality OST programs, especially as the system expands to meet growing demand. During the 2023-2024 school year, there were 18 school-based programs across the 12 CPS elementary schools, with at least one after school program in each school. Half of the elementary schools (6) had classrooms that are specifically dedicated for 5-day/week afterschool programs. All of the 18 school-based programs utilized the gym for programming, while 13 programs used the cafeteria. Five programs used the auditorium for afterschool activities. These common spaces were more fully utilized compared to classrooms. The classrooms most commonly shared were specialist classrooms (e.g., art and music classrooms); regular classrooms were the most underutilized space in school buildings.

However, challenges in sharing CPS school facilities—such as miscommunication and disruption—have affected collaboration and program quality. Focus groups with teachers, principals, and OST directors revealed that space-sharing difficulties stemmed from a lack of formalized decision-making processes and inconsistent communication. For example, focus group participants reported scheduling conflicts and lack of notice about room availability. Teachers were generally open to sharing classrooms but emphasized the need for clear expectations and communication. They expressed willingness to share space as long as their needs for preparation and their own afterschool activities were considered. This openness suggests potential to expand afterschool space by using more classrooms. Some teachers also reported maintenance issues and required extra time to clean shared spaces. Successful space sharing was found to be more effective when there was mutual trust, clear

communication, and collaboration. Supportive school leadership and a shared commitment to student outcomes were identified as key factors for smooth space sharing.

To address these issues, the study recommends creating clear, equitable protocols for space-sharing, including assigning a staff member to coordinate logistics, using physical checklists to maintain classrooms, and developing standardized shared agreements for space use and cleaning. System-level strategies include incorporating space-sharing into school equity audits and fostering a culture shift from "mine" to "ours." Building stronger relationships between school and afterschool staff through orientation sessions, regular check-ins, and shared goals will support this shift. These efforts aim to promote collaboration, improve the shared use of space, and ultimately enhance support for students who are served across school and OST systems.

RECOMMENDATION#4:

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Ensure equitable access to and positive experiences in afterschool for students who have special needs.

STRATEGIES:

o Center disability justice and empowerment. Utilize a child-centered model to coordinate care and support across school, afterschool, and home.
o Understand the breadth of "needs" that students with special needs experience and develop programs/policies/partnerships/supports to meet those needs, including communication, data sharing and IEP access.
o Ensure appropriate resources are available to provide adequate support to children with special needs (e.g., lower ratios significantly; ensure adequate staffing; secure appropriate space; design more expansive staffing models).
o Create incentives, requirements, and opportunities to ensure all staff are trained to support children with special needs; CPS and OST coordinate to offer and aligned professional development for staff across both systems.

This study centered on creating safe, supportive afterschool environments, particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds. It surfaced that effectively serving children with special needs is a key challenge at the program and systems level.

Students with special needs face **significant barriers to access**. Caregivers, principals, teachers, and frontline youth workers identified that **programs are often under-equipped**—due to a lack of staff, training, and inclusion specialists—to meet the specific and diverse needs of these children, including those without formal diagnosis. Although 93% of programs report having a policy for supporting students with special needs, frontline staff often lack the specialized training and program support to implement inclusive practices effectively. Some children are denied access or stuck on waitlists for years – due to **insufficient staffing** to provide one-on-one support or a program's **limited ability to provide accommodations** (e.g., administer medication, lack of quiet spaces) – sometimes resulting in families making significant sacrifices (e.g., caregivers leaving jobs).

Stakeholders called for stronger coordination between schools, afterschool programs, and families. Key strategies include adopting a case management approach, sharing essential student information like IEPs and attendance records, hiring coordinators to help families navigate systems, and reviving the Inclusion Advisory Team. Stakeholders also emphasized the need for inclusive policies, infrastructure alignment, and increased staff training in disability support. Reducing student-to-staff ratios and implementing shared staffing and cross-training models were highlighted as essential steps to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all children.

STRONG OST WORKFORCE

Build a stable, professional workforce of frontline youth workers to deliver high quality services and to accommodate additional demand for afterschool programs.

STRATEGIES:

- Improve administrative systems, benefits/pay, and culture/work-life balance to attract and retain staff.
- Build professional pathways and integrated staff development.
- Foster strong partnership between school and afterschool.
- Utilize a shared staffing model to expand access to full-time, benefited status, where appropriate.

Expanding afterschool seats requires a strong, stable workforce of frontline youth workers. However, there are challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. Over two-thirds of OST directors were moderately or very concerned about staffing shortages for the 2024–2025 school year. Overall, the findings showed that frontline youth workers are seeking **better pay, job stability, flexibility,** and, especially for part-time roles, **benefits**. Many struggle with the cost of living and take on multiple jobs or leave the field for better-paying opportunities. Data shows that staff working 30+ hours per week have the lowest turnover, while those working 20–29 hours have the highest. This suggests that workers in the 20-29 hour range may need **more hours for financial stability**. While there is demand for full-time roles, maintaining some part-time positions is important, as some workers prioritize flexibility due to personal circumstances like being students or caregivers.

Youth workers are often drawn to the field by a **passion for working with youth**, **personal community ties**, or alignment with the **mission-driven values** of OST organizations. However, they reported barriers to staying in the field, including a **lack of career pathways**, limited opportunities for advancement, and **low wages that don't reflect their contributions**. Many expressed a desire for more responsibility and leadership roles but felt such positions were scarce and undercompensated.

Many also expressed **feeling their role is undervalued** by members of the school community and that they are not recognized as educators by other teaching and school staff. While the majority of teachers and principals have positive relationships with afterschool staff, there are concerns about variability in program standards and

the professionalism of frontline staff. Some principals observed a need for better training, evidence-based practices, and alignment between school expectations and OST programs, particularly regarding behavior management. Many are open to cross-training and collaboration between OST staff and school teachers to support professional development.

LOOKING FORWARD

The study is not the end, but rather, just the beginning of the work ahead. Over the past year, school and OST partners collaborated to envision a future where all children and families have access to high-quality afterschool programs. Caregivers voiced a strong need for expanded access, and the study identified key barriers to equity. The next phase will focus on removing these barriers by challenging existing structures and practices. It will also necessitate mindset shifts, which start at the individual level and are essential to disrupting systemic inequities. Achieving this vision will require ongoing collaboration, creative problem-solving, and investments at both the system and individual level.

System leaders play a critical role in advancing an equitable OST system by supporting cross-sector collaboration and allocating necessary resources. This includes approving data-sharing agreements, funding joint training, and allowing time for coordinated planning between school and OST leaders. Sustained systems change requires dedicated funding for planning, facilitation, and continued leadership from Agenda for Children OST, which has been central to bridging both systems. Additionally, system-level investments will directly impact the City's ability to close the afterschool access gap and strengthen the OST workforce through improved compensation, benefits, and full-time opportunities.

Successful implementation of the OST expansion will require ongoing commitment from individuals, schools, and programs. Stakeholders prioritized key strategies, with the top vote going to increasing compensation and improving administrative systems to attract and retain frontline youth workers. Other top priorities included creating space-sharing agreements, a coordinated registration system, stronger collaboration between schools and afterschool programs, and partnerships to better serve students with special needs. Continued cross-system convenings will be essential to build these collaborative structures. While system-level investments are critical, small, local actions also play a powerful role in driving change and reflecting community will, laying the groundwork for broader systems transformation.