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# Increasing Opportunities for Alexandria City Youth

**A Community Report**



DECEMBER 2023





## **City of Alexandria, Virginia**

301 King Street, Suite 2300  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

### **Re: 2023 Youth Support Network Landscape Study**

The City of Alexandria is proud of its robust out-of-school time (OST) programs and is committed to supporting its youth and their families.

One of Alexandria City Council's six priorities, established in January 2022, is to support youth and families, and to do so through exploring ways to expand academic, social, and emotional services, and physical support to all youth during out-of-school hours.

Supporting our OST programming is key to reaching that goal.

OST activities bring enormous benefits to our community from increasing school performance; they provide an extracurricular safe place where our youth can explore their potential and, ultimately, life goals.

And we want to build on that to add even more activities – such measures as these help us ensure that young Alexandrians at any age have access to activities commensurate with their needs and interests.

This is an incredible example of private-public collaboration led by strong community engagement.

I want to thank our City and Alexandria City Public Schools staff, volunteer project advisors, partners, parents and guardians, and OST providers for availing us of their experience and expertise in this project submitted to you today.

Most importantly, I am grateful to the nearly 6,000 community members who took time to make this study as expansive and informative as it is.

I look forward to working with the Alexandria community to advance the recommendations laid out in this report.

Sincerely,

Justin M. Wilson  
Mayor

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# Executive Summary

High-quality out-of-school time (OST) programs promote positive youth development and offer a safe space where youth can explore their potential. OST programs are viewed as a valuable resource by community members in the City of Alexandria (City), and this holds true across all populations and grades. However, less than 35 percent of students/families reported being engaged in OST activities in the past twelve months. An opportunity exists to re-imagine how programs are delivered in the City: right-sizing and growing offerings so that all youth in the City have equitable access and engagement in meaningful OST programs and community-based activities.

# What is This Study?

The Youth Support Network - ACT for Alexandria, with financial support from the City of Alexandria and Frank & Betty Wright Foundation, in collaboration with a multitude of stakeholders, commissioned Weber Moore Partners, LLC to conduct a community-wide study.



## The study...

**1**

**Documents and maps the current state of OST and community programming** for K-12 students in the City.

**2**

**Identifies the hopes, needs, and barriers experienced by youth, families and providers** related to OST time activities with a focus on middle and high-school students.

**3**

**Develops recommendations to inform the continued development of the Youth Support Network** and serve as a community-wide call to action about the value and importance of expanded learning programs for children and youth.

This study builds on the commitment of the Alexandria community to prioritize OST activities and the findings of the Alexandria Out-of-School Time—A 2017 Community Report which highlighted a drop off in participation rates as youth entered middle school. This study was conducted over the course of 18 months, utilizing a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques securing insights from 5,785 community members.



Parents and youth identified having fun as the top desired outcome from participating in OST programs, and there is a broad range of desired activities. They are looking for programs that value diversity, cultural sensitivity and meet youth where they are in both interests and location. Providers identified multiple areas where additional support is desired, with a centralized program locator, support coordinating with schools, opportunities for networking, and professional development topping the list.



# Study Key Findings

**1. Many youth do not participate in OST programming.** This is an untapped market and opportunity.

**2. A culture shift in how we design opportunities and communicate about them** is needed to make youth-informed programming a priority.

**3. One size does not fit all** – families and youth want inclusive, accessible, diverse and age-appropriate programming.

**4. A potentially inequitable geographic distribution** of OST activities needs to be further explored.

**5. A coordinated, community-based approach** is needed to support a robust OST environment.

**6. Better communication and promotion of programs is a must.** How activities are described needs to match audience needs and wants.

**7. Professional development/training and technical assistance** would support providers in program delivery that meets consumer needs and demands.



## Six Implementation Priorities



**1. Create a way to capture and share information.**



**2. Advance robust professional development/training opportunities for OST staff.**



**3. Develop a comprehensive communication plan.**



**4. Grow diversity of programs and activities.**



**5. Expand community-based partnerships.**



**6. Implement supportive policies.**



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# 1 Introduction

Communities are increasingly looking to out-of-school time (OST) activities to support young people's overall health and development. Youth in the U.S. on average **spend 80-percent** of their waking hours outside of school, and many young people are alone after the school day ends. High-quality OST programs promote positive youth development and offer a safe space where youth can explore their potential.

Effective OST programming brings a wide range of benefits to youth, families, and communities. OST activities can support social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, reduce risky behaviors, promote physical health, connect youth to supportive adults and mentors, build life skills, connect youth to enrichment activities, and provide a safe and supportive environment for children and youth.

OST programs also provide a **significant return-on-investment**, with every \$1 invested saving at least \$3, through increasing youth's earning potential, improving their performance at school, and reducing crime and juvenile delinquency.

The **Youth Support Network - ACT for Alexandria**, with financial support from the City of Alexandria (City) and Frank & Betty Wright Foundation, commissioned **Weber Moore Partners, LLC** to conduct a community-wide landscape study to:

- 1 Document and map the current state of OST and community programming** for K-12 students in the City.
- 2 Identify the hopes, needs, and barriers experienced by youth, families and providers** related to OST activities with a focus on middle and high-school students.
- 3 Develops recommendations to inform the continued development of the Youth Support Network** and serve as a community-wide call to action about the value and importance of expanded learning programs for children and youth.

## What is OST?

OST programs are supervised activities for youth in grades K-12 that take place before or after school, on weekends, during summer, or during school when class is not in session. They are offered in school buildings and other locations in the community outside of school and are provided by both ACPS and over 100 non-ACPS community-based organizations. They provide opportunities for youth to learn, explore, grow and connect to valuable resources and social opportunities.



Working with a strong cadre of committed community partners and stakeholders (Appendix B), the study included a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques and analysis to advance this work. The analysis included the collection of information from 5,785 community members who participated in the study.

## Key Factors Driving the Study:

### Grounding in a consumer-based model.

OST programs and community-based activities are commodities: products that people purchase. This study employed a social marketing model<sup>1</sup> to focus on consumer orientation to better understand what community members currently know, believe, do and desire to inform the delivery and promotion of OST programs in the future.

### Engaging youth in the study.

A youth involvement approach can benefit organizations and their programs as well as the youth themselves. Programs developed in partnership with youth are more likely to be effective at engaging the population and, therefore, to have a greater impact.

### Embracing a racial equity and social justice lens.

This study focused on ensuring racial and ethnic groups that are historically disenfranchised were represented and involved throughout the entire process.

### Inclusionary practices.

About 10% of students receive special education services in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). Inclusion means supporting programs and services where all children feel welcome and valued. Inclusion is an attitude and practice that makes it possible for every person, regardless of ability or background, to participate meaningfully. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that youth with disabilities have access to OST programs.



<sup>1</sup> Social marketing is a “process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate and deliver value to influence target audience behaviors that benefit society (public health, safety, the environment, and communities) as well as the target audience.”

# A Focus on Middle School Youth

Middle school years are a crucial development period for youth in which they form behaviors and practices that affect their future. OST activities can provide multiple benefits on academic and social development that help these youth navigate adolescent years preparing them for success. They can provide safe places to have fun, be engaged and learn.

However, communities across the country tend to see declines in OST participation after elementary school. This holds true in Alexandria. **Several reasons have been identified** for lower rates of participation including those stemming from poverty/financial barriers, lack of awareness about OST programs, concerns about safety in traveling to programs, lack of connection with adults engaged in the programs, and negative perception or stigma and perceptions that OST programs are an activity for younger children.

**Middle schoolers are also more autonomous** and less interested in taking part in adult-supervised activities outside of the school day. They prefer to spend time with friends and are less likely to participate in programs if their peers are not involved or do not support their participation. In order to deliver OST activities that teens and tweens will embrace; youth need to be at the design table. Lastly, there are simply fewer activity offerings for this age group.





# A Multi-Year Commitment

Many stakeholders have been working to advance OST efforts in the City of Alexandria.

**2015**

Alexandria City Council and School Board Joint Commission **established an Out-of-School Time Programs (OSTP)<sup>2</sup> Work Group.**

**2017**

**ACPS secured funding from the 21st Century Learning Center grant program to establish the first LINK club,** designed as a high-quality afterschool program with an emphasis on academic achievement support and opportunity for high-need, low-income students at no cost to families. The program was created based on OSTP Work Group findings and to address the goals of the City's Children and Youth Master Plan and ACPS 2020 Strategic Plan.

**2022**

**Alexandria City Council adopted "Supporting Youth and Families" as one of their six priorities for 2023** with the goal of exploring ways to expand academic, social and emotional services and physical support to all youth during out-of-school hours.

**2015 – 2017**

OSTP Work Group administered a program survey completed by 22 service providers and surveyed Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) K-12 families to **assess parent/community needs and preferences, developed recommendations and explored fiscal implications.** Alexandria Out-of-School Time: A 2017 Community Report was released.

**2020**

ACT for Alexandria partnered with the Frank & Betty Wright Foundation, ACPS, the City, youth-serving community organizations, and other stakeholders to **support the ACPS Virtual PLUS+ vision for supportive programs and services.** The Youth Support Network was established through this collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> OSTP, out-of-school-programs, is an acronym that has been used in previous documentation.



## 2023

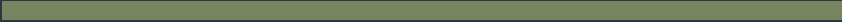
**ACPS International Academy students conducted a survey** with 9th - 12th graders to support Alexandria City Recreation and Parks in identifying strategies to increase the number of teenagers who participate in the recreation centers.

**The City of Alexandria released, Youth Safety and Resilience Initiative: Focus Group Analysis and Suggested Recommendations**, as part of its efforts to foster safe and resilient youth.

## 2022

The Youth Support Network with financial support from the Frank & Betty Wright Foundation and the City of Alexandria, engaged Weber Moore Partners, LLC to **conduct an independent community wide landscape study to document the current state of OST and community programming for K-12 students in Alexandria and identify recommendations** for future support to ensure all youth have equitable access to OST activities.





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# 2 Program Landscape Findings

The program landscape documented and mapped the state of OST and community programming for K-12 students in the City in February - March of 2023. It included information about OST programs and activities, including location, population served, hours and times of program, enrollment and program content.

# A Snapshot of OST and Community Programming in 2023

Information was gathered from OST providers via an on-line survey. There were **128 responses**, providing data for about 177 programs offered at 200 locations and 15 programs that were virtual or had variable locations.



## Audience Served

**More programs serve younger students.**

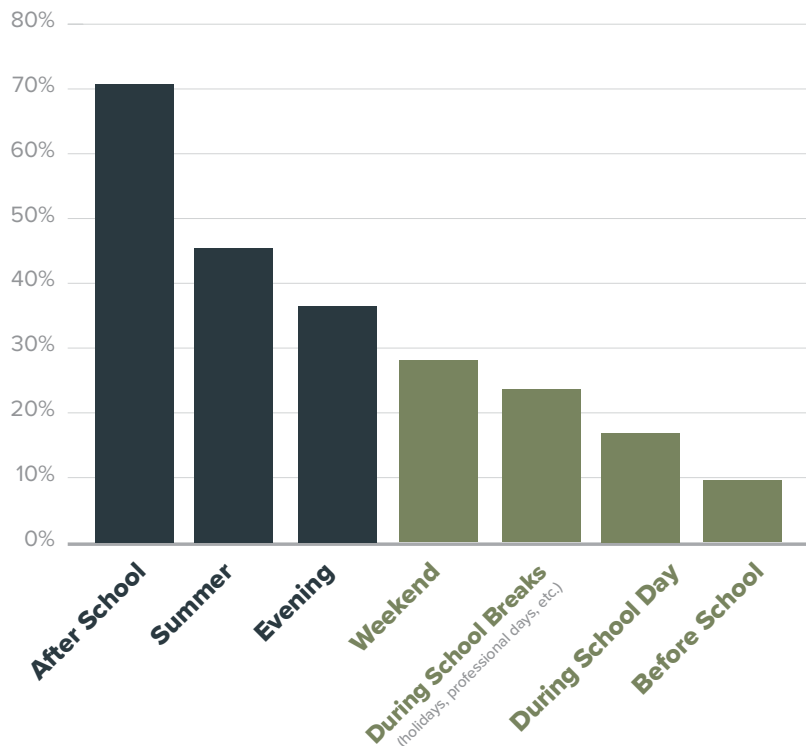
- 70% of OST providers served elementary students.
- About half served middle and high school students.

## Program Hours and Timing

**Most programs (70%) were offered after school.**

- Other program times included before school, evenings and weekends (see Figure 1).
- Programs were offered daily (21%), 2 to 4 days per week (24%) or 1 day per week (24%). Other programs met monthly or as needed.

Figure 1 Time Program is Offered



## Enrollment

**Smaller programs were more common.**

- 35% of programs had enrollment of less than 20 participants and 29% had enrollment between 21-50 participants.
- Only 5% of programs had more than 150 participants and about half of all programs were at capacity.

## Program Fees

**Both fee-based and free OST activities are available.**

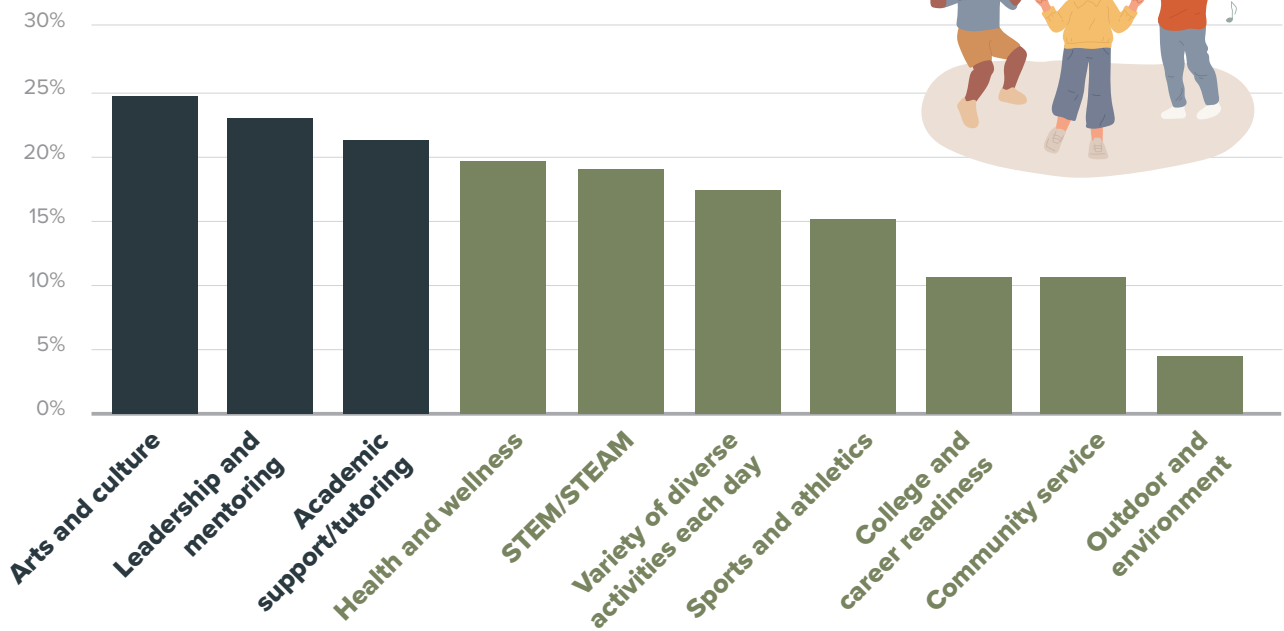
- There are both fee-based and free OST activities available, with some programs having both options available and some programs offering financial aid.
- How financial aid is administered and accessed needs more exploration.

## Program Content

**The most common activities offered were arts and culture, leadership and mentoring, and academic support/tutoring.**

The offerings (see Figure 2) are somewhat different from what families have noted as most desirable (see Figure 5).

Figure 2 Top Two Areas of Program Focus



# Accommodations for Youth with Disabilities

**Most programs offered some level of accommodation for youth with disabilities.**

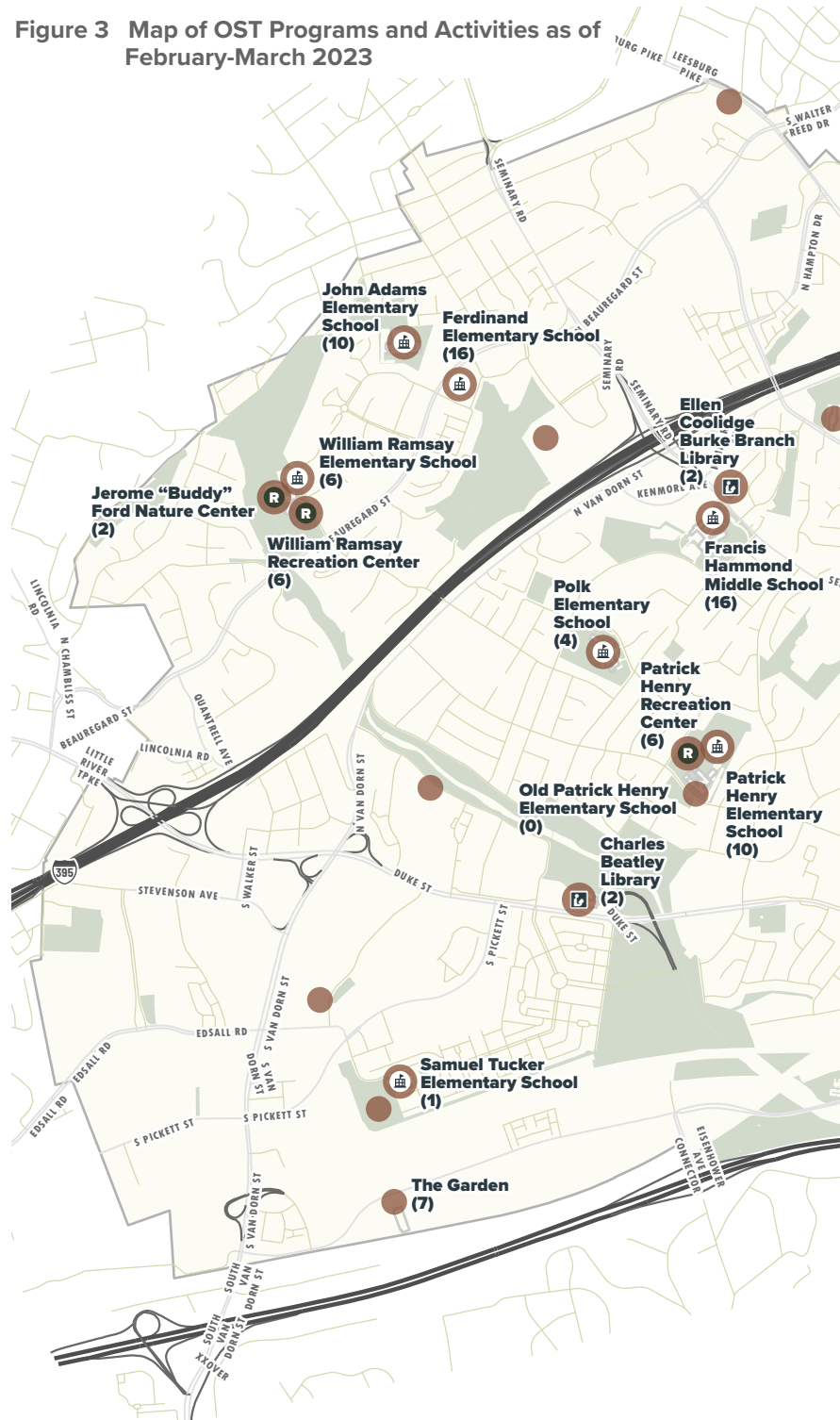
- Almost three-quarters (70%) of programs reported offering accommodations for youth with disabilities.
- Accommodations provided were an inclusion-based philosophy (77%), enhanced staff supervision (18%), program adaptations by trained professionals (15%), and therapeutic programs specifically designed to support students with disabilities (6%).

## Program Locations

**Programs clustered at schools and recreation centers**

- Programs tend to be clustered at schools and recreation centers, with fewer programs offered in the West End<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 3).

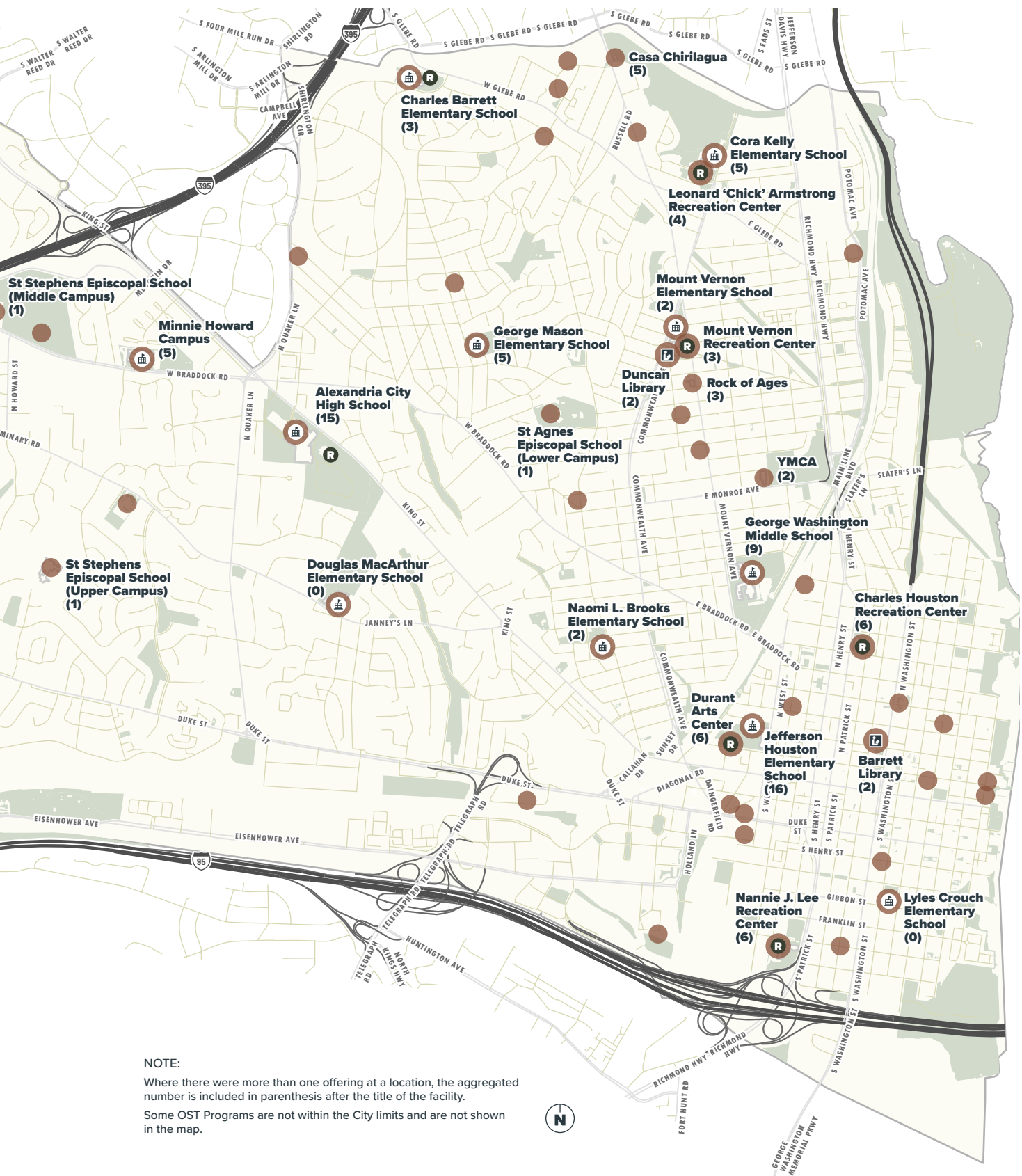
Figure 3 Map of OST Programs and Activities as of February-March 2023



**LEGEND**

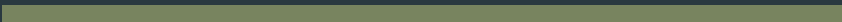
- Out of School Time Programs
- 🏫 School
- Ⓜ Recreation Center
- 📖 Libraries

<sup>2</sup> The West End borders both Fairfax and Arlington and includes the Beaugard, Landmark and Van Dorn neighborhoods, along with other smaller communities.



**NOTE:**  
 Where there were more than one offering at a location, the aggregated number is included in parenthesis after the title of the facility.  
 Some OST Programs are not within the City limits and are not shown in the map.







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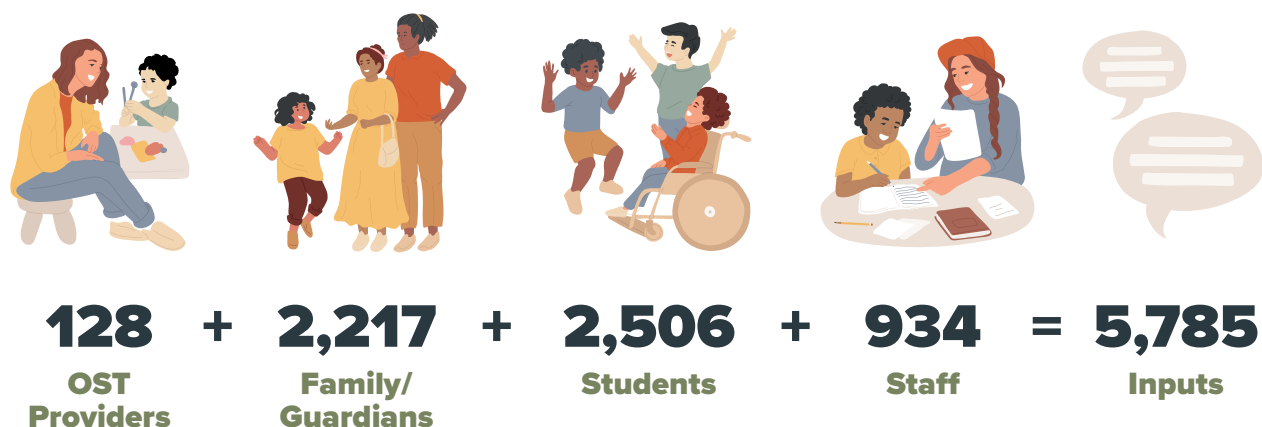
# 3 Program Analysis Findings

The program analysis was conducted using a mix of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (listening sessions) methods to better understand consumers' (parents, guardians, ACPS staff and middle and high school youth) knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and experiences about OST programs and activities.

# Learning from Families and Youth

A series of OST questions were included in the 2023 ACPS Equity Climate Survey. These were further explored via a series of family and youth listening sessions with a focus on reaching community members that are historically disenfranchised. In total, 5,785 community members provided input to this exploration.

Figure 4 Input Totals



## Participation Rates

**About one-third of students participate in OST activities.**

- Participation is highest in elementary students (46%) and starts declining in middle school (30%) and is lowest in high school (26%).
- Participation is also highest in White students (42%) and lowest with Middle Eastern or North African (17%).

## Programs of Interest

**Youths have access to programs that are of interest.**

- 27% completely agreed and 43% somewhat agreed that youth have access to OST programs that are of interest to them.
- Youth in High School want to participate in activities that are adult supported, not adult led.

# Life Success

## OST programs help youth succeed in life.

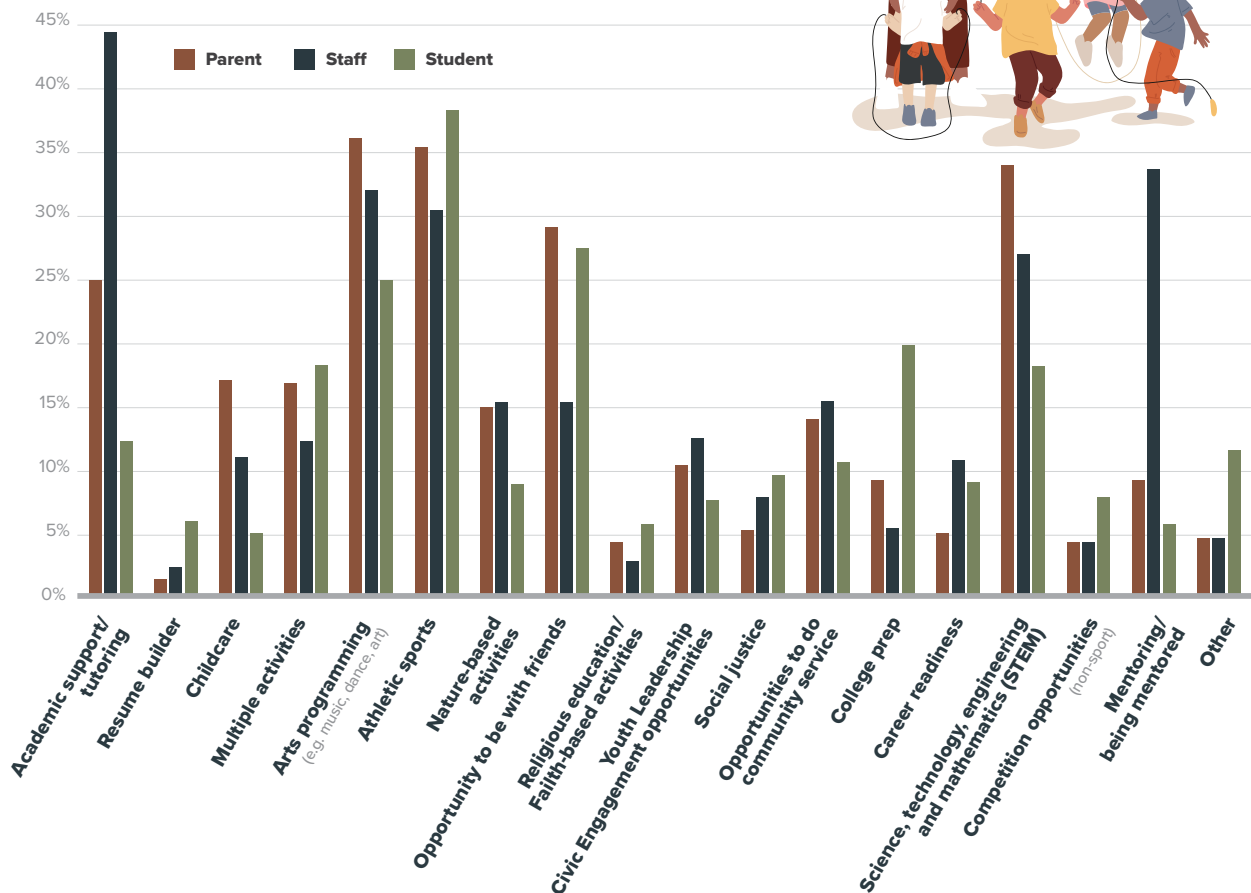
- Most respondents (85%) agreed that OST can help students succeed in life.

# Activities Desired

## Parents, staff and students have different perspectives of needs and wants for programming.

- Parents/guardians value childcare benefits for elementary school students. The term out-of-school time is strongly associated with childcare for these families.
- Parents and students identified athletics/sports and opportunities to be with friends as top desires, compared to academic support/tutoring and mentoring as top priorities among staff and providers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Top Three Activities Wanted in OST Programs

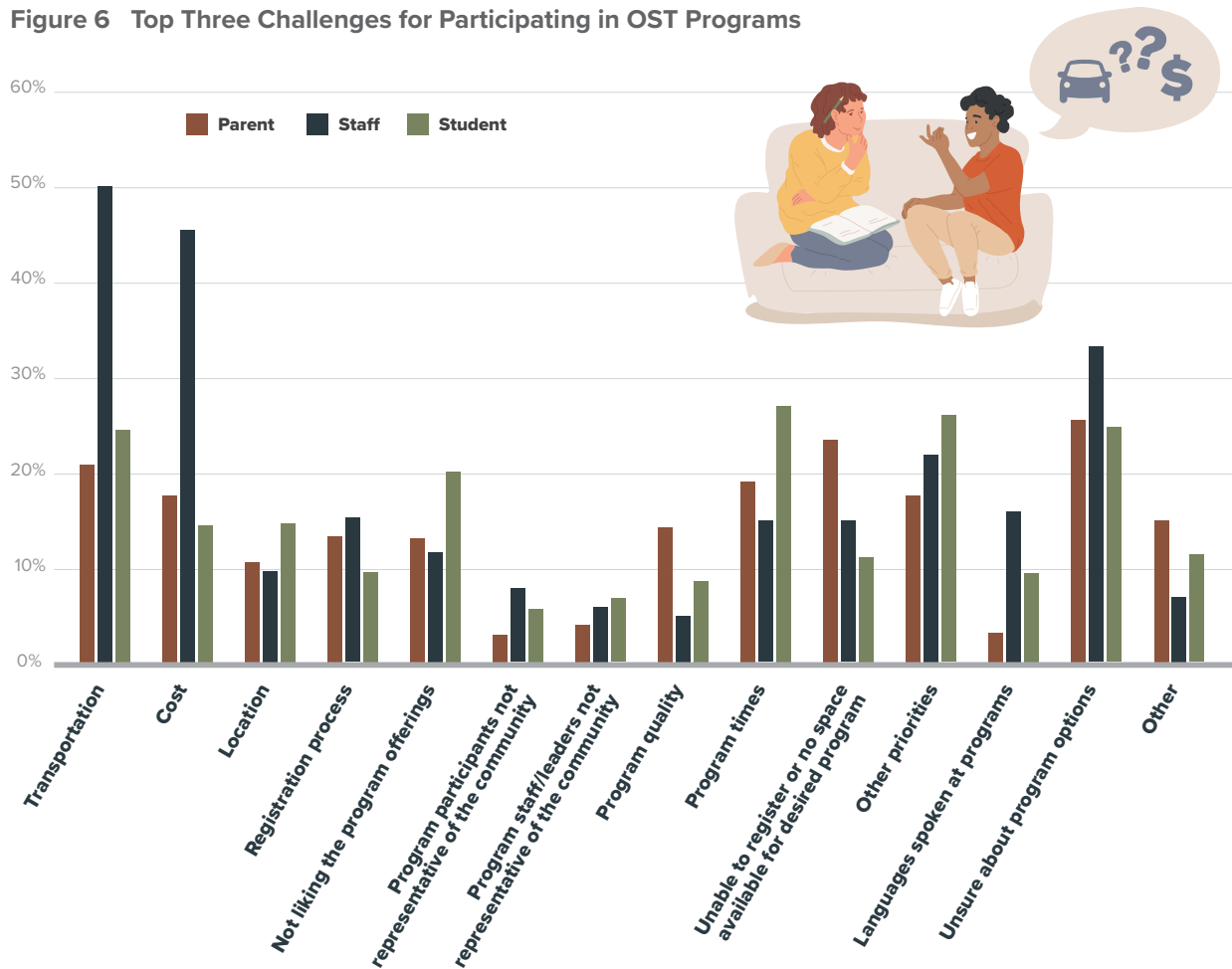


# Challenges to Participating

**Top barriers and challenges to participation include not knowing about program offerings, transportation, and cost, but varied by audience.**

- The need for unified transparency about program availability was flagged as a high priority across all family listening sessions.
- Students and families from historically marginalized communities do not feel welcome – they feel stigmatized.
- For those that cannot afford the fees and do not qualify for free/reduced programs, cost can be an issue.

**Figure 6 Top Three Challenges for Participating in OST Programs**

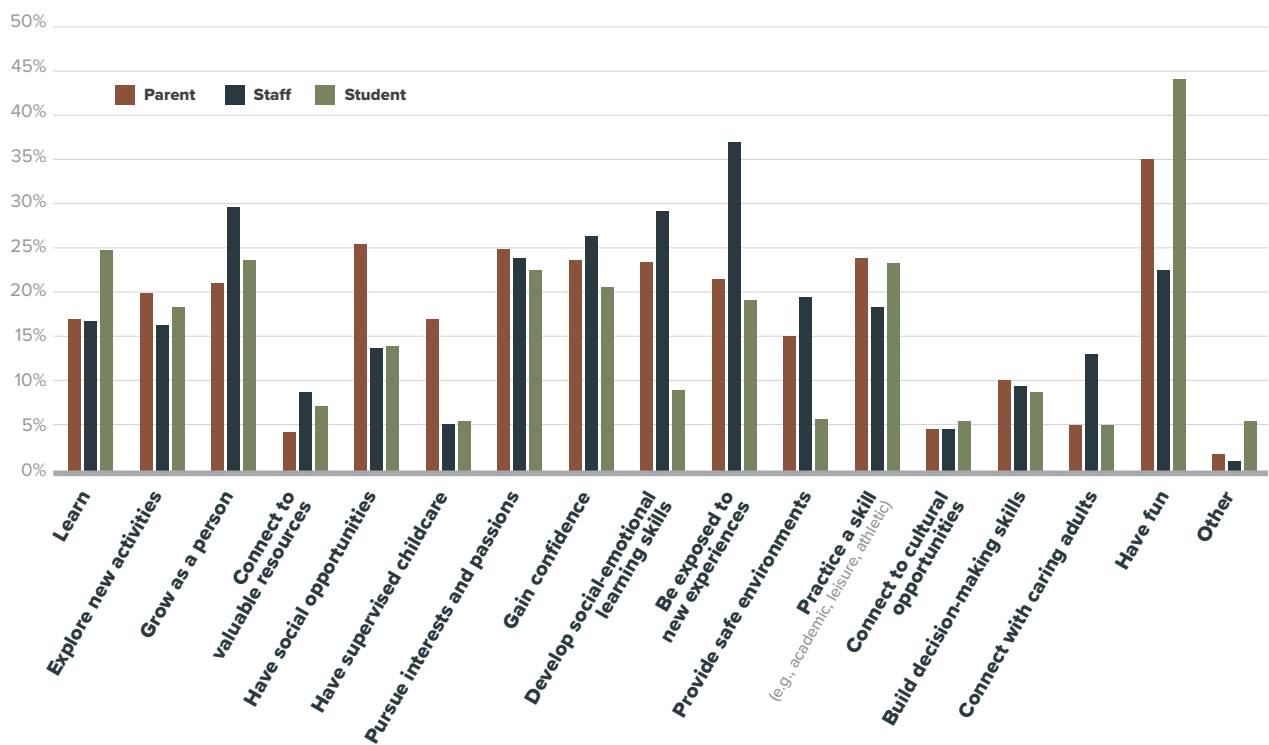


# Desired Outcomes for Participation

## Parents, staff and students have different desired outcomes.

- Parents/guardians and students want OST programs to be fun. Staff rated being exposed to new opportunities as the top priority (see Figure 7).
- Middle school and high schoolers place high value on being with friends. Teenagers value being with friends over specific activities.

Figure 7 Outcomes You Hope Result from Participating in OST Programs



## Other Findings

### Staff professional development/training was highlighted as a key need from both providers and families/guardians.

- Families want positive, supportive, inclusive programming. Training areas of note include inclusive practices (supporting those students with 504s, IEPs as well as racial and ethnic diversity), supporting students' social emotional needs, addressing behavioral issues and engaging families.

# Community Feedback about Locations

Community members noted that there are geographic gaps in OST offerings and opportunities to provide activities in additional locations. These are ideas that need further exploration.



Figure 8 Map of Community Member Ideas on Geographically Expanding OST activities: Collected during October 2023 Community Forum



**LEGEND**

- Out of School Time Programs
- School
- Recreation Center
- Libraries

**NOTE:**  
 Many out of School Time Programs are not within the City limits and are not shown in the map.



# Audience Specific Nuances

## Youth with disabilities

have one of the lowest participation rates across groups at 28%. Lack of space at programs was a top barrier to participation as well as a lack of inclusion opportunities, accommodations and disability specific programming.

## Spanish-speaking families

would like more information about when and where to apply for programs and help in completing applications. Having affordable programs is an important consideration for this group. They tended not to be connected to ACPS communication channels and rely on texts, Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

## Amharic-speaking families

highlighted the main barrier as lack of information about programs. Their perception was that OST programs are for young kids, not middle school and high school students and do not have educational value. They would value activities such as tutoring, sports activities, cultural learning and programming for parents.

## Dari-speaking families

highlighted that receiving information from trusted sources was important, with the school system being a trusted source. There was a desire to have programs focus on academics and the main barrier to participation is the time burden of getting kids to activities.

## Black, non-immigrant families

noted that staff professional development/training is needed on DEI, racism, and positive behavioral supports. They noted vast program inequities between Title 1 and other schools, with Title 1 schools offering more variety and options. There was a desire to focus programming on life skills including the introduction and sampling of new activities. The cost of programs is out of reach for many families.

## Homeschool families

were looking for athletics, nature-based and STEM activities. They also prioritized having fun as a top outcome, along with exploring new activities. Not knowing about OST program options was the top barrier to youth participation.



# Older Youth have a Unique Perspective

Study findings, consistent with academic research, highlighted that middle school and high schoolers have their own unique perspectives about OST activities which are often different from their parents/guardians or school staff. They are more independent than their younger counterparts and indicated they want to spend time with friends (see Figure 9). They expressed that they are less likely to participate in programs if their peers are not involved or do not support their participation. Their focus was on either considerations like making money and needing mental breaks from the classroom or on ways to learn in casual settings with friends (see Figures 10 and 11).



## Activities Desired

**Middle and high schoolers place the highest value on opportunities to be with friends, athletics/sports, and arts programming.**

Figure 9 Top 3 Activity Choices as Selected by Middle School and High School Youth

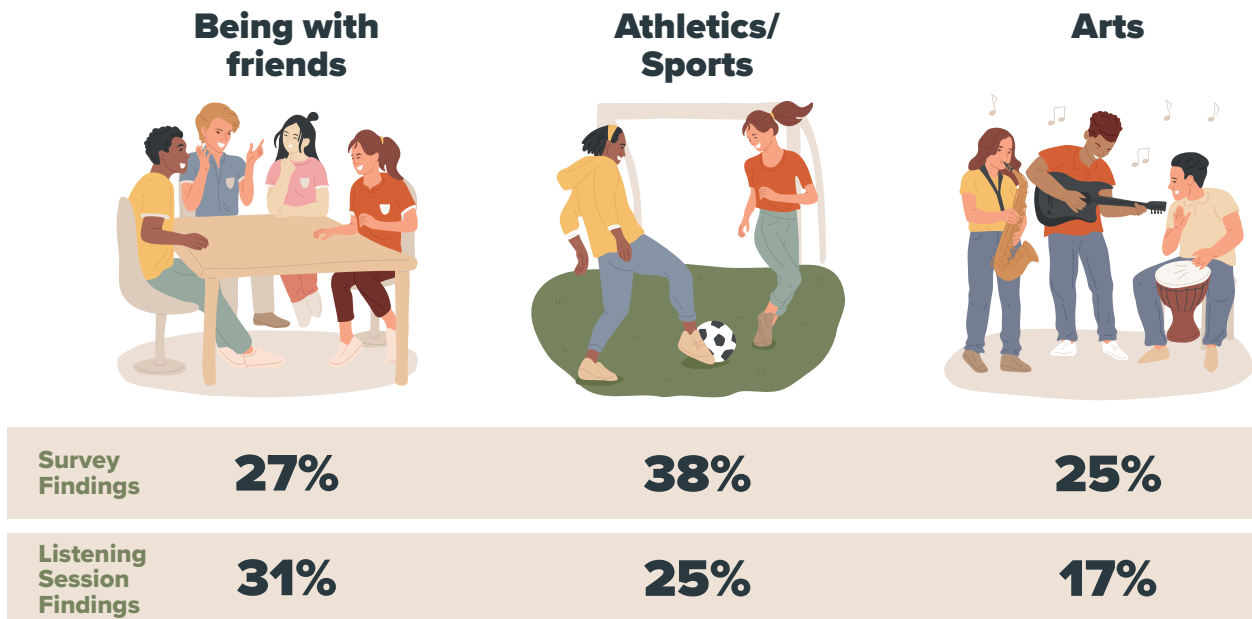


Figure 10 Youth Dream Big Activity: If You Had a Magic Wand, How Would You Design OST Activities - Activities and Benefits

**Interested Activities**



**Potential Motivators**



## Many Challenges Facing Older Youth

**Older youth identified several challenges to participating in OST activities.**

- Program times (27%), other priorities (26%), unsure about program options (25%), transportation (25%), and not liking the program offerings (20%), were the top cited items (see Figure 6).

## Desired Outcomes for Participation

**Having fun is the most desired outcome for participation among older youth**

- Having fun (44%), growing as a person (23%), practicing a new skill (23%), and pursuing interests and passions (22%) were priorities for youth (see Figure 7).



## Language Matters

### **Social-emotional- learning (SEL)**

should be considered a verb, not a noun, integrated into programming. Consumers consider it an important aspect, but not a stand-alone component.

**The term out-of-school time is closely associated directly with childcare for many families.** When promoting programs and activities for older youth, alternative language should be considered.



Figure 11 A Selection of Value Cards Projecting Preferred OST Activities for Listening Session Participants



# OST Program Providers

Support is needed to maintain existing programs. Financial resources, staffing and community partnerships were top resource needs identified to help existing programs succeed.



## Provider Needs

**Support is needed to expand OST activities for Middle School students.**

- Financial and staffing support were identified as needs to expand programming to middle schoolers, followed by staff professional development/ training and a better understanding of the needs of this age group.
- Opportunities for the Youth Support Network to support expanded middle school offerings included coordinated communications, provider professional education/ training and strengthening relationships with ACPS and the community.
- Providers are looking for professional development/trainings that enhance OST programs. Training on supporting students' social emotional needs, addressing behavioral issues and engaging families were identified as top areas of interest.

## Challenges to Engaging Youth

**Barriers to engaging youth in current OST programs varied by age with some being different than those identified by family members.**

- Transportation and space availability were identified as barriers to engaging more elementary school youth.
- Getting information to families was a top barrier to engaging middle school youth, identified by 45% of respondents.
- Finances, transportation and connecting with families were identified as barriers to reaching high schoolers.

## Provider Interests for Resources

**Providers are looking for a coordinating entity.**

- Coordination of programming with schools and building a central community program locator were top resources of interest.
- Providing professional development, networking opportunities and facilitating program collaboration and innovation were also of interest.
- Over 75% of OST providers expressed interest in a data system to help with connecting with families, managing registration, and supporting staff training.



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# 4 Recommendations

Out-of-school time programs are viewed as a valuable resource in the City of Alexandria, and this holds true across all populations and grades. However, less than 35 percent of students/families reported being engaged in out-of-school time activities in the past twelve months.

An opportunity exists to re-imagine how programs are delivered in the City: right-sizing and growing offerings so that all youth in the city of Alexandria have equitable access and engagement in meaningful OST programs and community-based activities.

**Parents and youth identify having fun as the top desired outcome from participating in OST programs, and there is a broad range of desired activities.**

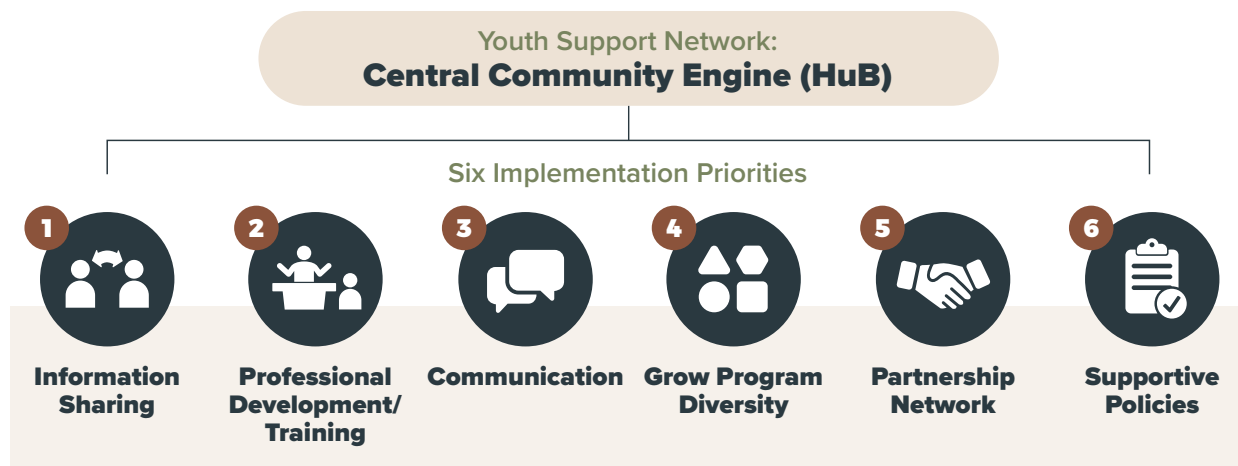
They are looking for programs that value diversity, cultural sensitivity and meet youth where they are in both interests and location. Providers identified multiple areas where additional support is desired, with a centralized program locator, support coordinating with schools, opportunities for networking opportunities, and professional development topping the list.



**OST stakeholders in the City should continue to build on their strong foundation of community partnerships while building a sustainable systems approach to out-of-school time programming that is youth-informed and offers a diversity of activities that are accessible and available to all youth.**

Evolving the Youth Support Network’s role and responsibilities to serve as the central community engine (HuB) supporting a robust OST environment connecting youth and families to fun, rewarding, and enriching community activities while supporting providers in delivering inclusive, diverse programs for all youth in the City of Alexandria should be prioritized. The HuB function can provide coordination and technical support for the OST community across the following six implementation priorities.

Figure 12 Youth Support Network Role







# Implementation Priorities

1



## **Create a way to capture and share information.**

Develop a central data system that includes features for both families and providers. A key feature would be a program locator that enables providers to showcase their programs and community members to access information on programs. Other features for providers could include managing registration, communicating with families and supporting staff professional development/training.

2



## **Advance robust professional development/training opportunities for out-of-school time staff.**

Ensure staff and volunteers have the training and support they need to meet the needs of a diverse population. Core training competencies include supporting students' social emotional needs, addressing behavioral issues, developing cultural competency and supporting racial diversity and students with IEPs and 504 plans.

3



## **Develop a comprehensive communication plan.**

Convey the wide variety of programs and activities that are available in a way that reaches all community members in terms they understand and can connect with. Create audience tailored communication strategies utilizing appropriate messages, messengers and communication channels.

4



**Grow diversity of programs and activities.**

Ensure that all middle school and high school youth have access to diverse OST activities that are accessible, affordable and youth informed. Start with the middle school population to address the drop off in participation that occurs after elementary school. Work with community partners and modify existing or develop new pilot options that are youth informed. Establish a systematic plan with youth and provider feedback loops for increasing capacity first with middle school students then high school while optimizing participation and satisfaction.

5



**Expand community-based partnerships.**

Continue to align resources and leverage existing and new partners in the community to ensure all youth have access to diverse opportunities. Dedicate staff support to intentionally engage untapped partners such as those in the business community, through collaborative planning and open communications. There are untapped connections which may provide opportunities for expanding youth-inspired activities.

6



**Implement supportive policies.**

Identify policies and systematic support that will help to right-size existing OST program capacity and meet community needs, while also building capacity to expand program offerings. Public policy determines what services will be provided to residents and the level of those services. Organizational policies provide guidance, clarity, consistency, accountability and efficiency. Supportive policies include expanding the current definition and scope of out-of-school time, creating a shared community goal to ensure all youth have access to OST activities, establishing a culture of inclusionary practices, committing to shared use policies, exploring new funding opportunities and pathways and committing to a systems approach to provide robust staff professional development/training.

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