

Expanding Access to Quality, Affordable Programs

Out of School Time in Dallas



Classrooms are not the only places that kids learn, and academic learning is not the only learning that students have lost because of the pandemic. More than 80% of Texas students' time is spent learning **outside of school**. High-quality out of school time (OST), which includes afterschool, summer, and enrichment programs, provides applied learning opportunities that help kids develop critical social and emotional skills as well as nurturing peer and mentor relationships that accelerate academic learning and prepare youth for postsecondary success.

OST is a critical component of the functioning ecosystem of support necessary for whole child development and whole communities. Community-based providers have been essential during the pandemic, standing up additional health and safety measures to continue offering in-person care and learning while also connecting families to critical services and resources, such as food, technology, and healthcare. Strong partnerships between schools and these community-based organizations are vital to our state's successful recovery.

Dallas Afterschool works to ensure that all children—regardless of where they live, where they go to school, or how much money their families have—can enjoy high-quality, affordable out of school time experiences. The organization provides support, training, and resources for 35 nonprofits and agencies operating OST programs at 150 locations in the Dallas area.

Reaching Youth Who Need Out of School Time Programs the Most

Dallas Afterschool's program partners serve roughly 12,000 children, most of whom are elementary school students from families with low income. Access to afterschool programs in Dallas is challenging due to cost and availability, leading to high unmet demand—for every child in an afterschool program in Dallas, three are waiting to get in. Christina Hanger, CEO of Dallas Afterschool, says the average cost of afterschool programming in Dallas is \$120 a week, which is 40% higher than the statewide average.

Access to high-quality OST programming is even more important now, given the unfinished learning needs that educators must address more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfinished learning is not due solely to having remote versus in-person education, Hanger says. An unknown number of children have not attended school regularly either in person or online since quarantine started in March 2020.

“Out of school time is where the kids are,” Hanger says. “We can help schools find those kids. What out of school time does really well is get kids excited about learning, which is exactly what's needed right now. If we can use out of school time to help kids deal with trauma and grief and loss, they're going to be so much better prepared to learn.”

Focusing on Nonprofit Providers and Low-Income Communities

Dallas Afterschool launched in 2007 as the Dallas Afterschool Network, a small organization serving both for-profit and nonprofit OST providers, mainly by offering large professional trainings. About eight years ago, the network shortened its name to simply Dallas Afterschool and switched gears to primarily support nonprofit OST providers and those in lower-income communities with a focus on capacity building, quality, advocacy, and sustainability.



Dallas Afterschool operates a certification program that includes on-site assessments for quality and safety, followed by coaching frontline OST staff and site directors to improve quality. It also offers trainings, technical assistance, and a host of tools and resources, including an online resource portal for OST professionals that launched just before the pandemic. The online portal has proved popular, recording more than 15,000 downloads in its first nine months for resources like lesson plans, curricula, quality improvement tools, and on-demand trainings.

Advocacy takes place mainly at the local level. During the 2019-2020 academic year, Dallas Afterschool mobilized more than 300 citizen advocates and worked to secure nearly \$2 million in public funding for youth programming that helped add 1,400 afterschool seats in underserved neighborhoods.

Providing Support in Times of Crisis

And then COVID-19 struck. Dallas Afterschool went remote immediately, while most program partners were forced to shut down for at least a couple of months. “We listened to what our partners wanted and needed,” Hanger says.

All training switched to virtual, addressing topics like how to run virtual OST programs, dealing with cyber-bullying, how to keep kids safe during the pandemic, and even how to develop a banking relationship and apply for the Payroll Protection Program. The network also offered monthly sessions on social and emotional learning, coaching OST staff for leadership, and racial healing. At a provider roundtable, participants exchanged new ideas and best practices, like how to get kids to socially distance by teaching them “airplane arms” with their arms spread out like airplane wings.

During the pandemic, Dallas Afterschool has played a critical role in providing up-to-date and credible information to its program partners, fielding questions about navigating safety challenges and new laws, accessing funding, connecting families with food sources, and addressing kids’ emotional and mental health. It also posts the latest COVID-19 information and guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state, and other sources on its online portal.

The pandemic, Hanger says, “positioned our organization in a different way with our providers. We increased our reach and became more of a collaborative resource to site directors.”

Recovery and Beyond

More challenges lie ahead. Hanger notes that Dallas Afterschool has done a lot of literacy work with programs serving children in kindergarten through third grade, and she wants to apply that approach to addressing unfinished learning. “We’ve had the most success hiring literacy tutors, training them in our curriculum, and then deploying them in summer programs.” The next step, she says, will be to place the tutors in afterschool programs.

Hanger says Dallas Afterschool and its program partners are ready to help children return to school and do well—not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. “Let’s help our schools find the kids who did not attend school virtually this year. Let’s get them used to coming to school again. Let’s get them excited about learning and let’s make it fun.”

Heart House Provides a Safe Space for Refugee and Immigrant Children in Dallas

Heart House is an education nonprofit serving refugee and immigrant children in Dallas' Vickery Meadow neighborhood with holistic out of school time programming rooted in social and emotional learning. As a program partner with Dallas Afterschool, it works to help these children, who have already been through so much, thrive in their new communities.

At Heart House, children have a safe place to learn, play, and be nurtured. Many of these children have experienced trauma—from the trauma of immigrating to a new country and learning a new language to the trauma of witnessing war or living in poverty. With their parents' permission, kids enrolled in Heart House have access to individual counseling through the Center for Survivors of Torture, a longstanding partner of Heart House.

"We try to meet our students where they are," says Liz Curfman, Senior Director of Program and Community Engagement at Heart House. "We provide individualized, culturally competent, and trauma-informed care."

Heart House provides a range of programming—what it calls "head, heart, and hands"—that covers academic support, mental and emotional health support, and hands-on project-based learning, like growing a garden to study the life cycle of plants.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the program served about 75 children, from kindergarten through eighth grade. Currently, it serves about 50. Together, these children represent cultures that speak several different languages—from Spanish to Burmese to Swahili.

When the pandemic began, Heart House suspended operations for about two weeks to pivot its programming to online. It loaned computer tablets to families whose children needed them for remote learning, delivered learning kits to children, helped them with their homework, and connected families to resources like food and rental assistance.

A Day at Heart House

Heart House returned fully to in-person programming in spring 2021. On a typical afternoon, elementary school students begin arriving at the apartment complex where Heart House is located at 3:15 p.m., with middle schoolers getting there around 4:30 p.m. Recess is the first order of business: 30 to 45 minutes for kids to unwind after a full



day of school. They then get an afterschool meal, followed by a transition period of mindful breathing to calm and center themselves.

Lessons might focus on reading or STEM or arts and crafts. Brain science is a way for kids to learn about their emotions—what they are, why they have them, and how their brains regulate them.

“Learning about the brain helps them build self-awareness,” Curfman says. “So they know, for example, that when they feel angry or sad, they should go to the Mindful Corner to take a moment for themselves until they’re ready to join their classmates.”

The last activity of the day is the gratitude circle, when children reflect on what they are thankful for, what they’ve done that day, and how they feel they did.

Summer programming is about exploration—exploring nature, how to make healthy food choices, or even how to run a lemonade stand. In a summer unit on homelessness, kids created hygiene kits for people who lacked housing.

Heart House CEO Tori Hobbs says it’s all about creating equity.

“On one side of the highway here, you have families who live in beautiful homes, and every child has their own phone and tablet and computer. They have everything they could possibly need,” Hobbs says. “The children on this side of the highway have none of that. We’re trying to bridge that gap.”







“ My favorite thing about Heart House this year is when we did Lemonade Day because I feel like we learned a lot and also each one of us faced our fear, like doing a presentation or attracting customers.”

– Seventh-grade boy



The Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST) is a statewide intermediary whose mission is to convene, educate, and advocate to improve the quality and increase the availability of out of school time (OST) opportunities for Texas youth. TXPOST works in partnership with vital leaders at local and regional levels, including Dallas Afterschool, which invest deeply in their own communities to offer professional development opportunities, engage in system building work, advocate for the OST field, and support local programs.




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Dallas Afterschool is a nonprofit organization leading the charge to help working families and level the playing field for children of all races and economic backgrounds by increasing the quality and availability of out-of-school time programming in Dallas County. Dallas Afterschool provides vital support, training, and resources to afterschool providers and helps parents find afterschool programs that meet their needs. More information is available at www.dallasafterschool.org.

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