

Lessons From the Sector: Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities for Michigan's Out-of-School Time Programs

A summary of regional listening sessions with out-of-school time providers and advocates | August 2023





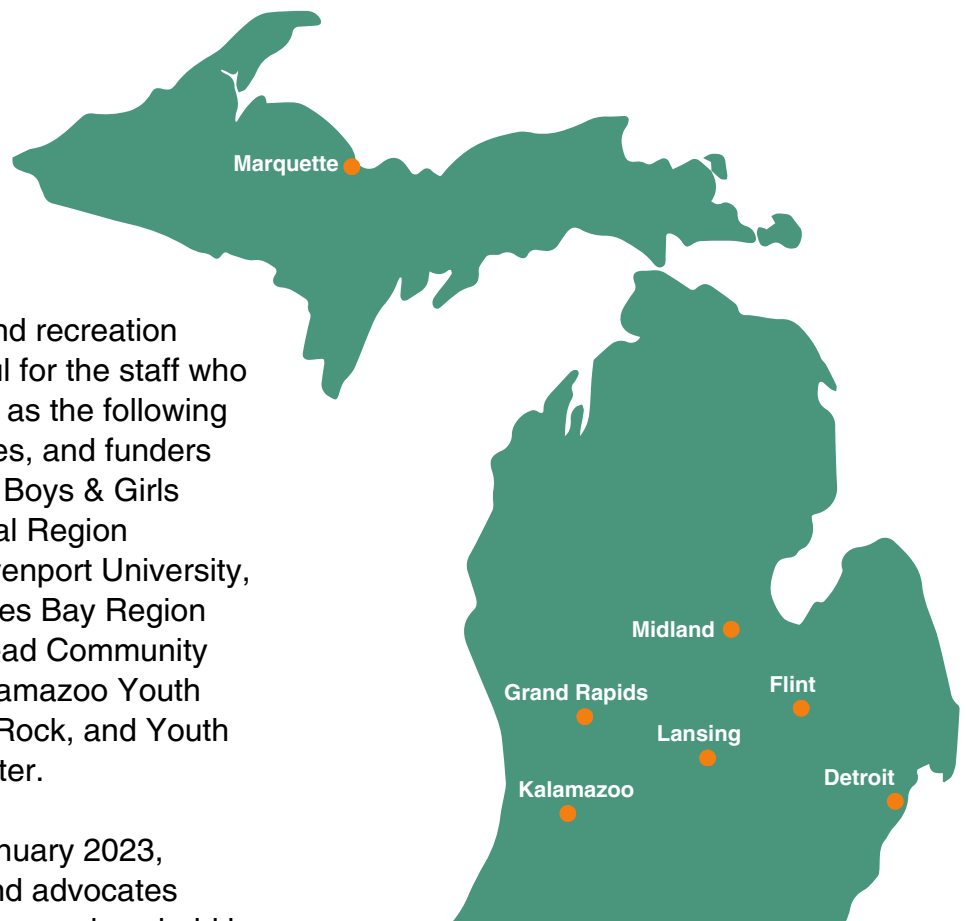
About the Listening Sessions

Beginning in fall 2022, the Michigan Afterschool Partnership (MASP) convened a series of listening sessions for out-of-school time (OST) providers and advocates. The purpose was for MASP to learn from these leaders about what’s working well, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening OST in their communities and across the state.

These shared perspectives will help inform our work going forward to support diversity, equity, and inclusion in OST statewide; provide professional development and other valuable resources to the sector; and champion policies and funding to build and sustain a strong, equitable OST system across Michigan.

Listening session participants included representatives from community-based organizations, childcare centers, libraries, 4-H centers, higher education institutions, school districts, and parks and recreation departments. We are grateful for the staff who shared their insights, as well as the following OST programs, intermediaries, and funders that co-hosted the sessions: Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Flint, Capital Region Community Foundation, Davenport University, the ELO Network, Great Lakes Bay Region Michigan Works!, Grow & Lead Community and Youth Partnerships, Kalamazoo Youth Development Network, The Rock, and Youth Development Resource Center.

From September 2022 to January 2023, nearly 200 OST providers and advocates participated in seven listening sessions held in the locations depicted at right.



A Message from MASP

As advocates of afterschool, summer learning, and other OST programs, we know these opportunities open a world of new learning experiences for kids. Decades of research support what we see firsthand every day: programs are not only engaging kids in learning and keeping them safe, they're launching careers and changing lives.

It's also clear Michigan families need OST more than ever before. We heard from program providers that many of the youth they serve are struggling with their mental well-being, others need extra support to re-engage and catch up at school, and some need a safe space to play or a healthy meal. Working families across our state rely on us so they can keep their jobs and have peace of mind, knowing their kids are in good hands.

But more than 750,000 Michigan children are missing out because our state has never had enough OST programs for all the families who want and need them. There are 376 kids for every OST program in Michigan, and access is far worse in some communities—like Wayne County, where the ratio is 452 to 1.

According to providers and advocates across Michigan who participated in our listening sessions, it's not only a lack of available programs that keep kids from participating—transportation and funding issues are also significant barriers. In the following pages, you'll learn about more of the challenges we face, but you'll also learn about what's working and the opportunities we have to build on our successes.

I am feeling incredibly hopeful about the future of OST in Michigan. Funding opportunities from the American Rescue Plan and \$25 million last year from the Michigan legislature allowed us to expand programming to more Michigan families. And this year, the state invested even more—\$50 million—in OST! We will continue to identify and develop champions who will fight for Michigan youth, and we will never give up on our mission to ensure that every child who wants to participate in OST has that opportunity.

On behalf of our MASP team, thank you to every person who gave their time to support and participate in these listening sessions. What we learned will help MASP better serve providers across our state and help us build a stronger, more equitable OST system in Michigan together.

In partnership,

Erin Skene-Pratt
Executive Director
Michigan Afterschool Partnership



What's Working

OST programs are making a significant impact in the lives of youth across the state. During our listening sessions, we began by asking providers and advocates about what's working well in their programs. Key themes resonated across all regions.

Meaningful connections with adults and other youth. Providers reported feeling excited about a return to in-person programs and a deeper focus on relationship-building. Many programs have experienced staff who are more present, greater volunteer participation, stronger connections with high school students, and the ability to provide engaging offerings to youth.

Hands-on project based learning. Providers reported offering life- and skills-based programming and having greater flexibility to engage more students through both virtual and hybrid programming. New funding has enabled programs to purchase new materials. cts that interest them.



Wraparound supports for families. OST has gained importance in our state’s post-pandemic rebuilding of social and cultural opportunities. Programs have connected families to resources while providing structure and spaces for kids to build meaningful relationships with peers and mentors. Providers reported that they have included families in programming through virtual meetings and in-person community events, and many have seen an increase in parent engagement.

Academic enrichment and support. Across the state, many providers saw enrollment skyrocket after programs reopened their doors after the pandemic. OST has served a key role in helping kids recover from lost learning time by reengaging them in learning through diverse, hands-on activities and giving kids freedom to explore subjects that interest them.

Youth-driven programs. Providers reported finding new opportunities to amplify youth voice in OST programming in response to a growing desire for this among youth participants. Additionally, programs have been aiding youth in their personal recovery from the trauma associated with COVID-19. For many children and teens, the lack of structure and other challenges associated with pandemic-related school closures had adverse mental health outcomes that needed—and still may need—healing. OST has provided important social and emotional connections that are helping remediate these challenges and build resilience among youth.

Career readiness and college preparation. Some OST providers reported that they have been successfully building relationships among middle schoolers and high schoolers to help prepare younger students for post-secondary life. Others are finding success through partnerships with local universities to increase interest in science, technology, engineering and math, and expose students to various career paths.





Challenges

The biggest barriers impacting youth access to OST programs are availability, transportation, and funding. These three issues consistently emerged across the listening sessions and are main priorities for MASP.

When it comes to organizational and programmatic challenges, these were the top issues shared in all seven sessions:

Availability, eligibility, and complexity of funding.

While state policymakers have allocated resources to community-based OST providers in recent years, these funds were one-time in nature and have been stretched to the limit. When state leaders allocated \$25 million of new funding to community-based afterschool programs in 2022, for example, more than \$45 million in requests were submitted—nearly double the amount available. Additionally, many funding sources are restricted, which means programs can't apply them as they would like. One area of concern is staffing, which often can't be supplemented with one-time grant resources or public funding. Many providers also reported feeling excluded from funding opportunities and reinforced the need for a more equitable funding process, particularly with government dollars, that ensures support goes to all different types of OST providers, including small community-based organizations and Black and Brown run nonprofit organizations.

Transportation to and from programs. Getting children and teens to and from their programs is a hurdle OST providers have struggled with for years. During and after the pandemic, this issue has become even more pronounced. While many local programs identified partnerships that help address families' transportation needs, we learned the problem is common across all communities and regions—urban, suburban, and rural. Several providers noted challenges with collaboration and support when it comes to transporting youth from school to the OST provider setting.

Michigan parents agree with these barriers. In a 2020 America After 3PM survey:

- 40% said programs are not available in their community.
- 52% said their child does not have safe or reliable transportation to programs.
- 52% said programs are too expensive.

Staffing recruitment and retention. Although many OST programs have managed to increase their staff sizes thanks to the funding they have received in recent years, staffing remains a concern. Providers told of team members who are working multiple jobs to make ends meet or of vacant positions that simply can't be filled due to the low, uncompetitive wages that are offered. These staffing challenges make it extremely difficult for OST providers to recruit, hire, and keep skilled team members. High turnover makes it difficult to ensure basic staffing needs are met on a continuous basis.

Volunteer recruitment and retention.

Providers expressed that finding volunteers is a challenge, particularly volunteers who will commit long-term. Some mentioned additional challenges related to the lengthy process for onboarding new volunteers at their programs.

Access to professional development opportunities for the OST workforce.

Staffing shortages and the cost of professional development have combined to form a sort of perfect storm around the sharing of best practices that work to boost youth learning and growth. Michigan OST providers are eager to find—and fund—opportunities for professional development that can ensure the advancement of approaches that are known to be effective in the sector.

Collaboration, not competition, amongst OST organizations and programs. Some listening session participants noted that the sector needs to foster a culture of collaboration and cited challenges with relationships between schools and community-based organizations. Others asked for more leadership to help organizations work together to address common needs. There was particular interest in getting assistance with collaboration and connections in areas of the state where there is not an existing intermediary to serve that function.

Misunderstanding or mischaracterization of the goals and purpose of OST. Providers expressed the need to change a perception of OST and what it does. There is a misconception that it serves exclusively a childcare role, and there is a lack of recognition about the impact programs have on youth academic outcomes, social and emotional learning, life and workforce skills, and more.

“How do we have high quality expectations for staff, when they don't have quality wages for the staff?”

“Youth development should be something you can stay in for the long haul.”

Licensing requirements as it relates to school-age providers. Michigan law requires childcare programs for children up to and through age 12 to be licensed. But this requirement isn't always easy to manage, nor is it clear how this applies to OST programs. Bureaucracies can be difficult, and for organizations with high turnover, limited funds, and other extraordinary challenges, addressing licensure can become overwhelming. Added to that are the reporting requirements many agencies maintain. While reporting in a digital age may seem more straightforward than it used to be when paper was required for everything, there are many different data systems at play, and OST providers must be up to date with all of them.





Michigan OST programs make an extraordinary difference in the lives of today's youth.

Opportunities

OST program leaders were very clear about their needs. They need a well-developed, consistent statewide system to ensure that every Michigan youth who wants to participate in high-quality OST has that opportunity. Program leaders also need practical solutions to help build a more sustainable future for OST. They shared with us opportunities to meet these goals and strengthen OST.

Based on these conversations, our priorities moving forward are to:

- Raise awareness about OST and its impact on youth outcomes.
- Increase public funding support at the state, county, and city levels.
- Design an equitable funding framework for state support of OST.
- Increase philanthropic support of OST and advocate for simpler applications, reporting requirements, and a trust-based funding approach to encourage more support of smaller community-based organizations and Black and Brown led programs.
- Make significant changes to the state licensing regulations for school-age programs.
- Address the transportation crisis as it relates to OST programming.
- Support and strengthen the OST workforce.
- Explore convening and collaboration opportunities for programs in regions that are not currently represented by an OST intermediary.



Next Steps

Michigan OST programs are delivering huge wins for youth and families statewide. They are strengthening learning outcomes, building community, and helping connect young people with their futures.

While there are wins, they're hard-fought, and OST programs continue to struggle with major challenges. It's long past time our state developed clear systems of funding and support that make youth a priority. Working with our policy leaders—and experts across the state of Michigan—we believe the ideas, tools, and resources are in place to help make it happen.

We at MASP are grateful for all the feedback and time given by providers and partners who engaged in this process. This is just the beginning, and we intend to continue these conversations and seek your feedback.

Please visit our website at miafterschool.org to learn about how you can engage with MASP.





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