



# **Alabama's High Quality Summer and Afterschool Programs**

## Introduction

Summer and afterschool programs, also commonly referred to as out-of-school programs, offer opportunities for students to continue learning or engaging in enrichment opportunities outside of the regular school day. Research shows that students can experience [“learning loss” or “summer slide”](#) during the summer months. This is when students lose valuable academic gains when they are not in school or using their new skills. High-quality summer and afterschool programs help to mitigate these declines.

In Alabama, summer and afterschool programs serve over 80,000 students each year. However, according to Mindworks, an estimated 335,000 students would participate in an afterschool program if one was offered to them. This shows a large unmet demand for high-quality programs to improve academic achievement and provide students an opportunity to learn new skills in a safe and enriching environment.<sup>1</sup>

## How do summer and afterschool programs benefit children and families?

**Out-of-school programs are a research-based way to reduce academic declines due to learning loss or summer slide in reading and math, helping students to make important gains.** A study published in 2021 found that students lost an average of 17-28% of their English Language Arts skills, and 25-34% of their math skills gained in the previous school year over the summer. These losses accumulate year-to-year, affecting older students more than younger students. According to Chalkbeat, learning loss accumulates to 9 months by 8th-grade, and disproportionately impacts economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond mitigating learning loss, there are many positive outcomes of summer and afterschool programs. Engaging students in these types of programs can have positive impacts on their academic performance and behaviors, as well as their families. Some Alabama examples include positive impacts on:<sup>3</sup>

- **Academic Achievement** - Students enrolled in effective afterschool programs show academic gains in reading and math. In the [2016-2017 evaluation of Alabama's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program](#), which offered summer and afterschool opportunities, 34% of regular attendees improved their reading grades and 37% improved their math grades. 81% of regular attendees saw improved academic performance. 81% improved their class participation, and 75% experienced increased motivation to learn.
- **Behavior Improvements and Safety** - According to a study by the [Truman Pierce Institute](#), students attending afterschool programs saw improvement in their behaviors. 62% of Alabama parents believe that afterschool programs reduce the likelihood that their children will engage in risky behaviors, and 69% agree that these programs provide

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<sup>1</sup> [Mindworks](#)

<sup>2</sup> Chalkbeat: [New analysis rings alarm bells on middle schoolers' academic recovery](#), Central Reach: [Summer Learning Loss and its Impact on Students](#) and NWEA: [Summer learning loss: What we know and what we're learning](#).

<sup>3</sup> National Library of Medicine: [How Do Summer Programs Influence Outcomes for Children and Youth?](#)

access to more caring adults in their children's lives. Supervising students between school letting out and parents getting home leads to fewer high-risk behaviors.

- **Improved School Attendance** - Summer and afterschool programs like the partnership between [Autauga County Schools and the local YMCA](#) resulted in improvements in attendance. Half of the students who were chronically absent before engaging in this program improved their school attendance, and the overall student attendance rate increased to 80%.
- **Family Benefits** - High-quality and safe summer and afterschool programs allow for parents and other caretakers to fully participate in the workforce when children are not in school, without worrying about childcare, mid-day transportation, or providing meals for their children. Demand for afterschool programs in Alabama is so large that only 37% of students wanting to attend afterschool programs are funded.<sup>4</sup>
- **Closing the Income Achievement Gap** - In Alabama, students from wealthier households score 30 percentage points higher in 3rd-grade reading than students from economically disadvantaged households. Summer and afterschool programs help to close this gap by providing students with intensive academic time. Consistent participation in afterschool programs in the elementary school years is linked to a substantial narrowing of the income achievement gap in math achievement by 5th-grade.<sup>5</sup>

All of these benefits are even more substantial in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to school delays, hybrid and remote learning, and the unknowns related to schooling during the pandemic, COVID-19 has drastically exacerbated learning loss. Studies have found that students will need about 4.5 additional months of learning time to make up for COVID-related declines.<sup>6</sup> Students of color and students living in poverty are likely to have experienced more learning loss, putting them further behind their peers.

### **Funding Summer and Afterschool Programs in Alabama**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Alabama districts received \$3.28 billion in ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds from the U.S. Department of Education. These funds were a part of a series of federal packages to address the financial impact of the pandemic on public schools and anticipated student achievement declines. At least 1% of these funds had to go towards afterschool programs. Many districts in Alabama chose to use these funds on summer reading or math camps to support Alabama Literacy Act and Alabama Numeracy Act implementation.<sup>7</sup>

In 2021, the Alabama Legislature allocated \$1.5 million for a 3-year summer and after-school pilot grant program, administered by the Department of Early Childhood Education, and funded

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<sup>4</sup> A+ Education Partnership (2021). Tackling Unfinished Learning and Learning Loss: Support Expanded Access to High-Quality Afterschool & Summer Programs for Alabama Pre-K-12 Students, pg. 13.

<sup>5</sup> <http://expandinglearning.org/research/vandell/>

<sup>6</sup>

<https://thehill.com/homenews/education/4793156-learning-loss-chronic-absenteeism-american-students-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AI-Afterschool-Fact-Sheet-2024.pdf>

partnerships between local school districts and community-based organizations to expand access to high-quality summer and after-school programs.

In 2023, the pilot was moved to the Alabama State Department of Education and renamed the created the Alabama Summer and Afterschool (ASAP) grant program. These grants continued to were designed to provide support for existing and new afterschool programs during the 2024-2025 school year, as ESSER funding began to phase out. 45 grants up to \$50,000 each were awarded.<sup>8</sup>

In 2025, the Alabama legislature increased funding for summer and after-school programs by \$14.4 million, bringing the total to afterschool programs by \$14.4 million for a new total of \$17.3 million. These funds will go towards some summer and afterschool initiatives that were previously funded by ESSER, and represents an ongoing commitment to student success. Additionally, the legislature created the Joint Interim Study Commission on Expanding Access to High-Quality Out-of-School Time (OST) to study Alabama's afterschool and summer opportunities for students and provide recommendations to expand program access and quality.

### Alabama's Summer Programs

Since the passage of the Alabama Literacy Act (ALA) in 2019, most Alabama schools have implemented summer reading camps for 3rd-graders who are struggling to read and may not be able to advance to 4th-grade. Since the ALA's implementation began, 3rd-grade reading scores in the state have improved. In 2019, Alabama ranked 49th in the nation for 3rd-grade reading. As of 2025, Alabama is ranked 34th in the nation and 3rd-graders are passing the reading section of the state's ACAP assessment at a rate of 88%. Still, according to the Nation's Report Card (NAEP), only 28% of 4th-grade students are reading proficiently. This data suggests that implementation of the ALA, including the summer reading camps, has improved academic outcomes for students - but we have a long way to go for Alabama's students.

Similar to the ALA, the Alabama Numeracy Act (ANA) requires summer math camps as an option for struggling students in grades K-5. The law requires schools to offer these camps to students who show math deficiencies. In 2019, Alabama ranked 52nd in the nation for 4th-grade math. In 2024, Alabama ranked 32nd for 4th-grade math, which is higher than pre-pandemic math proficiency rates. Contrastingly, 8th-grade math rates are stagnant at 49th nationally. Even though rankings have improved, Alabama students are still struggling. In 2023, only 31% of students demonstrated grade-level proficiency. Summer math camps, among other interventions, will continue to help improve student achievement.

Beyond summer reading and math camps related to the ALA and ANA, many Alabama students have opportunities to attend community-led summer programs. Some programs are academic in nature, while others are enrichment programs. Some engaging and effective examples include:

- [Summer Adventures in Learning \(SAIL\)](#) partners with 54 summer learning programs across 31 counties in Alabama to fund community-based summer opportunities for students. SAIL facilitates assessments, peer learning, and funding opportunities for existing community-based programs. Enrolled students gained an average of 7 months of reading skills and 2.6 months of math skills.
- [Auburn's Early Childhood Summer Enrichment Program](#) for children 3.5-7.5 years old provides opportunities to learn and play, develop projects, and develop social and emotional skills.
- [Alabama State University's Summer Skycap College Adventure Program](#) for first through 6th-grade students enhances academic skills and provides opportunities to explore the natural and social sciences, creative expression, physical fitness, and STEAM skills.
- [Huntsville's NASA Space Camp](#) for children ages 9-18 provides opportunities to learn about space, aviation, and robotics.
- [Alabama STEM Leadership Academy](#) for 6th-9th-grade students provides opportunities to learn about 3D printing, engineering, rocketry, marine biology, physics, robotics, and other engaging topics.
- [The University of Alabama's STEM Entrepreneurship Academy](#) for high school students focuses on topics like biomimicry, computer science, civil and mechanical engineering, geometry and art, and community-specific business design.

### Alabama's Afterschool Programs

Beyond summer programs to mitigate learning loss, afterschool programs can be effective at improving student academic performance and other measures of success, such as improvements in attendance and decreases in dropout rates. Afterschool programs in Alabama are particularly impactful when they are run by local community organizations, such as local churches, nonprofit organizations, or community gathering places like the YMCA. Like summer programs, some afterschool opportunities are academic-focused while others are enrichment based. Some effective and engaging programs include:

- [Birmingham Regional Empowerment and Development Center \(BREAD\)](#) serves about 600 elementary and middle school students from at-risk neighborhoods, offering engaging enrichment curriculum. Students in the program improved their class participation, attendance, motivation to learn, relationships with peers, and behavior in school.
- [Gadsden City Schools 21st Century Afterschool Program](#) serves 9th-12th-grade students by addressing challenges in math and literacy through daily homework help, tutoring, and credit recovery. Other aspects of the program include service learning opportunities and events on topics like cultural diversity, drug prevention, financial literacy, and nutrition. The program improves attendance, increases parental involvement, and improves student behavior.

- [United Way's Before and After School Programs](#) for all ages offers students opportunities to explore arts, sports, and academic help in reading and math. These programs are run in partnership with local communities, such as this program in [Fairfield](#).

## A+ Policy Recommendations

- Dedicated State Funding Alabama has committed to supporting high-quality expanded learning programs for students in the FY2026 Education Trust Fund budget. The state should continue to invest in summer and afterschool programs across the state. Additional funds should be available for underserved communities to support these programs and create opportunities for students who otherwise would not be able to participate due to cost. For every \$1 invested in afterschool programs, there is a \$12 return on investment for taxpayers.<sup>9</sup>
- Community-Based Partnerships  
Summer and afterschool programs should be hosted by community-based organizations, such as child care centers, faith-based centers, college and university lab schools, private schools, and community organizations. This allows the leaders closest to students to identify and address their needs. Initiatives like the Birmingham Regional Empowerment and Development (BREAD) afterschool program have had positive impacts on class participation, peer relationships, motivation, and attendance - even though the program was not at the school.<sup>10</sup>
- High-Quality Instruction  
Summer and afterschool programs should use high-quality instruction to make the biggest impact possible on COVID and more general summer learning loss. Programs need to align summer and afterschool programs with school curriculum through engaging and rigorous opportunities for students. The Alabama Campaign for Grade Level Reading recommended summer learning opportunities as a primary method of advancing student reading levels up to grade level standards.
- Enrichment Component  
Programs should engage students to improve attendance both in the program and on typical school days. Students who are engaged in clubs, sports, and other enriching opportunities have better academic outcomes, fewer behavioral challenges, and are more likely to graduate.<sup>11</sup> In addition to programs centered around sports or other activities, academically-focused programs should aim to engage students.
- Focus on Literacy and STEM  
Programs should focus on building students' reading and STEM skills, because these areas are where Alabama students have the largest deficits. Summer and afterschool

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<sup>9</sup> New York State Network for School Success (2018). The Return on Investment of Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs.

<https://networkforyouthsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Return-on-Investment.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA-Spotlight-Bread-Center.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5492&context=td>

programs in literacy and STEM lead to better academic outcomes, more students pursuing higher education, and more students entering STEM fields.