

Summer Learning From Screen to Screen

Lessons Learned From After School Matters Summer 2020 Programs

Executive Summary

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AFTER SCHOOL matters®



After School Matters provides teens with opportunities to discover their potential and find their future. To learn more about After School Matters, visit www.afterschoolmatters.org.

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About After School Matters

After School Matters is a nonprofit organization that provides afterschool and summer opportunities to Chicago public high school teens to explore their passions and develop their talents, while gaining critical skills for work, college, and beyond. After School Matters programs are project based, led by industry experts, and provide a pathway to progress in skills development and independence. Teens earn a stipend while participating in programs in the arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Over the span of nearly three decades, After School Matters has impacted more than 350,000 teens throughout the city of Chicago.

Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, After School Matters engaged in organization-wide planning and preparation efforts to move in-person programs online. After School Matters reenvisioned its summer 2020 program session to provide 517 remote learning programs to nearly 10,000 teens in the city of Chicago. Remote programs offered a combination of small group, whole group, and individual work time to achieve various projects. Online program meetings occurred 3–5 days a week through Google Suites to be closely aligned to the Chicago Public Schools approach for ease and familiarity. Individual program supply kits and tech devices were delivered directly to teens.

Learning From After School Matters' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

After School Matters partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to better contextualize and understand remote programming in three key topics: (1) teen experiences, (2) instructor experiences, and (3) program quality. AIR also explored how summer 2020 compared with previous summers and what this means for future programming. After School Matters provided AIR with three years of summer session datasets (2018, 2019, and 2020), including information on program and teen characteristics, teen and instructor survey responses, and [Youth Program Quality Assessment](#) (YPQA) scores. Where applicable, AIR used five methods to analyze data:

1. Descriptive analysis (averages, counts, and percentages)
2. Correlational analysis (how two items relate to one another)
3. Analysis of variance (ANOVA; whether group averages are different from each other)
4. Geographic analysis (whether items relate to where teens live)
5. Qualitative analysis (whether open-ended responses from teens and instructors have common themes)

In this brief, we share key findings from these analyses.

What Did We Learn About Teen Experiences?

After School Matters served 9,543 teens in the summer 2020 program session. A total of 3,999 teens (42%) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences.

One in three teens (32%) screened positively for food insecurity. For context, this is nearly three times as high as the 2018 child food insecurity rate in Cook County of 12%.¹

Teens reported various levels of stress.

Teens in areas of the city with higher [Social Vulnerability Index](#) and with higher rates of positive [COVID-19 cases](#) were more likely to report higher levels of stress and be food insecure than teens in other areas of the city (Figure 1).

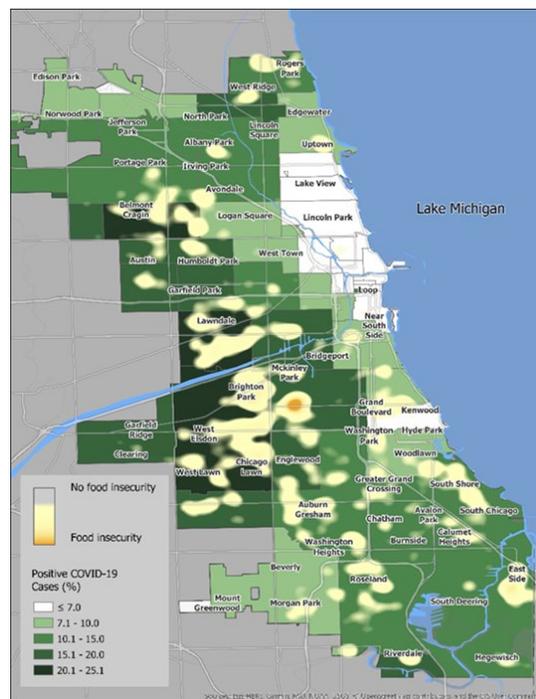
Teens shared positive feedback about their program. They highlighted (a) supportive relationships with their instructors and peers and (b) opportunities for skills development. In fact, when teens reported a higher sense of belonging, they were more likely to report lower stress and food insecurity.

Teens reported significant gains in their skills, such as making plans or working with groups to achieve a goal, indicating that remote learning programs can still provide critical opportunities for teens to develop and practice skills.

Some teens highlighted challenges with technology and internet access ($n = 265$). For example, some teens described their spotty internet connection as a barrier for fully participating in the program.

Most teens (78%) shared that they felt more hopeful about their future after participating in their program. For example, teens highlighted the skills they developed this summer; having a better sense of their career path; and their relationships with peers, families, and instructors.

Figure 1. Teens in Areas With Higher Rates of Positive COVID-19 Cases Were More Likely to Be Food Insecure



¹ Gundersen, C., Dewey, A., Engelhard, E., Strayer, M., & Lapinski, L. (2020). Map the Meal Gap 2020: A report on county and congressional district food insecurity and county food cost in the United States in 2018. Feeding America. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child/illinois/county/cook>

What made me hopeful is my instructors having a very comforting talk about everything that's happening in the world right now. They didn[']t try to push anything aside or try to hide anything, they were just real, but also gave reassurance.... I'm just very happy and appreciative of the fact that I got to come across and have those people in my life.

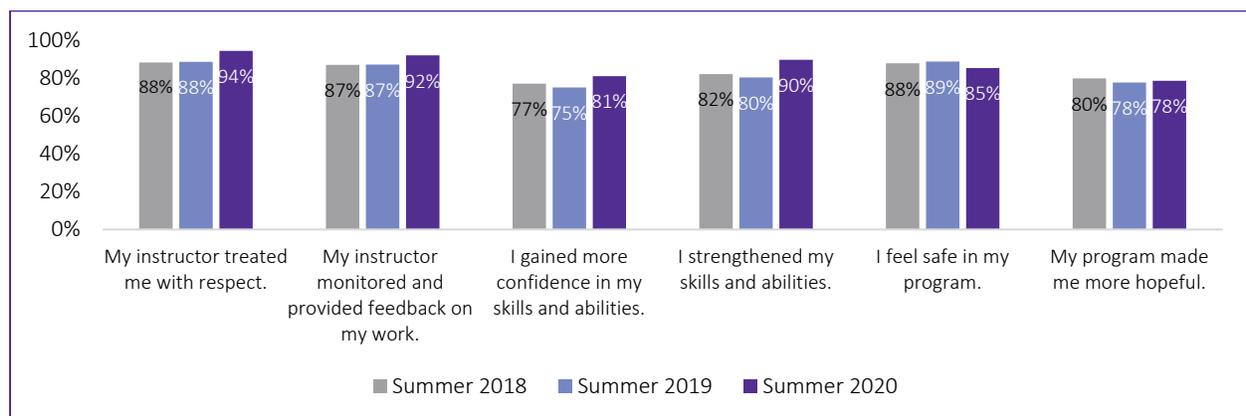
—After School Matters Teen

Comparing Summer 2020 With Previous Summers: *Teen Experiences*

After School Matters regularly monitors average daily attendance (ADA) rates to gauge teen engagement in programs. After School Matters programs maintained a **high ADA rate** of 90% as they transitioned to a remote learning model. While the ADA rate for summer 2020 was significantly lower than summer 2019, there was no difference compared with summer 2018. Reports indicate that rates of teen disengagement in schools and the workforce are on the rise.² The high ADA rates tell a more positive story about teens' engagement in enrichment activities. After School Matters provides teens with a stipend to participate in programs, which is likely a contributor to the high ADA rates as it removes potential barriers and incentivizes participation.

Teens generally rated survey items higher in summer 2020 than in past summers, especially as it relates to their **relationship with their instructor** and the **skills they gained** (Figure 2). Teens reported **lower feelings of safety** in summer 2020, although the rating was still high (85%). Teens also reported **lower ratings of their program making them hopeful** than in previous summers. Again, the percentage of teens was still relatively high (78%). The pandemic and social unrest may contribute to this finding, as some teens reported stress, food insecurity, internet connectivity issues, and other hardships.

Figure 2. Teen Agreement About Their Program Experiences



² Bauer, L., Lu, S., & Moss, E. (2020). *Teen disengagement is on the rise*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu.cn/ampproject.org/c/s/www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/10/01/teen-disengagement-is-on-the-rise/amp/>

What Did We Learn About Instructor Experiences?

After School Matters worked with 729 instructors in the summer 2020 program session. Half of instructors ($n = 370$, 51%) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences.

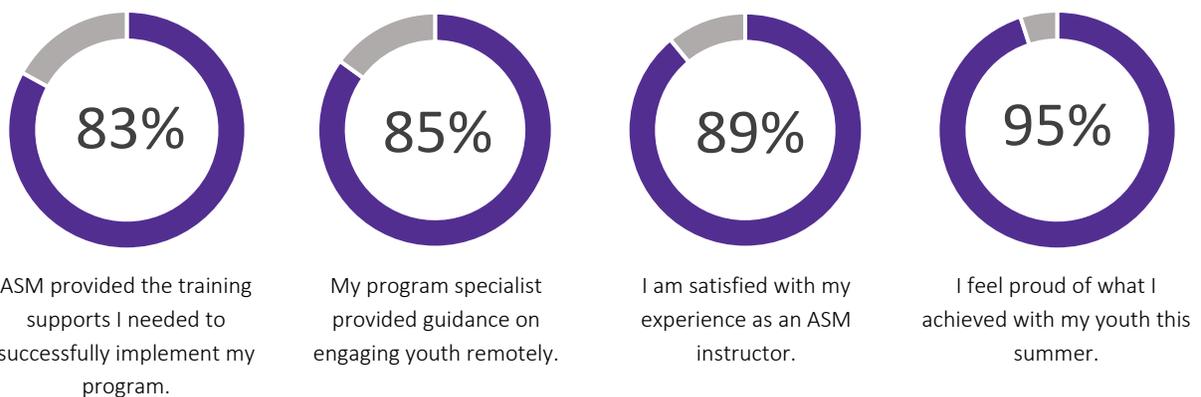
Nearly one in four instructors (24%) screened positively for food insecurity. This rate is higher than the most recently available data for Cook County as a whole (10%).³

Three in four instructors (75%) reported that After School Matters provided them with a reliable income. We also found that 61% of instructors live with someone who lost a job or had their hours cut as a result of the pandemic.

Instructors' reports on their level of stress varied. Instructors reported higher levels of stress if they were food insecure, reported less access to mental health supports, or reported less confidence in their knowledge of resources or referrals to respond to teen requests.

Instructors shared positive feedback about the supports they received from After School Matters. They shared that their program specialists (staff who work closely with instructors to provide coaching and support) were responsive to phone calls and emails, resolved issues and problems, and provided guidance on engaging youth remotely. Most instructors (89%) were satisfied with their experience as an instructor (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Instructor Agreement About Their Program Experiences



Instructors shared inspiring stories about their teens. They highlighted the positive relationships they had with teens. They also described teens' enthusiasm, final products and showcases, and growth over the course of the program.

³ Gundersen, C., Dewey, A., Engelhard, E., Strayer, M., & Lapinski, L. (2020). Map the Meal Gap 2020: A report on county and congressional district food insecurity and county food cost in the United States in 2018. Feeding America. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child/illinois/county/cook>

Some instructors also shared their challenges, including translating their program content for a remote learning environment, maintaining teen engagement and participation, and facilitating live program sessions virtually.

It was wonderful experience to see the teens reveal their talents, improve their skills, and came out with beautiful virtual murals. We and the teens had [a] chance to talk and reflect about our moment, pandemic and racism through art. They inspired in what all of us confront today to create their own symbolic visual language. The murals reflect their own impressive response about this moment.

—After School Matters Summer 2020 Instructor

Comparing Summer 2020 With Previous Summers: *Instructor Experiences*

Instructors adjusted to the new remote learning program model by learning new technology and adapting their in-person program to function as a virtual program. In this transitional summer, instructors reported that their program specialists were more helpful at resolving program issues than in the previous summer, although reports of their responsiveness were lower for summer 2020 than for summer 2018. Program specialists, like instructors and teens, also had to adapt to supporting programs in the new remote learning model, which may have caused delays in response.

Instructors also reported higher rates of satisfaction and interest in being an instructor with After School Matters again. These findings indicate that, despite the challenges instructors reported, they were still generally satisfied with their instructor experience.

Program Quality

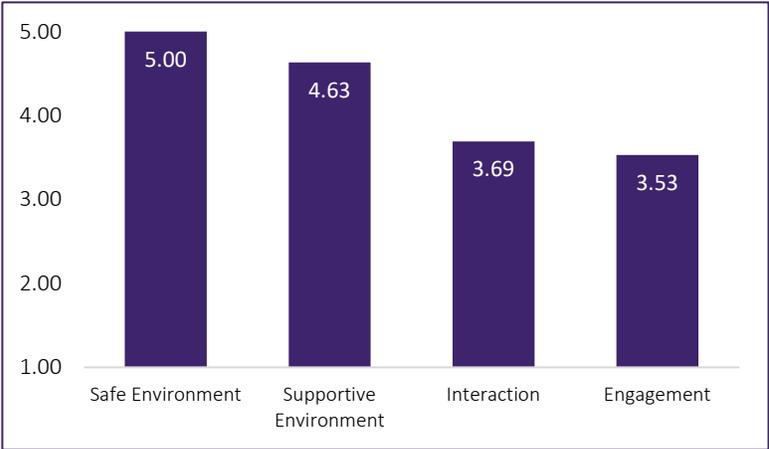
After School Matters uses the YPQA as part of the organization’s continuous quality improvement process. This summer, After School Matters modified the YPQA to better assess the remote learning environment by removing traditional YPQA items not relevant to online learning.

After School Matters programs demonstrated high program quality across each of the four YPQA domains:

Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement. This trend follows the most recent national benchmarks of the full YPQA compiled by the Weikart Center: 4.64 for Safe Environment, 4.31 for Supportive Environment, 3.36 for Interaction, and 2.85 for

Engagement. We found that average scores for each of the four domains were consistently high across the different program content areas (arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM; Figure 4).

Figure 4. Programs Demonstrated High Quality Across Domains



Note. n = 101 programs

Comparing Summer 2020 With Previous Summers: Program Quality

Summer 2020 program quality was comparable with previous summer sessions based on the adapted YPQA domain scores, except in the area of Interaction (staff practices that promote belonging, collaboration, leadership, and partnerships with adults), which was significantly lower for summer 2020.

The lower belonging scores contradict teens’ reports of a high sense of belonging. Instructors indicated in their open-ended survey responses that they need more support in adapting their program content to a virtual setting. Additionally, both instructors and teens reported issues with internet connectivity. Both issues could contribute to the success of program activities intended to bolster belonging, collaboration, and partnership. Both instructors and teens reported they kept in touch with each other offline in the Google environment as well, which could contribute to teen feelings of belonging, but would not have been observable on the YPQA.



Where Do We Go From Here?

Findings from AIR's analysis of After School Matters data revealed that **After School Matters teens had a positive remote learning experience** during summer 2020, despite what was likely an unusual and stressful summer for all. **Instructors reported both positive experiences and challenges**, and shared how to best support themselves and teens moving forward into the school year. After School Matters programs **maintained a high level of quality** in their transition to the remote learning program model.

After School Matters can take five key steps to improve for next year, based on the lessons learned from the summer 2020 program session:

1. Continue to support basic needs (e.g., food, technology, and internet access) for teens and instructors.
2. Support instructors with their mental and emotional health.
3. Focus on teen belonging to help buffer teen stress.
4. Offer training or resources for instructors on strategies for facilitating interaction in a remote learning environment.
5. Continue to collect information about teens, instructors, and program quality and the remote learning program model.

We note that findings from these data also have broader implications for the education and out-of-school time fields. First, these findings underscore the **importance of caring for young people and the adults who support them as whole people**. To fully participate in remote learning programs, **young people and adults need access to basic resources** such as food, mental and emotional health supports, and access to technology and high-speed internet.

Second, while remote learning programs may exacerbate inequities in program access, particularly as it relates to technology access and internet connectivity, remote learning programs may **remove previously existing barriers** for program participation, such as transportation. Remote learning programs may **provide more flexibility**, allowing young people to choose from a broader list of programs. Increased efforts to make technology and high-speed internet available to all young people and the adults who support them are necessary for them to reap some of the benefits remote learning programs may provide.

Last, it is possible to implement **high-quality, engaging remote learning** programs for young people, but it requires **building the technology skills** of the adults who facilitate virtual learning spaces to help them translate learning content for a virtual environment. It also requires **providing training and resources** to support adults in providing ample opportunities for meaningful interaction in their remote learning programs. Finally, it requires **planning and collaboration** across multiple departments and teams, including programs, finance, operations, and research, to ensure organizational alignment on the remote learning model.

