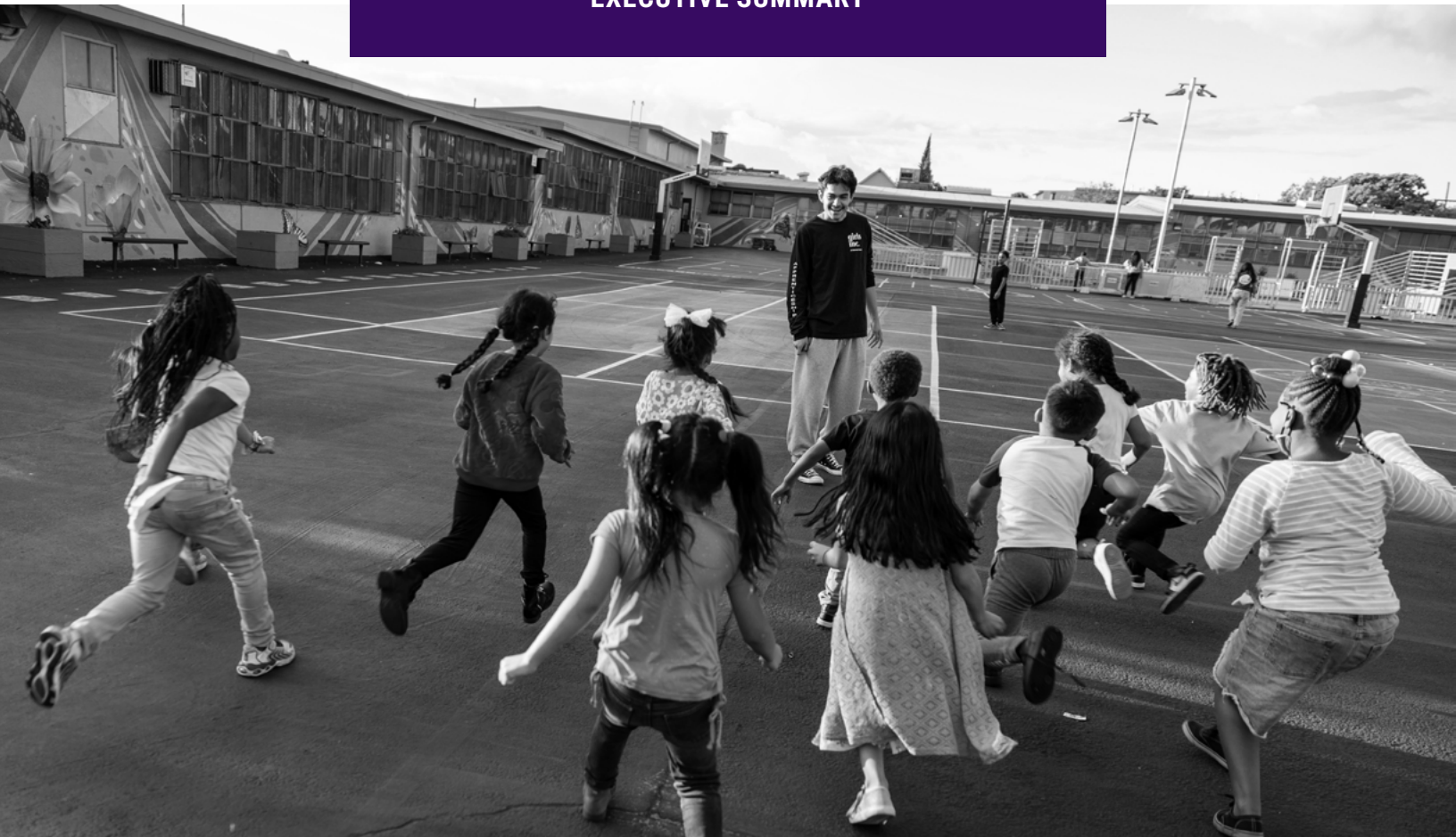


Investing in the Out-of-School Time Workforce: Recommendations for Grantmakers

October 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Access the full report at [Grantmakers for Education Out-of-School Time Impact Group](#)

Credit: Girls Inc. of Alameda County, photographer Joyce Xi



Credit: Partnership for Children & Youth, photographer Amris Mendoza

Introduction

Youth workers are the backbone of the out-of-school time field. In high-quality OST programs staffed by skilled youth workers, children and youth experience engagement, agency, belonging and discovery – all of which are key to reaching developmental milestones such as:

- Developing intrinsic motivation, a sense of purpose and self-confidence through discovering and pursuing their own passions and interests.
- Honing problem-solving and persistence skills by taking risks within safe, low-stakes environments.
- Building social and emotional skills and capacities.
- Experiencing belonging, support and affirmation connecting young people to their communities and contributing to positive identity formation.

These and other positive impacts of participation in high-quality afterschool and summer programs have been evidenced by research, recently summarized in the 2025 report [*The Future of Youth Development, Building Systems and Strengthening Programs*](#), by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Despite the profound impact youth workers have on young people's well-being, the field of youth work in the United States lacks the systemic infrastructure needed to recruit, train, develop, compensate and support youth work professionals at scale. Jobs in the field are too often characterized by part-time status, low pay, lack of benefits and no clear pathways to advancement.

NOW IS THE MOMENT – CARING ADULTS AND SAFE SPACES ARE NEEDED

During the pandemic, as youth workers stepped in to connect isolated young people and their families to schools, communities and resources, it became clear that the people providing so much support had little support themselves.

In the wake of the grief, loss and crushing isolation of the pandemic, American society has been weathering a series of constant, overlapping crises that are taking a toll on children and youth. Learning gaps that have persisted since school re-openings, heightened economic stress and worry, more frequent and intense climate-related disasters, and a divisive and increasingly hostile political climate are among today's challenges. We are witnessing increased attacks on societal norms, public institutions and marginalized populations. Immigrant communities and their allies are experiencing fear and stress as enforcement actions intensify.

Young people are profoundly impacted by all of this. They experience these crises in their homes, schools, communities, and online. More than ever, they need access to safe and joyful spaces and the support of caring adults that afterschool and summer programs provide.

At this moment, we must do many things at once.

We must advance solutions to broaden program access, and at the same time navigate the turbulence of nonprofit destabilization, budget cuts, cancelled grants, impounded funds, attacks on cultural and racially inclusive programming and more. We must do all of this while making progress on building a system that truly supports the people charged with helping every child through these challenging times.

As we illustrate in the full report, we do not lack innovative ideas to move us forward. Program leaders and youth workers are testing ingenious solutions that support youth, youth workers, families and their communities. The good news is that there are many ways that philanthropy, working in coordination and collaboration, can support the field to advance toward a robust, resilient OST workforce for the future.

Project Overview

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation commissioned this report to outline the challenges facing the OST workforce, highlight solutions, and provide recommendations for philanthropy.

To inform this report, the OST Impact Group:

- Commissioned the Afterschool Alliance, Every Hour Counts, National Afterschool Association, National Summer Learning Association, and National Urban League to contribute their perspectives.
- Interviewed two dozen field leaders and engaged in a literature review.
- Supported a state-level convening on the California expanded learning workforce, organized by Partnership for Children & Youth and California School-Age Consortium, to gather input on field level solutions and engage local funders to inform the recommendations.
- Sought insights on how the early childhood education sector, the care fields, and leaders in the nonprofit sector are advocating for systemic supports and improvements for their workforces and the role of philanthropy in those efforts.

Our full report, *Investing in the Out-of-School Time Workforce: Recommendations for Grant-makers* can be found on our [webpage](#).



Credit: Boston Afterschool & Beyond

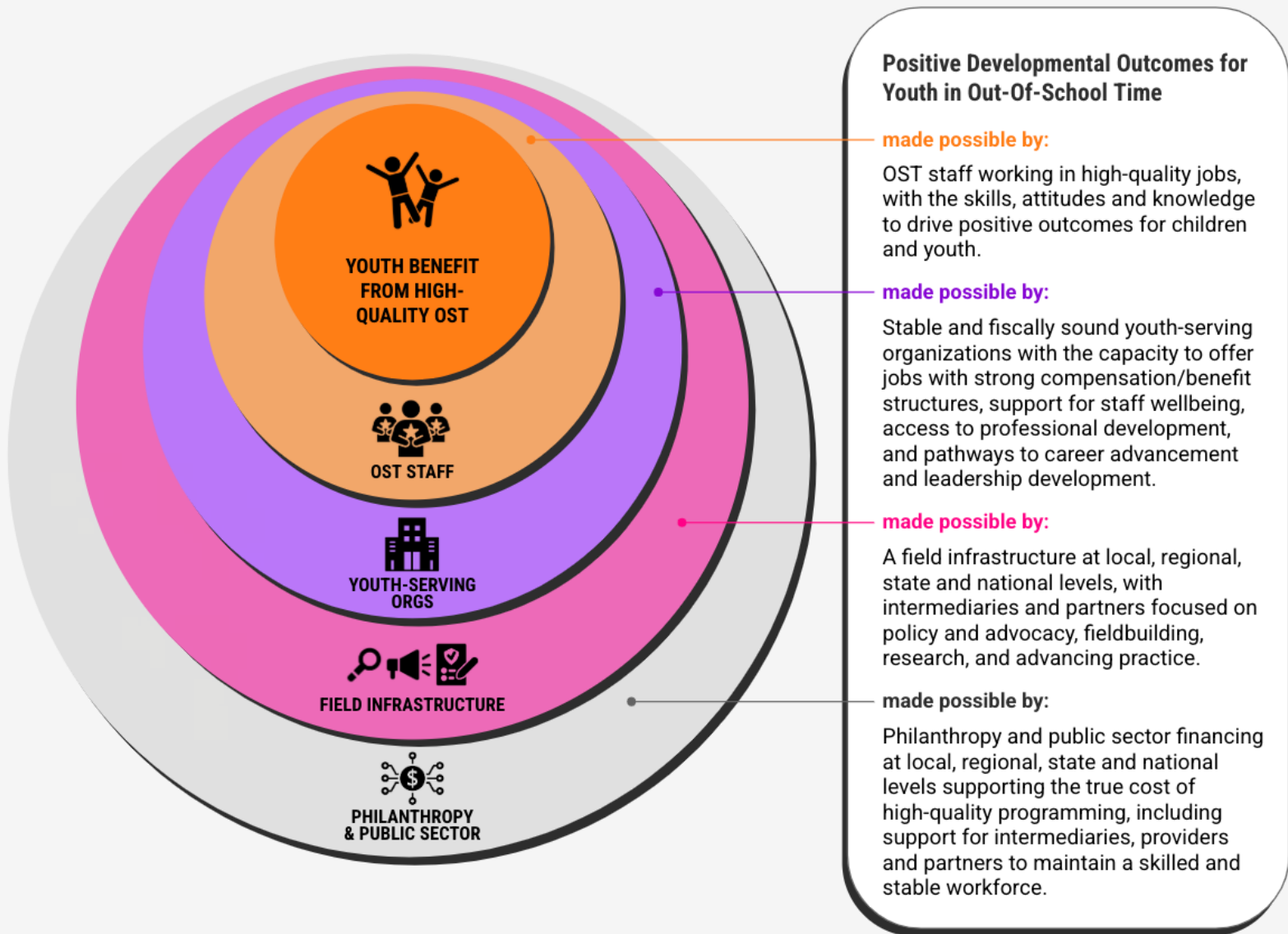
AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS DATABASE

Gathering examples of emerging solutions, we learned about dozens of innovations addressing recruitment, compensation and benefits, professional development, career pathways, nonprofit capacity and leadership development. We noticed that the field had no mechanism to track and disseminate these innovations. To address that need, we commissioned the Afterschool Alliance to create the [Afterschool and Summer Workforce Solutions Database](#).

Integrating contributions from our partners, this searchable database now includes more than 175 emerging solutions and will continue to grow, serving as a resource to funders as well as OST practitioners, researchers, technical assistance providers, intermediaries and policy leaders.

Innovative solutions included in the database are highlighted throughout the full report. We encourage field leaders and funders to explore the database, offer their own solutions and reach out to the contributors to learn more and collaborate.

THRIVING WORKFORCE FRAMEWORK



To organize our thinking and recommendations, we developed a framework that places youth at the center. We named critical roles of youth-serving organizations and the necessary field infrastructure to support a thriving workforce.

This framework helped us to see how various components of the OST field infrastructure contribute to advancing the workforce and the many options for philanthropic investment to support short- and longer-term solutions.



Credit: Girls Inc. of Alameda County, photographer Joyce Xi

Challenges to Building a Thriving OST Workforce

The [full report](#) unpacks the challenges facing the field, including the need to:

- Access data to better understand the workforce.
- Ensure stable funding for programs and intermediaries.
- Increase compensation and offer benefits.
- Build robust recruitment and retention strategies.
- Clarify career pathways and advancement opportunities.
- Center equity and the need for diverse leadership.
- Provide high-quality professional development.
- Support staff well-being.
- Amplify field identity and recognition.



Credit: Boston Afterschool & Beyond and Every Hour Counts

Recommendations for Philanthropy

The OST field is innovating toward a stronger and more stable workforce — and there are so many ways that philanthropy can help advance this work.

We hope funders will act together to advance practice, research and policy supporting the workforce, and to catalyze narrative shifts toward greater understanding, support and respect for what youth work entails and the important role youth workers play in the lives of young people.

1. SUPPORT THE FIELD TO IMPLEMENT EMERGING SOLUTIONS.

We recommend funders and grantee partners explore the [Afterschool and Summer Workforce Solutions Database](#) to identify ideas that align with their communities' priorities, and support communities of practice so grantees can engage together in testing and improving new solutions.

Among the dozens of interviews we conducted, increasing compensation was the most important and urgent intervention cited. The solutions database includes examples of local, state and regional initiatives that have increased compensation for direct service workers and others in the OST, early childhood or nonprofit sectors.

2. ALIGN AND COLLABORATE TO ADVANCE STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS FOR BUILDING A THRIVING WORKFORCE.

Support robust research focused on the workforce and workforce solutions.

Building on the [Power of Us](#) workforce survey by American Institutes for Research, funders can consider supporting expanded and ongoing data collection to better understand the composition of the workforce.

Funders can also support convenings among researchers and practitioners to develop a comprehensive research agenda that is informed by voices of direct service workers and considers challenges, solutions and the interplay among all the components of a thriving workforce.

Support policy and advocacy.

In this volatile policy environment, intermediary organizations at the local, state and national levels are leading efforts to preserve existing funding sources and explore opportunities for new funding streams. Additional philanthropic funding toward these critical efforts is necessary.

Support communications and narrative shift.

Lack of awareness about the roles youth workers play and the unique skills and expertise they possess perpetuates the undervaluation of the workforce in society. Philanthropic support can help deepen the field's understanding of how to catalyze narrative shift over time and identify both short- and long-term strategies.

3. CENTER OST WORKFORCE SUPPORT IN GRANTMAKING PRACTICE.

Increase financial support without increasing expectations for the number of youth served.

Grantmakers often focus on scale, prioritizing the number of young people served. While scale is an important goal, it has sometimes superseded a commitment to high-quality jobs

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and adequate support for the workforce. Given that past grant budgets may not have explicitly addressed workforce challenges, and operational costs have risen significantly due to inflation and other factors, funders should consider increasing grant awards without an expectation of grantees offering more services.

Connect grantees with workforce resources.

Grantmakers can help connect their partners and grantees with useful resources available - including the [Afterschool and Summer Workforce Solutions Database](#).

Use grantmaking processes to assist grantee partners in supporting the workforce.

As part of their existing due diligence and reporting processes, grantmakers could consider asking grantees about their approaches and challenges regarding staffing and adjust grants where possible to better support grantees to meet workforce challenges.

Stay committed to an equity-focused approach.

As the field advances toward a well-supported and robust workforce, all the key components of this work must be designed to intentionally center equity. In the current environment, providing flexible, long-term funding to grantees to engage in this work could support continued commitment to equity without incurring additional exposure or risk. Most importantly, sustainable, flexible, long-term support is needed for organizations led by/representing communities of color and other historically excluded communities to engage in the field's policy and advocacy, research, communications, professional development and other field-defining work.

Build support among foundation leaders for focusing on the workforce.

It is important for the leadership of grantmaking organizations to understand the depth and complexity of the workforce challenges grantees face – and the implications for program quality and youth outcomes. Early childhood funders noted that highlighting the link to outcomes was critical in convincing their boards that workforce investments were worthwhile, despite the complexities and longer time horizon these issues demand.



Credit: Afterschool Alliance



Credit: Afterschool Alliance

4. LEVERAGE PHILANTHROPIC INFLUENCE

Support the youth development field's visibility and influence within the broader movement for workforce reforms.

Efforts to support the OST workforce have much to gain by learning from and joining with early childhood, child care, workforce development and nonprofit sectors as well as the labor movement overall. This might include joining pooled fund efforts and advocating for an expanded focus to include the OST workforce. Funders can also support OST intermediaries and other field leaders to make these connections in the practice, policy, research and narrative spaces.

Attract more funders to the youth development field.

Unfortunately, the field has lost several influential philanthropic partners in the last decade, due to sunseting or strategy shifts that eliminated significant philanthropic support for OST programs and field infrastructure.

We hope that the field's current funders will leverage their influence to attract other foundations to this space. OST funders can consider joining and actively participating in funder collaboratives, philanthropy infrastructure organizations, and cross-sector efforts focused on integrating education, youth development experiences, career exploration, and civic engagement to prepare young people in their K-12 years and beyond to succeed. Grantmakers have the influence and positional power to elevate the youth development perspective in these important conversations. They can invite youth development leaders to speak to funder audiences. Funders can build relationships with other funders, introduce them to the value of the youth development space, and invite them to participate in the OST Impact Group community.

Grantmakers have the influence and positional power to elevate the youth development perspective.

REQUESTS FROM THE FIELD

We repeatedly heard these requests from field leaders. Funders, please:

- Pay the full administrative costs needed for strong nonprofit infrastructure, and end caps on administrative costs.
- Understand that short-term (less than 5-year) grants are unlikely to deliver the outcomes the field is striving for.
- Prioritize the perspectives of those most proximate to the issues to drive the solutions, and always compensate people for their time.
- Support the role of intermediaries as critical advocates and connectors in the field. Intermediaries are important partners in developing and testing solutions focused on the workforce.

Conclusion & Ways to Engage

The OST field is still recovering from impacts of the pandemic while also feeling increased urgency to support young people's wellness, learning recovery, and safety. The reality is that the field must equip itself to operate sustainably in a state of ongoing crises. Much like the young people in programs, youth workers are in urgent need of support, including increased compensation and benefits, high-quality professional development, advancement opportunities and public recognition for the difference they make every day for youth.

We invite funders to collaborate to meet the moment, including leveraging the [Grantmakers for Education OST Impact Group](#) to learn, collaborate, push for collective action and hold ourselves accountable. We look forward to working with funders and all the sector's leaders toward a skilled, supported and sustainable workforce, so that all of our children and youth experience the joy and opportunity of high-quality out-of-school time programs.



Credit: Allison Shelley for EDUimages



Credit: Afterschool Alliance

As the leading network for education philanthropy, Grantmakers for Education offers an unparalleled platform for learning, collaboration and influence – backed by front-line sector research, exclusive insights and a vibrant community of peers. We believe in the value of philanthropy as a catalytic partner in creating a just world. We strive to prepare our members – a diverse association of organizations, staff, trustees and individual donors in education philanthropy - with the tools, knowledge and relationships to meet the challenges and pursue opportunities they face in serving learners of all ages. We serve as a hub for new connections and ideas, a compass to help education funders navigate their work, a spur for collective action and a champion for positive change in education. For more information, please contact us at information@edfunders.org.



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