Case Study: Increasing Quality After-School Opportunities in Salem, Massachusetts

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Introduction

Our communities, economy, and democracy all are stronger when we help kids reach their full potential in education, advancing their chances for career and life success. Massachusetts has made significant progress in recent years in ensuring that schools across the state effectively serve young people. In the 2019 Annie E. Casey Foundation *KIDS COUNT Data Book,* Massachusetts ranked second in overall child well-being across the country, including the top ranking in education.[1]

While Massachusetts is a nationwide leader in education, this data also showed that half of our eighth-grade students were not proficient in math and 12 percent of high school youth failed to graduate on time. The Commonwealth has not consistently provided all children with the opportunity to achieve educational success, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students of color faring worse on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in key areas such as 4th-grade reading proficiency.[2]

After-school programs, structured initiatives taking place after the conclusion of classes each day, have elevated academic achievement as well as other key social, health, and wellness indicators.[3] These benefits depend on effective program design and implementation, with elements such as professional staff, rich academic support, diverse enrichment activities, and partnerships with schools and community organizations.

Statewide analysis of after-school programs in Massachusetts has revealed that despite the benefits, there is major unmet demand for after-school programs. MassBudget found that using the broadest definition of after-school and summer programs, Massachusetts supported 114,000 students in publicly-funded after-school and summer programs in 2017. In that same year, our public schools educated 288,000 economically disadvantaged kids (our state's definition of students in poverty) and 954,000 kids overall.[4] These programs were supported by over $200 million in the state budget, including some largely financed through federal grants. Even with this support, hundreds of thousands of students are not accessing publicly supported after-school.

Without sufficient funding, communities across the Commonwealth face challenges in helping all students, particularly those most in need of additional support, gain access to affordable, quality after-

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school opportunities. This report aims to provide tailored guidance to one community, Salem, Massachusetts, on how to provide services to more youth. This includes evaluating its current after-school landscape, compiling data from local providers, applying lessons learned from after-school efforts across the country, and providing recommendations on how Salem can expand access to quality after-school. This report will also provide lessons that other communities in Massachusetts and beyond can hopefully learn from and adapt in their contexts. For further background on after-school policy and funding, see MassBudget's Beyond the Bell: Options for Increased Learning Time and Investment in After-School & Summer Learning in Massachusetts: Current Funding & Unmet Need.
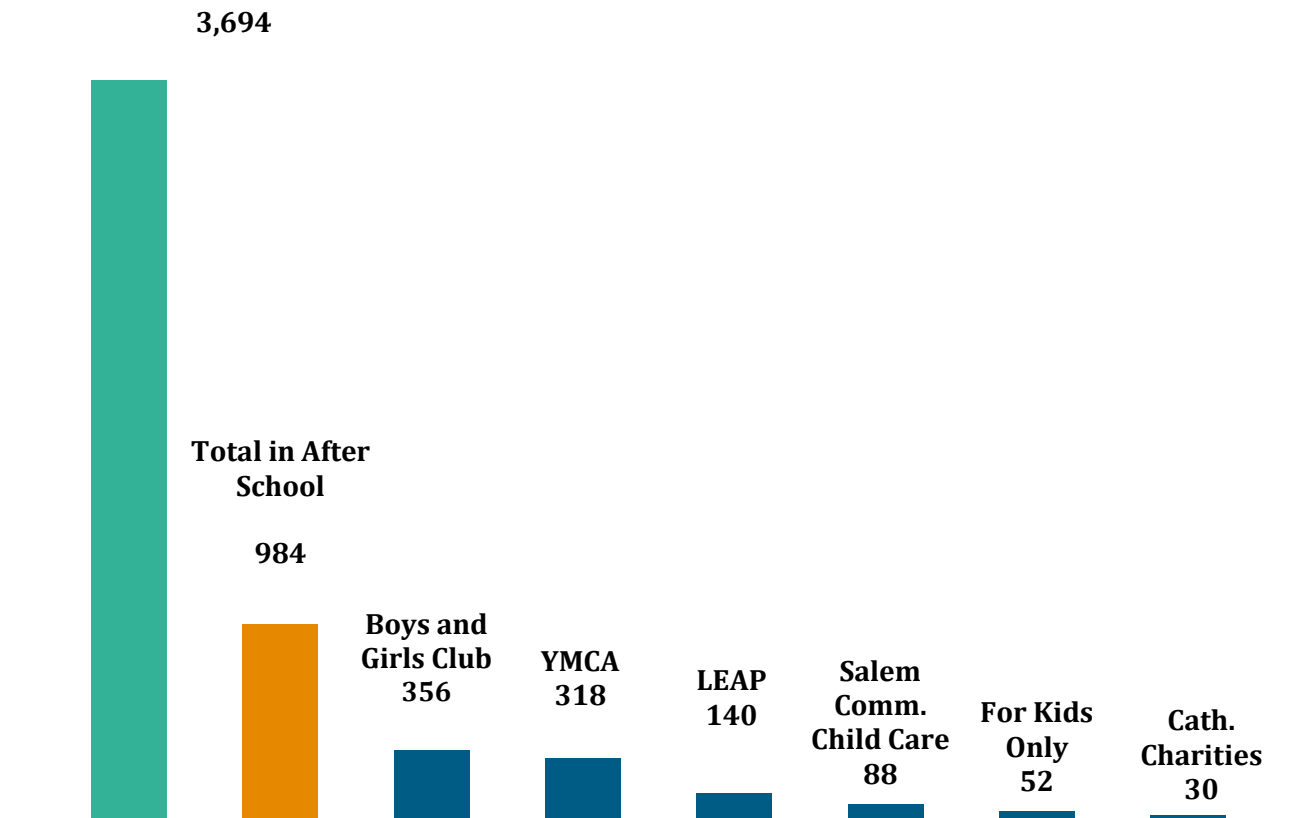
Current After-School Opportunities in Salem

The city of Salem has 43,000 residents, with a median household income of $66,000 (compared to $77,000 for Massachusetts as a whole).[5] The Salem Public Schools operated 11 individual schools, including an early learning center, and served 3,700 kids in 2017-2018.[6] Salem Public Schools students were 47 percent White, 38 percent Hispanic/Latinx, 7 percent Black, 5 percent multi-ethnic, 3 percent Asian, and several are Native American youth.[7] Nearly half, 49 percent of students, are economically disadvantaged, while 13 percent are English Language Learners.[8] Salem is one of the 26 Massachusetts Gateway Cities, defined by the Legislature as mid-sized urban centers that serve as key anchors of regional economies, but that have been negatively affected by economic trends over the past several decades.[9]

In the fall of 2018 MassBudget, with the help of a team of students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, undertook interviews with after-school providers to gauge the current state of services in Salem. Six after-school organizations that participated in interviews were large comprehensive providers, defined as those offering: services for five days a week, meals for students, and some form of financial support to promote access for participating families. That group includes the Boys and Girls Club, Catholic Charities, For Kids Only, LEAP for Education, Salem Community Child Care, and the Salem YMCA. These varied organizations serve different age groups of kids, who are mostly low-income.

The six large after-school providers in Salem served 984 children as of 2018, or 27 percent of all young people in Salem Public Schools. This meant 73 percent or roughly 2,700 students did not participate in a comprehensive program. Assuming programs served a minimum of 60 percent low-income students (providers reported a 60-90 percent range) that means as few as 600 low-income youth are covered. This leaves as many as 1,200 economically disadvantaged kids without comprehensive after-school in Salem.[10]

Large After-School Programs in Salem
Serve Nearly 1,000 Students, Only 27% of all Kids

Salem School Enrollment 2017-2018

3,694

Total in After School

984

Boys and Girls Club 356

YMCA 318

LEAP 140

Salem Comm. Child Care 88

For Kids Only 52

Cath. Charities 30

Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MassBudget Interviews with Providers

Interviews and a landscape analysis also identified over 25 small after-school providers in Salem, who generally serve fewer students, operate less frequently, and focus on a single non-academic activity such as dance, music, or martial arts.[11] Because evidence suggests that more comprehensive services are more likely to affect long-term, positive outcomes for youth, this report will focus on access to comprehensive programs. Smaller programs and providers nevertheless have a positive role to play in providing enrichment and other experiences for youth in Salem.

Case Studies of After-School Expansion & Lessons for Salem

Many communities across our state and the country face the same challenges as Salem. There is a great need for communities to support kids and families with after-school enrichment, particularly for those with less access or ability to pay for these opportunities. However, like in Salem, there is often a patchwork of available programs, limited capacity, scarce resources, and a variety of somewhat disconnected program goals, approaches, and definitions of success. Despite these challenges, in recent

years there have been prominent examples of communities across the country making progress in increasing access to quality after-school programming.

Providence, Rhode Island - Providence After-School Alliance (PASA)

One significant after-school effort is the Providence After-School Alliance (PASA). The city of Providence, Rhode Island is home to nearly 180,000 people with an annual median income of just over $40,000 compared to $64,000 for the state at large.[12] The school district serves roughly 24,000 students, roughly 87 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.[13] While there have been significant challenges to achievement in the Providence Public Schools at large, the city has also undertaken significant effort to formalize and strengthen after-school efforts.[14]

PASA is a non-profit organization that works with the city of Providence and its school system. The organization has operated since 2004, when a community assessment identified an unmet need for enrichment programming, particularly for middle school students. The resulting action plan led to the creation of regional networks called "afterzones" serving Providence middle schools and their surrounding neighborhoods. In its first years of operation, PASA expanded to seven of the city's eight middle schools, and more than 40 percent of middle schoolers at participating sites.[15]

PASA serves the functions of distributing funding, streamlining communication, supporting enrollment, and overseeing program quality for multiple after-school providers.[16] The centralized approach of PASA helps to promote greater collaboration among providers. PASA acts as an advocate for all after-school providers, including helping with fundraising.[17]

PASA coordinates after-school services, managing up to 100 programs in seven middle schools, distributing funds, setting schedules, overseeing enrollment, implementing a unified set of quality standards and providing training aligned with these standards.[18] Programming includes after-school services for sixth to eighth graders based in anchor schools and surrounding libraries and community centers that also house programs within the same geographic zone.[19] PASA students participate in 2.5 hours daily, four days a week programming throughout the school year. There are varied offerings including academic enrichment and skills courses, arts, and sports.[20] PASA also ensures students have transportation, either to offsite opportunities or home on late buses that operate at each school.[21] This unified approach helps PASA identify gaps and increase access for students. At the same time, the organization oversees quality standards that ensure programs are healthy and safe, and that parents, families, and other stakeholders can trust the organizations under the PASA umbrella.

PASA has achieved notable success in advancing after-school programs and coordination, while positively affecting student outcomes. One report found that participating students, particularly those with greater engagement in the program, improved on attendance, math grades, as well as attitude and behavior.[22] To achieve these outcomes, PASA has developed a significant operating budget and robust funding. Typically, it does not charge fees.[23]

Overall, PASA operating expenses averaged $2.5 million in 2015 and 2016 (in 2019 dollars).[24] This total budget is supported by roughly equal parts public and private dollars, including city and school district funds, as well as foundation grants and individual donations.[25] In 2017, PASA reported serving 1,500 middle schoolers in its "AfterZones" and 2,000 students overall.[26] This would suggest per-student costs of $1,237 per-student on average after adjusting for inflation.

Even with the successes achieved, PASA faces challenges. The organization requires extensive fundraising and has been subject to various restrictions and priorities related to this support. This may have limited its responsiveness to schools, educators, and students.[27] PASA has also yet to reach universal coverage, with students at several schools outside the PASA umbrella.

Grand Rapids, Michigan –Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) Network

Another community that has undertaken significant after-school expansion efforts is Grand Rapids, Michigan. The city is home to over 195,000 people, with a median income of $44,000 annually compared to $ 55,000 for Michigan as a whole.[28] The Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) serve nearly 17,000 students from an array of backgrounds, making it the fifth-largest school district in Michigan.[29] Roughly 75 percent of these students are from low-income families.[30] Grand Rapids serves students in after-school through an organization called the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Network.

Since 2001, the ELO Network has operated across the city and school district to ensure that children in Grand Rapids and surrounding communities in Western Michigan have access to after-school enrichment.[31] Like in Providence, there was a significant need for unification of efforts across fragmented after-school services and providers. Within the ELO Network, after-school funders and providers, which had once competed for resources, came together to address common priorities and identify areas of collaboration.[32]

Before the creation of the ELO Network, Grands Rapids educators had little information on the types of after-school services that benefited kids or what other activities students were undertaking. An initial landscape analysis provided them with a much greater understanding of how many children needed services, their demographics, and what would be necessary to provide high-quality services.[33]

Currently, the ELO Network serves 21,000 students and includes 120 community partners.[34] The ELO Network has developed unified quality standards for all partner programs.[35] These standards, covering areas such as student engagement and positive learning environment, have been the basis of evidence-based quality efforts and led to ongoing improvement within the ELO Network.[36] The network has also created an open data dashboard that makes information about providers, participants, and academic outcomes available to the public.[37]

Some after-school providers within the ELO Network charge family fees, and there are challenges with ensuring all students can participate in high quality after-school. However, the ELO Network has comprehensive services for some children. One example is LOOP, a collaboration of the Grand Rapids public schools and after-school partners such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and local faith-based organizations. LOOP serves elementary and middle school students free-of-charge, offering homework support, tutoring, and enrichment activities.[38] LOOP offers a nearly daily program of up to three hours. Student recruitment is focused on those kids who need additional academic support and are from low-income families.[39] Enrollment for this program reached more than 2,500 students as of 2017.[40]

According to the most recent data from 2016, the Grand Rapids city office which houses the ELO network reported a budget of $903,000 after adjusting for inflation.[41] Of this total 43 percent, or $391,000 was attributed to the ELO Network including administrative costs. This budget included a mix of revenue sources, including two-thirds private grant and donor funds, 19 percent in-kind donations, and 15 percent city funding.[42] Recent Grand Rapids budget data shows that this effort employed three full-time staff including an administrator, analyst, and executive assistant.[43]

Unfortunately, the entire ELO Network budget, inclusive of the cost of after-school service providers, is unclear. However, the ELO Network itself costs roughly $20 per student annually.[44]

Nashville, Tennessee - After Zones Alliance (NAZA)

Nashville, Tennessee has also built a significant coordinated after-school system in the past decade. The Nashville metropolitan area is home to 666,000 people with a median income of $58,000, higher than the statewide average in Tennessee of $51,000.[45] The public schools which serve metro Nashville educated over 85,900 students in 2018-2019, 72 percent of whom were in low-income families.[46] Since 2010, the city has convened and operated a coordinated after-school system known as the Nashville After Zones Alliance (NAZA).

This organization arose after the city of Nashville convened a student success task force to address public school dropouts and to improve academic outcomes.[47] This task force made a few key recommendations including to provide more youth, particularly middle schoolers, with greater out-of-school time opportunities.[48] Nashville also created a citywide after-school administrator role, working under the Mayor, charged with planning and overseeing the NAZA effort.[49] This administrator works collaboratively with a leadership council comprised of city agencies, the school district, business, and community leaders.

This leadership team adopted a plan to split metro Nashville into geographical after-school zones that would be opened sequentially across the city over several years.[50] The first zone, funded primarily through the city budget, opened in 2010, while in 2011 city funding was matched with additional support from partner organizations.[51] NAZA currently serves five zones in Nashville.[52] As the effort has matured, its place in city infrastructure and governance shifted from the Mayor's office to the Metro Nashville Public Libraries, ensuring a consistent stable partnership through multiple city administrations.[53]

While it grew, NAZA focused on addressing the needs of the highest-risk youth, who did not benefit from enough educational or social programs in their neighborhoods.[54] Nashville engaged in an outreach campaign where youth and families helped design the programming for their zone, advised on how it could attract students, and tailored offerings to the specific challenges youth and families wanted to address.[55]

While NAZA works as a single initiative, achieving economies of scale by using common schedules, recruitment materials, transportation, and data tracking systems, there is also autonomy for staff on the ground in different areas.[56] In each "After Zone" a lead agency, such as a community nonprofit employs a local director, who coordinates the offerings of specific after-school providers. [57] These providers, called "Anchor Partners," run program sites within the zone.[58] NAZA provides quality control for leading providers within the system as well as ongoing professional development to improve practices.[59] Additionally, "Enhancement Partners" increase enrichment opportunities by offering specialties such as fashion, sports, and arts programs.[60]

NAZA focuses on middle school youth and is an entirely free service for families.[61] However, the program does depend on in-kind support from city agencies, particularly the use of free space in Nashville Public Schools, and assistance with transportation when needed.[62] NAZA tries to put programs where they are most needed and accessible for youth.

According to recent data, NAZA had a budget of $3.4 million in 2017-2018, when adjusting for inflation. This includes roughly $2.9 million in public dollars from Nashville municipal government, $300,000 in federal aid, and $200,000 in philanthropic support.[63] During that year NAZA enrolled 2,945 students.

Only 2,189 students are in fully-funded NAZA programs, with 756 students in programs at least partially supported by other partners.[64] NAZA reports a standard per-pupil cost of $1,300 before accounting for the significant in-kind resources provided by the city government and other partners.[65]

Recommendations - Expanding Access to Quality After-School in Salem

The efforts of cities across the country including Providence, Grand Rapids, and Nashville provide useful lessons for Salem to consider as it moves towards making high-quality after-school programs available to more youth. Effective practices from many leading national programs can be adapted in the specific context of Salem in ways that meet the needs of families and most of all kids.

The lessons learned from efforts across the country are numerous, and the subject of significant research in the field.[66] Several key themes can provide a useful starting point for Salem to consider in moving towards after-school expansion. Many of these practices are also mutually dependent and reinforcing.

Recommendation 1: Undertake a Landscape Analysis

One of the formative steps for the successful after-school initiatives profiled here was gaining a clear understanding of the landscape in their community and particularly better information about children and families that could be served through expanded after-school.

Improving understanding of the existing landscape for out-of-school time can help identify the types of students who need after-school, the services they are already participating in, barriers to access, and preferences for expanded services. Nashville undertook a formal assessment, which was related to reducing student dropouts, and zeroed in on after-school as a key leverage point for positive change.

In this regard, Salem can build on the efforts already underway across the city to understand and improve key indicators of child wellbeing. Through a national network called By All Means, and the related local organization, Our Salem Our Kids, the city has begun to bring together a range of key youth-serving organizations to assess conditions for kids and the supports they need to achieve greater levels of success.[67] Due to its relatively small size and the existing efforts, Salem may not need a formal needs assessment like those done by the cities profiled in the above case studies. However, synthesizing existing information into an effective landscape analysis is an important step to further unify key stakeholders, create a shared sense of the challenges and opportunities at hand, and spur further collaboration.

City officials and allied organizations will need to carefully gather and evaluate information from a wide range of constituents and families on the specific issue of after-school. It will likely be more difficult to connect with families who speak first languages other than English and those who are not connected with existing programs. The process could also require differentiation by age group. For example, parents may be more likely to offer thoughts on needs and opportunities for K-8 students while high schoolers could be contacted directly to share their perspectives on youth service needs.

Continued cooperation between the city, school, and community organizations is necessary to undertake an effective landscape analysis.

Recommendation 2: Create a Coordinating Organization

Another important component of successful after-school efforts is a coordinating entity that takes ownership. This is a step that, for cities like Providence, has been a natural extension of responding to the insights gained from undertaking landscape analysis.

Interviews with providers in Salem revealed a need for continued focus on areas such as recruitment of students, retaining qualified staff, collaboration among providers, as well as increasing access to funding and facilities.[68] All of these issues could potentially be better addressed by working collaboratively within a unified organization. Additionally, there are varying standards and systems for different after-school providers in Salem that necessitate a more unified approach.

Across the country coordinating entities have developed in different ways depending on local conditions. Typically they have either been government agencies, independent non-profits, or formalized networks under the purview of several organizations. In all cases, there has been a unifying focus on after-school.[69] In Grand Rapids and Nashville, city governments filled the gap by creating a new office. In Providence, PASA stepped up as an independent non-profit to lead the effort.

Creating an after-school coordinating organization takes significant investment. It could require greater staff time than is currently available within the city of Salem or the school district. Additionally, while various structures have worked for different places, leaders in Salem must determine if a city agency, independent non-profit, or collaborative network with clearly defined roles would be best for their situation. Regardless of what structure is adopted, there will need to be a sequential approach where fundamental issues of network goals, expectations, application processes for new members, and communication are the priorities. Over time, the unified organization can tackle more advanced issues such as data sharing and funding to directly cover services for more families.

Recommendation 3: Collect Key Data, Define, Share and Implement Quality Metrics

Each program profiled in this report also set up data collection systems to examine student indicators and measure the success of programs. This has helped cities ensure that all after-school stakeholders including providers, city agencies, schools, and families are moving with shared goals and information relevant to their objectives.

Across the country, after-school networks have prioritized data collection and used it to improve services and outcomes for kids. National after-school efforts used data and quality measurement systems to measure enrollment, attendance, and demographic data.[70] Furthermore, centralized networks have taken the next step from simply collecting data, to using it to tailor services, identify trends, and support adaptation and improvement.[71] Some cities have even employed geographic information systems to identify gaps and improve access to services.[72] Data systems in after-school efforts have also been critical to creating city-wide quality indicators and assessments. These systems also support program evaluations that help communities see the tangible benefits of the work for students and families.[73]

The efforts profiled in this report have at times made innovative use of data and quality indicators to advance after-school initiatives. Metro Nashville's Public Schools has implemented a data-sharing agreement that enables student data to be integrated between the NAZA initiative and the district student management system, creating a seamless process that reduces data entry for providers, ensures sharing of key contact information, and has the potential to help the district see how its goals are also advanced in out-of-school time.[74]

In Providence, PASA was a key player in developing after-school quality standards, not only for Providence but ultimately for the entire state of Rhode Island, which built off their approach. The resulting quality tool called RIPQA has helped experts provide technical assistance at the program level to improve services for young people.[75]

Grand Rapids has been effective in creating success indicators and integrating them into larger operations of city government. The ELO Network created data indicators that help evaluate need and demand for after-school across the city.[76] These indicators are applied to areas beyond their after-school expansion, such as a youth plan for the city of Grand Rapids at large.[77] Using its data, the ELO Network was able to work with partners such as local universities and city police to demonstrate that youth in after-school were less likely to be involved in delinquency and that there was a correlation between after-school expansion and declines in negative youth involvement with the police.[78]

Given that these examples emerged over several years, Salem will need time to establish a successful data and program quality system. The city will need to consider several factors, such as overall goals and vision, the time it will take to gather input and examine options of what system to adopt, the costs of any new database, how to transition from existing systems, and how to create pilots and data-sharing agreements that will lead to overall success.[79]

Recommendation 4: Ensure Financial Support for After-School

All the components of effective after-school networks discussed above require investment, including with public dollars. None of the networks across the country, the after-school services they have supported, nor the existing programs available in Salem would be possible without sufficient funding. As Salem considers how to proceed with the first three recommendations, undertaking a landscape analysis, creating a backbone organization for the efforts, and establishing a data and quality measurement system, it will also have to determine how to ensure these efforts are properly funded.

Several initiatives profiled here began with a reasonable budget and were able to grow thanks to combining several sources of funding. For example, the city of Nashville deployed $400,000 in seed funding for the NAZA network to launch its first site, with funding increasing to $1,000,000 after the introduction of the second service area.[80] At the same time, the NAZA network was able to attract $250,000 from private sources, while enlisting partners and providers that contributed towards the effort.[81] A combination of city funding, along with some available state and federal grants can help spur the development of greater after-school choices. The NAZA network has also gained greater stability by moving from the Mayor's Office to the city libraries, which helped to integrate resources from a well-established public system that also draws significant private support.[82]

In Providence, PASA maintained the ability to offer programming without charging families by employing a variety of funding sources, including federal block grants, 21st Century Learning Center grants, a dedicated city line-item, and by cultivating private support.[83] Similarly, after-school efforts in

Grand Rapids have a relatively diverse mix of city funding, private grants, individual donors, and in-kind support.[84]

While each of the city programs discussed here uses a multitude of funding sources, it is helpful to consider an estimate for the overall costs of a unified after-school network with expanded service in Salem. As mentioned above, Providence's overall expenditures (which are likely similar to Salem's) totaled over $1,200 per-student on average in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years after adjusting for inflation. NAZA recently reported a cost of $1,300 annually, which does not necessarily reflect in-kind support from partners including the public schools for space and other resources.[85] The budget of the ELO Network in Grand Rapids is not inclusive of the total program costs including service provision, but the centralized network itself reported inflation-adjusted costs of just over $391,000 for the activities of its network in 2016, the most recent year with a public annual report.[86]

The realistic costs for Salem would largely depend on the range of expansion. As discussed above, of the 3,694 students enrolled in Salem as of 2017-2018, large providers reported serving 984 youth. This would leave up to 2,710 students needing services to reach universal access. That is the most expansive possibility. An alternative would focus on access for all low-income students. The providers surveyed reported at least 60 percent of the students they served are low-income. This would suggest a floor of 590 low-income students being served by existing efforts. Using 2017-2018 figures, this leaves 1,218 low-income students as the focus for after-school expansion efforts.[87] Using per-student budgetary figures from Providence, the cost of expansion would be roughly $1.5 million if focused on serving all disadvantaged students. Reaching universal access across the district could take up to $3.4 million annually. Within these broad scenarios, there are numerous options for how Salem could undertake and prioritize after-school expansion.

National After-School Case Studies Spend
Up to $1,300 Per-Pupil Annually

PASA Total
$1,237

NAZA Total
$1,300
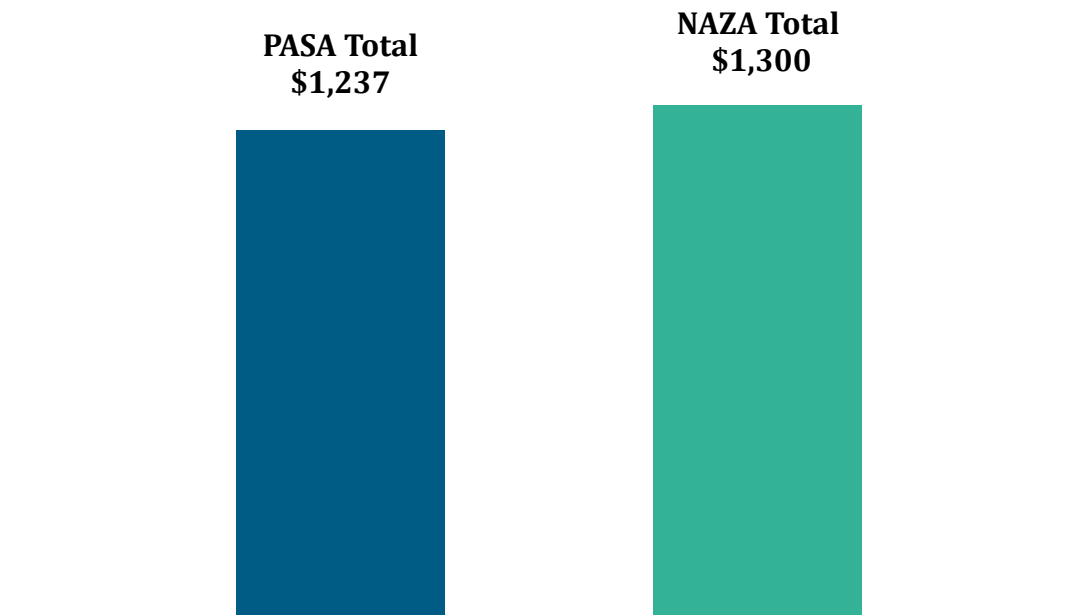
Providence After School Alliance, Nashville After Zones Alliance

As Salem moves to expand access to after-school programming, the city has the opportunity to learn from cities across the country and from understanding the current landscape of programming in Salem. These recommendations, to conduct a needs assessment, create a centralized network, develop common data and quality indicators, and to ensure consistent financial support for after-school could allow Salem to better serve families, bring together providers, and ensure high-quality sustainable offerings. These are all approaches that — as illustrated by Providence, Grand Rapids, and Nashville — have real promise for improving Salem's after-school picture. The city has great potential to create and develop a unique model of increased access for the benefit of its children.

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