

The New Ecology of Afterschool: Emerging Pressures on Workforce, Children and Developmental Relationships

Technical Report

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Keywords

Afterschool programs; workforce development; child development; developmental relationships; program quality; youth development; social-emotional learning; out-of-school time

Abstract

This report examines how conditions affecting afterschool programs have changed in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on interviews with 130 program directors in Palm Beach County, the study identifies a “new ecology” characterized by workforce instability, an increasingly inexperienced workforce, rising child stress, and growing pressures on families. These converging conditions increase the relational demands placed on programs while simultaneously making it more difficult to sustain the developmental relationships that underpin high-quality practice. Findings suggest that maintaining program effectiveness and long-term returns on investment will require adapting quality assurance systems to better support early-career staff and protect the relational conditions central to child development.

Executive Summary

Over the past 25 years, a substantial body of evidence has demonstrated that high-quality afterschool programs generate consequential benefits for children, families and regional economies. Prime Time Palm Beach County’s 25-Year Report estimates that the county’s afterschool system has produced more than \$2 billion in social and economic returns. These returns, however, depend on programs’ ability to deliver consistently high-quality experiences.

Developmental science shows that both the quality and effectiveness of school-age care and afterschool programs ultimately depend on the *developmental relationships* adults cultivate with children. Through stable, emotionally attuned relationships, adults help children regulate emotions, sustain attention and engage in learning. When these relational conditions weaken, access to learning narrows regardless of curriculum or program structure.

Prime Time’s Census Study of Afterschool Directors examined whether conditions affecting these relationships have changed in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with 130 program directors identify a “new ecology” shaping afterschool programs, characterized by workforce instability, rising child stress and growing economic and logistical pressure on families.

Key Findings from the Census

Directors consistently described several converging patterns affecting programs:

- **Workforce instability and early-career staff.** High turnover and the onboarding of inexperienced staff reduce continuity for children and require directors to invest substantial time in foundational professional socialization.
- **Rising child stress and attention challenges.** Many children arrive at programs with elevated emotional stress and difficulty sustaining attention, increasing the need for adult co-regulation and emotional support.
- **Dual professional learning demands for staff.** Frontline staff must learn both foundational workplace norms and the developmental practices needed to support children’s emotional and behavioral growth.
- **Greater importance of family–program alignment.** Directors report that communication with families about child development and behavior has become increasingly important as parental stress and differing expectations create inconsistencies across program, school and family settings.

When asked about their vision for the coming year, directors overwhelmingly emphasized stability and continuity: consistent staffing, calmer program environments, stronger staff confidence and improved communication with families.

Implications

Because the documented return on investment from afterschool programs depends on high-quality implementation—and quality depends on relationships—protecting relational conditions becomes a system-level priority.

The report concludes with recommendations to adapt Prime Time’s best-in-class quality improvement infrastructure to this new ecology. These include strengthening data systems to identify emerging pressures, adapting professional learning to support an increasingly early-career workforce, and expanding leadership supports that help directors stabilize staffing and reinforce relational practice.

Afterschool programs remain a critical protective and developmental environment for children -- particularly during a period marked by economic uncertainty, workforce volatility and digitally saturated childhoods. Sustaining that promise requires continued investment in the stable, skilled adult-child relationships at the heart of child development.

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, a substantial body of evidence has demonstrated that high-quality afterschool programs generate consequential benefits for children, families and regional economies. Prime Time Palm Beach County’s 25-Year Report estimates these returns at more than \$2 billion and highlights a central conclusion: the social and economic return on investment from afterschool programs depends on their ability to deliver consistently high-quality experiences to children (Smith & Giannella, 2026).

Developmental science has long established that the quality of youth programs ultimately depends on the caring, intentional relationships that adults cultivate with children.¹ From early childhood through adolescence, learning and development are mediated by relationships with adults who provide emotional safety, introduction to new experiences and guidance for skill practice. As articulated in the seminal work, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, child outcomes are shaped not by isolated interventions, but by the broader ecology of relationships, settings and communities in which children and families are embedded (Sameroff, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

A deep evidence base has further clarified the role of relationships as a proximal mechanism of learning. For example, Elizabeth Hau’s recent book, *Love to Learn*, emphasizes the moment-to-moment nature of developmental relationships, particularly the role of emotional attunement and co-regulation between adults and children (2023). These relational processes determine whether children are able to engage with the opportunities a program provides.

When children feel regulated and supported in relationships, they are able to engage and learn; when relational conditions are strained, the window for engagement and learning narrows, regardless of curriculum or structure. While this is true for all humans, for children experiencing elevated stress, strong relationships are particularly important protective factors (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sahle et al., 2024).

The purpose of Prime Time’s recent Census Study of Afterschool Directors was to examine whether, and how, conditions in afterschool and school-age care settings have been changing in the post-pandemic years. Drawing on interviews with program directors across Palm Beach County, the

¹ The concept of “developmental relationships” draws on a broad body of research in developmental science, resilience theory and educational psychology. Attachment theory emphasizes the role of stable, responsive adult relationships in fostering emotional security and regulation (Bowlby, 1988). Ecological developmental frameworks underscore that children’s outcomes are shaped by relationships within and across settings rather than isolated program components (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Masten (2014) describes supportive adult relationships as a form of “ordinary magic” that undergirds resilience across adversity. Self-determination theory similarly identifies relatedness, alongside autonomy and competence, as a foundational psychological need supporting motivation and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Across these literatures, sustained, emotionally attuned adult–child relationships function as a primary mechanism through which children develop self-regulation, competence and long-term adaptive capacity. In the youth development and afterschool fields, this mechanism has been articulated explicitly as “developmental relationships,” including work by Li and Julian (2012), who describe relationships as the active ingredient across effective interventions, and by Roehlkepartain and colleagues (2017), who outline core relational elements that help young people thrive in out-of-school-time settings.

Census documents a “new ecology”² characterized by instability and inexperience in the regional afterschool and school-age childcare workforce, increasing numbers of children bringing higher levels of stress and attention challenges into afterschool programs and increasing family economic strain. Directors consistently described how these conditions are reducing continuity in the adult-child relationships which are the foundation of their work, and necessary to achieve high standards for program quality in Palm Beach County.

Because Palm Beach County operates one of the most mature and comprehensive afterschool quality assurance systems in the nation, the experiences of local directors provide a useful early indicator of how broader ecological pressures may be affecting child and youth-serving systems across the country.

“I have a lot of new staff starting next year and they're all inexperienced straight out of high school, so one of the challenges they will have is learning how to do the job without much training...”

—Afterschool Program Director

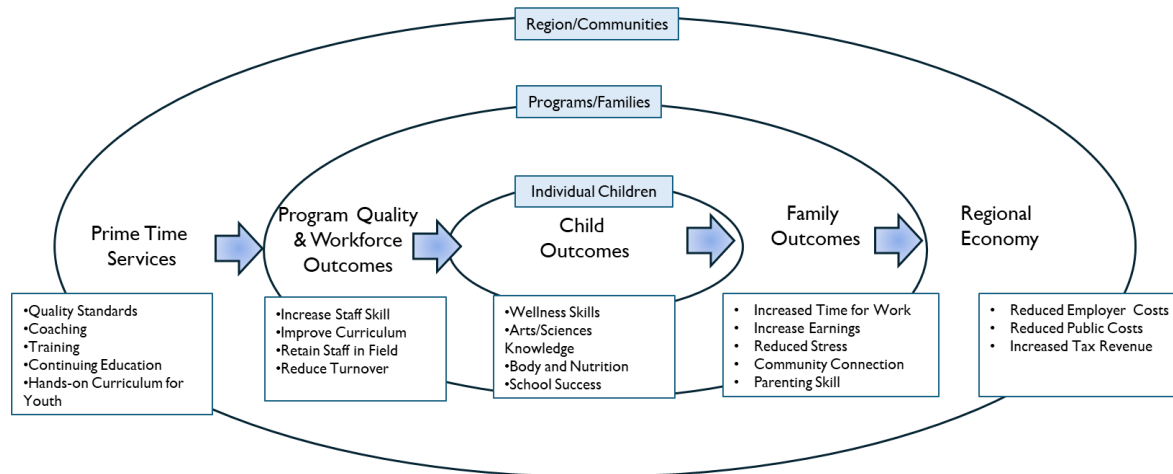
“This year we had a lot of students, especially the older ones, are dealing with their preteen challenges... but now it starts with 3rd and 4th grade, so we're dealing with younger ones, and that's something I've never really thought of.”

—Afterschool Program Director

Figure 1 illustrates the framework underlying Prime Time Palm Beach County's approach to quality improvement. The model highlights how investments in workforce development and program supports strengthen program quality and adult-child interactions, which in turn generate developmental benefits for children, support for families and long-term economic returns for the community.

² The term “ecology” is used here in the tradition of ecological systems theory, which conceptualizes child development as occurring within nested and interacting systems, including family, school, community institutions, labor markets and policy environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this framework, development is shaped not only by immediate relationships (microsystems), but also by interactions among settings (mesosystems) and broader economic and policy structures (exosystems and macrosystems). Recent scholarship in the out-of-school-time (OST) field similarly emphasizes that youth development programs operate within interconnected ecosystems that include workforce conditions, intermediary organizations, funding streams, cross-sector coordination and policy alignment (Moroney & Nalamada (Eds.), 2025). The phrase “new ecology of afterschool” therefore refers to the interacting workforce, family, economic, technological and policy conditions that shape the relational environment in which afterschool programs operate.

Figure 1. Prime Time Outcomes Framework: From Workforce Stability to Child, Family and Community Outcomes



Note: The framework illustrates how investments in workforce development and quality improvement strengthen program quality and developmental relationships, leading to benefits for children, families and the regional economy.

The Census Study reported here examines whether the conditions supporting this framework have changed in recent years.

Background

A Field in Transition

The Census of Afterschool Directors was initiated in response to two converging signals. First, Prime Time began to observe changing patterns in performance data. Second, directors and coaches increasingly described new challenges in day-to-day operations.

In this section, we situate Palm Beach County’s experience within national labor, family and child development trends. Changes in labor markets, family economic conditions, and children’s mental and emotional wellness needs have altered the context in which youth-serving organizations function (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021; Maier & Roach, 2023).

Workforce instability has emerged as a defining feature of the new ecology. Multi-state studies document persistent challenges related to staff recruitment, retention and compensation across childcare and afterschool settings (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021). At the same time, the composition of the workforce has shifted, with a growing proportion of frontline staff entering the field with limited prior experience in youth development or, more generally, in any formal employment setting (Maier & Roach, 2023). Further, the proportion of the workforce who has learned about child development through rearing their own children has decreased: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Martin et al., 2023; Osterman et al., 2024), the average age at first birth in the United States has risen steadily over the past several decades.

For individual children, national (and cross national) trend data point to increased mental and emotional wellness concerns among school-aged children and adolescents in recent years (Leeb et al., 2024). Scholars have also raised concerns about children’s opportunities for play, sustained attention and face-to-face social interaction in the context of expanding digital and algorithm-driven environments (Gray, 2013; Haidt, 2024).³

Finally, families served by afterschool programs are also navigating heightened economic and logistical pressures. Many households juggle multiple jobs, nonstandard work hours and blended caregiving responsibilities which in turn limit their capacity for consistent engagement with schools and afterschool programs (Lofton et al., 2021; Duran-Franch & Regmi, 2022).

Evidence from Palm Beach County

Over the past several years, performance data collected by Prime Time began to signal shifts in the conditions facing afterschool programs. Anecdotal reports suggested that more younger staff were entering the field and that higher levels of turnover were occurring. At the same time, quality assessment data indicated lower performance in some of the more advanced relational practices measured in the Youth Program Quality Assessment, particularly items related to emotion management and empathy. Child assessment data indicated that as many as 30 percent of afterschool activity groupings were contending with challenges related to children’s self-regulation.

These shifting conditions form the backdrop for the Census Study. However, to fully interpret the findings, it is also important to understand the institutional context in which Palm Beach County’s afterschool programs operate. Over the past 25 years, Prime Time Palm Beach County has built one of the most comprehensive quality improvement infrastructures in the nation for school-age care and afterschool programs.

A Best-in-Class Quality Improvement Infrastructure

Designed to strengthen program quality at scale, Prime Time’s suite of services integrates standards, coaching, credentialing, wage supports, performance data and expert curriculum staffing, serving approximately 230 programs, 26,000 children, and 20,000 families in the county each year.⁴ This infrastructure represents a long-term, cumulative investment to achieve high standards for workforce skills, program quality and child outcomes.

³ In *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt (2024) argues that the rapid shift from play-based, in-person childhoods to “phone-based” childhoods—characterized by early smartphone access and immersive social media use—has contributed to rising rates of anxiety and depression among adolescents. National data indicate that in 2021, 42% of U.S. high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up from 28% in 2011, and approximately 1 in 5 children ages 3–17 have been diagnosed with a mental, emotional or behavioral disorder, with anxiety and depression among the most common (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

⁴ These numbers are based on performance in 2024-2025. Number of unique children per program was estimated using the average enrollment of 113. Number of unique families per program were estimated using the assumption that one quarter of children had siblings in afterschool, i.e., $113 \times 0.75 =$ number of families per program.

Recent policy research in the early childhood field has begun to clarify the system-level levers required to stabilize and professionalize the childcare workforce (Bernardi et al., 2024).⁵ This work provides a useful benchmark for understanding how a regional quality assurance system can support workforce stability.

As described in Table 1, Prime Time’s model exemplifies this multi-lever approach. The five evidence-based levers identified by Bernardi and colleagues are: economic support, qualifications, psychological well-being, workplace conditions and system alignment. While Prime Time’s infrastructure was built iteratively over 25 years in response to local need, when mapped explicitly onto this national framework, the alignment is comprehensive. Prime Time’s services do not cluster within one or two domains but span each of the major levers.

Table 1 illustrates that Prime Time has invested at scale across all five levers identified in the national literature. Economic supports, credentialing pathways, relationship-based coaching, wellness initiatives, workplace supports and system-level data infrastructure function not as isolated strategies but as mutually reinforcing components of a unified intermediary system. Palm Beach County therefore represents a high-capacity context for examining how changing ecological pressures interact with even the most comprehensive quality improvement systems.

While these system-level investments are designed to stabilize the workforce, their ultimate significance lies in the relational conditions they protect. Stable staffing, professional preparation and aligned systems make it possible for adults to sustain the relational conditions that support child development: continuity and trust over time, emotional containment and co-regulation during moments of stress and moment-to-moment attunement in daily interactions.

⁵ The term “policy levers” is informed by Bernardi et al.’s review of national strategies to build and sustain the child care and early education workforce. In their environmental scan of 144 active initiatives, Bernardi and colleagues identify five “levers of change” that shape workforce dynamics: educator economic well-being; educator qualifications and competencies; educator psychological well-being; workplace demands or supports; and system alignment and inequities. Rather than relying on a single intervention, the authors emphasize that workforce stability is influenced by coordinated action across multiple interacting levers (see Table 1 in Bernardi et al., 2024). Prime Time’s quality improvement infrastructure aligns with this multi-lever framework by integrating incentives, credentialing pathways, coaching, wellness supports, workplace supports and data system alignment within a unified intermediary system.

Table 1. Alignment of Evidence-Based Workforce Levers with Prime Time Services and Scale

Bernardi et al. Workforce Lever and Its Impact (See note 5)	Examples from Prime Time Palm Beach County Inc. over 25 years⁶
<p>Educator Economic Well-Being. Financial instability is a primary driver of turnover; wage supplements, scholarships, and incentives reduce turnover and improve retention.</p>	<p>Distributed more than 14,000:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives tied to implementation and training • Scholarships for credentials, degrees and certifications • Stipends aligned to milestones
<p>Educator Qualifications & Competencies. Clear, supported pathways for skill development and advancement strengthen practice and reduce early exit from the field.</p>	<p>Provided more than 37,000 enrollments for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive training portfolio including evidence-based Youth Work Methods • Career registry and pathway navigation • Credentialing (AA and BS degrees) and certification through Palm Beach State College
<p>Educator Psychological Well-Being. Stress, burnout, isolation and emotional overload undermine workforce stability and relational capacity; wellness and relational supports improve retention and effectiveness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered more than 23,000 hours of relationship-based coaching and technical assistance • Hosted 147 networking events and annual symposium to recognize professional advancement • Wellness and Leadership cohorts focused on adult and child wellness • Weekly mindfulness meetings for staff
<p>Workplace Demands & Supports. Supportive organizational structures, clear expectations, and expert curriculum staffing mitigate turnover and help staff succeed despite instability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported 2,436 annual program cycles of implementation for quality standards with more than 7,000 assessments, aligned action planning and nearly 10,000 on-site coaching visits • Provided at no cost to programs, more than 160,000 staff hours of expert curriculum delivery, with materials
<p>System Alignment & Infrastructure. Fragmented systems exacerbate turnover; coordinated, aligned systems amplify the impact of individual supports.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided intensive supports annually to more than 190 organizations to participate in an evidence-based Quality Improvement System (QIS) • Salesforce-based data infrastructure • Learning content and longitudinal data alignment across child, workforce and program supports

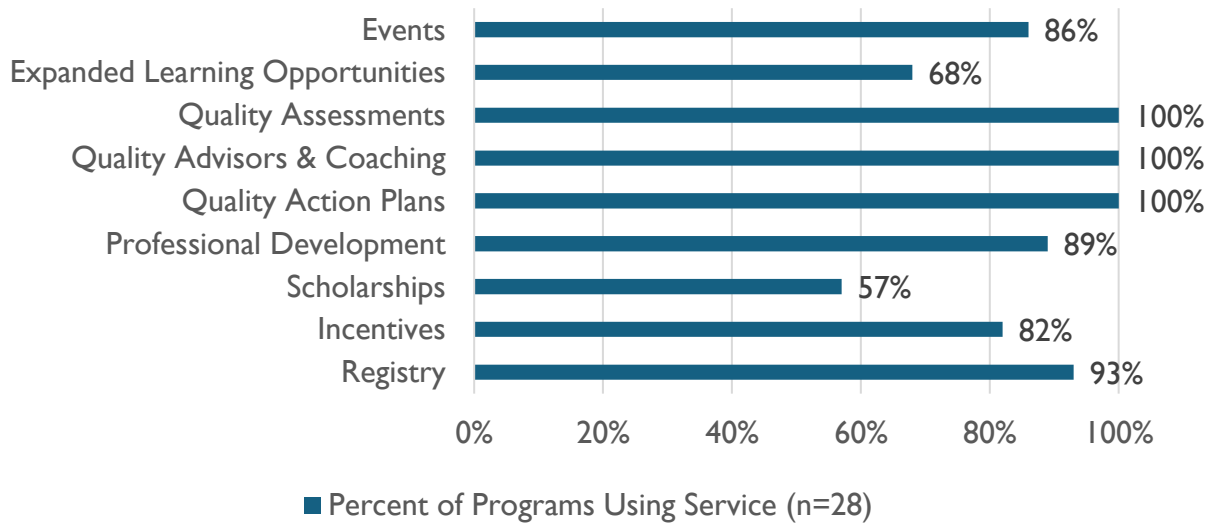
Census Study Method and Themes

A total of 130 afterschool program directors participated in interviews. For analytic purposes, two independent random samples of interviews (n=16 and n=12) were coded and analyzed separately to assess convergence in themes. Because results across the samples were highly consistent, the samples were combined into a single analytic dataset (n=28) for the findings presented here.

⁶ All figures in this column are drawn from Smith and Giannella (2026) see pages 7-9 and Appendix A Tables 1 and 2.

As shown in Figure 2, directors reported high levels of experience with Prime Time’s quality improvement services and are well-positioned to provide expert description of the needs of staff, children and families. Census Study methods are described in greater detail in Appendix A.

Figure 2. Use of Prime Time Quality Improvement Services Among Census Respondents



Note: Figure 2 demonstrates high engagement of afterschool program directors in continuous improvement activities indicating their expertise about staff, family, and child needs.

Interview responses from 28 randomly sampled interviews were coded to 14 codes across all question responses. These codes were then “rolled up” into the seven major themes listed in Table 2 (see step 6 “Theme Development” in Appendix A). A theme was counted as present if a director referenced it at least once across any study question. Percentages therefore indicate how widespread each theme was across directors. Appendix B provides definitions and sample quotations for each theme. The major themes were then integrated as five major Findings presented in the next section.

Table 2. Prevalence of Major Themes Across Directors

Major Theme	% of Director Interviews with Theme
Workforce instability & inexperience	93%
Professional socialization – foundational norms	93%
Child stress & attention challenges	71%
Parent–program alignment on child development	71%
Professional socialization – developmental practice	61%
Vision focused on stability & continuity	57%
Parent stress & family circumstances	46%

Note. Percent of directors reflects the proportion of interviews in which a theme was present.

Findings

The workforce investments described in Table 1 ultimately matter because they support the relational conditions through which afterschool programs produce outcomes for children, families and regional economies. More specifically, workforce stability, educator skills and supportive workplace structures create conditions under which adults can build consistent, attuned relationships with children. These developmental relationships form the mechanism through which afterschool programs produce quality, engagement, skill growth and ultimately, children’s transfer of skills to new settings.

Finding 1: Conditions in the New Ecology Strain Developmental Relationships

Drawing on the developmental science literature summarized in Note 1 - including attachment theory, resilience research and developmental relationships - relational quality in school-age care and afterschool settings can be understood as involving several observable conditions that enable children to feel safe, regulated and ready to engage in learning. Table 3 summarizes how the pressures described in the Census - staff turnover, early-career inexperience, child stress and family–program misalignment - translate into strain across these relational conditions.

Directors report frequent staff turnover and onboarding of new personnel, limiting continuity and predictability for children. Elevated child stress and behavioral dysregulation place additional demands on young adults’ capacity for emotional containment and co-regulation. Inexperience among frontline staff - many of whom are new to both the field and the workforce - constrains attunement and consistent relational responses. Finally, misalignment between family expectations and program practices challenges the development of shared meaning across children’s environments.

The most consequential challenge facing afterschool programs in the new ecology is sustaining stable, skilled adult–child relationships that allow children to feel safe, regulated and ready to engage in learning. While these relational conditions are foundational for all children, they are especially protective for children experiencing elevated stress or inconsistent support across settings. When relational stability weakens, those children may be the first to disengage.

The system pressures identified in the Census translate directly into strain on the relational conditions that developmental science identifies as the foundation of children’s engagement and learning. The conditions required for relational consistency are increasingly difficult to maintain.

Table 3. How New Ecological Pressures Disrupt Developmental Relationships

Six Aspects of Developmental Relationships	Disruption in the New Ecology
Continuity. Children experience adults as consistently present over time, allowing children’s trust and ability to predict adult behavior to grow over time, ideally multiple years.	Staff turnover and non-retention
Trust and Respect. Relationships are grounded in respect, dignity and a belief in children’s capacity to grow.	Adults have insufficient time to know and guide children’s abilities
Emotional Containment. Adults provide calm, non-reactive responses that help children feel secure, especially during moments of stress or conflict.	Child stress escalation and staff inexperience at managing their own stress
Co-Regulation. Adults help children manage emotions and behavior, often by modeling or guiding the desired emotion and behavior, before expecting sustained attention, compliance or learning in relation to curriculum activities.	Staff inexperience or limited understanding of child development
Attunement. Adults notice and respond to children’s emotional and behavioral cues, adjusting expectations and responsiveness in real time.	Staff inexperience or limited understanding of children’s emotional cues
Shared Expectations. Adults and caregivers communicate consistent norms, routines, and developmental expectations across school day, afterschool and family settings.	Parent-school-program misalignment

Finding 2: Child Stress and Behavioral Challenges are a Converging Pressure on Relationships

Directors' reports of child stress, emotional dysregulation and behavioral challenges reflect the cumulative effects of multiple ecological pressures. Family economic strain, disrupted routines, inconsistent caregiving, staff turnover and school-day pressures interact to increase children's need for co-regulation and emotional support.

“Last year a lot of our students had difficulty sharing what they were going through during the school day or at home... sometimes they needed just a listening ear or someone that they can turn to for comfort.

—Afterschool Program Director

Within afterschool programs, these pressures increase the relational demands placed on staff at the very moment when continuity and experience are hardest to sustain. These demands affect all children in the program environment. However, children experiencing higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression - for example from exposure to one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) - often require more sustained co-regulation and greater developmental expertise from adults in order to regulate emotions and engage in learning (Masten, 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

As a further point, directors' observations about child stress align with national conversations about attention difficulties and mental unwellness (Haidt, 2024). In this context, high-quality afterschool programs have the potential to serve as important protective environments - places where children still engage in non-technology-based play, experience autonomous multi-age social interaction and receive sustained attention from caring adults.

More generally, it is important to highlight the role that high-quality afterschool programs play as protective environments. Developmental relationships help children regulate stressed nervous systems and learn to manage their own emotional states toward full engagement – regardless of the source of the child's stress. Our challenge is to provide this protective role with a less experienced workforce and an increasing volume of child stress behaviors.

Finding 3: Professional Socialization Now Requires Two Distinct Forms of Learning

The Census data reveal that professional socialization for frontline staff now involves two overlapping but distinct developmental tasks:

- **Professional socialization into helping professions**, including reliability, professional communication, mandated reporting, safety procedures and ethical responsibility.
- **Professional learning about child development**, specifically, how to support emotion regulation, high quality interactions and provide appropriate responses to children with identified behavioral needs.

Directors consistently indicate that many staff are learning both simultaneously. Directors also noted that increasing numbers of children arrive with formal school designations related to

behavioral or learning needs, placing additional demands on staff who often have limited preparation for specialized supports. When inexperienced staff are asked to support children experiencing high levels of stress or complex developmental needs without adequate preparation or support, the resulting strain can undermine the forms of emotional containment and attunement that are central to developmental relationships.

Another important implication of this finding is that many frontline staff are themselves in late adolescence or emerging adulthood, navigating their own developmental transitions. Supporting staff therefore requires attending not only to skill acquisition, but to identity formation, emotional regulation and professional belonging - conditions that mirror those needed by the children they serve.

Finally, the single most prominent theme in the Census study – noted in more than 40% of all responses – was the issue of access to learning opportunities for younger and new staff. Because many young staff are balancing multiple jobs, postsecondary coursework and transportation constraints, it is very difficult for them to make it to training held off-site or before afternoon work hours begin.

“I have a lot of new staff starting next year and they're all inexperienced straight out of high school so one of the challenges that they will have is learning how to do the job without much training.”

—Afterschool Program Director

Finding 4: Family–Program Alignment Is Central to Relational Continuity

Directors frequently describe the need for improved communication with families about child development and behavior. Misalignment between home expectations and program practices can intensify behavioral challenges and place additional strain on adult–child relationships.

“We have many families who are not from here, and a lot of them are worried, questioning whether school is a safe place for their children to continue attending. Hopefully, we can continue to reassure them that while they are here, they are safe, and we will do everything we can to protect them.”

—Afterschool Program Director

“I also feel that parents are a bit burned out. I hope we can encourage them every day by reminding them that we are here for them. As for our staff, I hope we will continue participating in trainings and workshops that help us respond effectively to the challenges our families are facing.”

—Afterschool Program Director

Importantly, directors frame this as an alignment challenge occurring in the context of heightened parental stress, not as a deficit in families. The data suggests that shared understanding across settings is increasingly essential for maintaining relational continuity for children. For example,

program directors noted that many parents are unfamiliar with the developmental rationale behind high-quality programming and how they could align with high quality practices to take advantage of the skill building opportunities that afterschool programs provide for their children.

“My primary challenges for children and families that I anticipate are new parents and their children joining our program and not really knowing our program culture.”

—Afterschool Program Director

Finding 5: Directors’ Visions Validate the Census Results and Findings

Directors’ responses to the question “What is your vision for next year?” reinforce the interpretation of the Census findings. Rather than emphasizing program expansion or new initiatives, directors overwhelmingly prioritized staffing stability, calmer program environments, stronger staff confidence and improved communication with families. These priorities mirror the core pressures identified throughout the Census.

Integrative Interpretation

Taken together, the Census findings indicate that afterschool programs are operating within a new ecology characterized by converging pressures across workforce, family and child domains. These pressures do not function independently; they interact and accumulate at the level of daily adult–child relationships, consistent with transactional models of development (Sameroff, 2009), and increasing the level of support required to sustain developmental relationships.

At the child level, directors describe increased stress, behavioral dysregulation and attention challenges that heighten the relational demands placed on staff. Children require more co-regulation, more reassurance, and more predictable routines to feel safe and ready to engage. Many children navigate family economic strain, inconsistent schedules and digitally saturated environments, all of which point to the protective role afterschool programs might play – when they can offer developmental relationships in response.

While these relational functions benefit all children, they are particularly critical for those navigating heightened stress or adversity. The long-term economic and public health implications of sustained childhood stress and self-regulation difficulties suggest that strengthening relational and regulatory supports in afterschool may yield returns that extend well beyond the program day.⁷

⁷ Longitudinal evidence suggests that early adversity and persistent attention and behavior problems are associated with substantial long-term costs across multiple domains. In a population-based study using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, exposure to adverse childhood experiences significantly increased risk for later anxiety and depression symptoms during adolescence, accounting for a meaningful share of mental health burden (see *How Much Do Adverse Childhood Experiences Contribute to Adolescent Anxiety and Depression Symptoms?*). Similarly, a conceptual replication of Moffitt et al. (2011) using U.S. and U.K. cohorts found that childhood attention and behavior problems predicted lower educational attainment, reduced earnings, poorer health, and greater likelihood of criminal involvement decades later (Koepp et al., 2023). Across cohorts born in different decades and countries, attention and behavioral regulation difficulties were associated with adult financial status, health and incarceration outcomes, even after accounting for

Indeed, helping children develop stress-regulation skills is a substantial contributor to the long-term return on investment documented in Prime Time's Celebrating 25 Years of Impact and Long-Term Returns on Investment (Smith & Giannella, 2026).

At the workforce level, instability and inexperience reduce relational continuity at precisely the moment children require more of it. Frequent onboarding, limited prior work experience and the dual developmental task of learning both professionalism and developmental practice constrain adults' ability to provide consistent, attuned responses. Even in programs deeply engaged with quality improvement supports, staff are often building foundational competencies while simultaneously being asked to manage increasingly complex child needs.

Across family and program contexts, misalignment in expectations further compounds relational strain. Directors consistently emphasize that heightened parental stress and differing understandings of child development can create inconsistencies across settings. When expectations are not aligned, adult-child relationships within programs must absorb and reconcile those differences, placing additional pressure on staff capacity.

These findings emerge within a mature, best-in-class quality assurance system. The presence of powerful evidence-based levers - coaching, professional learning, degrees and certifications, wage incentives, wellness supports and continuous quality improvement cycles - does not eliminate relational strain. Instead, it clarifies the magnitude of ecological change. What directors describe is not disengagement from quality improvement, but the increasing intensity of conditions under which quality must now be achieved.

Viewed through a systems lens, the central risk in the new ecology is the erosion of relational stability. Developmental science is clear that relationships are the mechanism through which learning, regulation and long-term benefits are produced. If continuity weakens, if adult emotional containment falters under stress or if shared expectations fragment across settings, the relational pathways to engagement narrow. Because the documented return on investment from afterschool depends on high-quality implementation - and quality depends on relationships - protecting relational conditions becomes not only a program priority but a system-level imperative.

The implications of the Census are therefore adaptive rather than corrective. The findings do not suggest replacing existing structures; they suggest strengthening and recalibrating them to match rising relational demands. The task ahead is to ensure that quality assurance systems evolve in ways that protect continuity, build early-career capacity and reinforce alignment across workforce, families and programs.

The recommendations that follow are framed with this objective in mind: adapting a best-in-class system to sustain relational quality under changing ecological conditions.

childhood socioeconomic conditions. Together, these findings suggest that effective supports that strengthen children's regulatory capacities and buffer stress during childhood have the potential to generate long-term economic and social returns.

Recommendations: Adapting Best-in-Class Services to the New Ecology

The recommendations below focus on adaptation of data products, professional learning and leadership supports to better respond to the new ecology.

1. Improve Information: Strengthen Data Systems to Better Reflect Dynamics in the New Ecology

To respond effectively to changing conditions, quality assurance systems must generate data that illuminates new dynamics. Specifically, information about settings with high rates of turnover, new and inexperienced staff and large proportions of children struggling with stress behaviors, should be more easily identified in Prime Time's data.

Recommended actions include:

- Improve child assessment offerings to make it easier for program staff to identify the proportion of children exhibiting stress behaviors at the beginning of each year. Also, work with the school district to determine the proportion of children with special needs or exceptional status currently being served in county afterschool programs.
- Gather caregiver input about children's needs, school-day experiences, technology/social media use to align with afterschool opportunities and values.
- Adjust quality ratings to more clearly reflect relational quality and staffing continuity.
- Streamline access to Prime Time's internal data base to enable annual program- and county-level reports on staffing turnover, experience and expertise.
- Advance a "total quality dashboard" concept – where multiple performance metrics are reported from Prime Time's internal data base – using new ecology metrics at the program-level to improve real-time insight and differentiated response.

Together, these steps would enhance Prime Time's role as an intermediary, sense-maker and agenda-setter for child care policy in Palm Beach and Martin counties – and position Prime Time as a leader in responding to the new ecology for the wider field. Further, by adapting information systems to integrate multiple sources of data at the individual program level, it will facilitate the delivery of targeted supports such as those discussed in recommendations 2 and 3 below.

Recommendation 2: Adapt Professional Learning to the New Ecology

Prime Time already offers strong professional development through expert trainers and relationship-based coaching. Two complementary refinements are proposed: (1) expand micro-learning supports and (2) tune youth development content to strengthen relational practice under stress.

2.1 Expand Micro-Learning Supports

To better support programs with high proportions of new or inexperienced staff, Prime Time should consider:

- Creating flags or self-identification mechanisms in Prime Time’s data base to identify programs with elevated onboarding needs.
- Piloting short, video-based coaching that allows directors to share brief clips of practice for targeted feedback.⁸
- Breaking existing training content into short, mobile-accessible modules optimized for short-form mobile delivery.
- Encouraging coaches to more explicitly model relational techniques during site visits.

These strategies would align professional learning content delivery with workforce realities while making efficient re-use of Prime Time’s wealth of applicable content.

2.2 Tune Youth Development Content

Prime Time should also refine the emphasis of its child development content by:

- Elevating relationship-building, attunement and co-regulation as core practices.
- Integrating principles from attachment theory and trauma-informed practice into training and coaching.
- Make Prime Time’s excellent wellness and mindfulness content available for delivery by all coaches.

Together, these refinements reinforce the report’s central conclusion: sustaining afterschool’s impact in the new ecology requires strengthening the relational capacity of frontline staff.

3. Partner with Directors: Enhance Supports for Directors to Promote Stability and Continuity

Directors play a critical role in sustaining relational quality under changing conditions. The Census findings suggest that leadership supports that Prime Time offers should place greater emphasis on stability, continuity and onboarding at program sites where a higher proportion of staff are both new and new to the field.

⁸ Video-based coaching models have demonstrated stronger impacts on instructional and relational practice than traditional workshop-only professional development. For example, MyTeachingPartner (MTP), developed at the University of Virginia, has shown positive effects on teacher–child interactions and student outcomes in randomized trials (Allen et al., 2011; Pianta et al., 2008). Coach Companion, developed by Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington and used statewide in Washington’s Early Achievers system, applies similar video-based feedback principles at scale, enabling educators to receive targeted coaching grounded in observed practice.

Recommended actions include:

- Introduce stability and continuity as explicit priorities within program action plans, recognizing their importance for both child development and workforce sustainability.
- Strengthen supports for directors' hiring and onboarding pipelines, with tools and guidance that balance:
 - professional socialization into the field and organization, and
 - learning related to child development and relational practice.
- Refocus coaching and leadership development for directors toward relational leadership practices, including supporting staff through transition, modeling emotionally attuned supervision and fostering program-wide consistency.

By centering leadership supports on developmental relationships, directors will be better equipped to reduce staff turnover and more effectively compensate for the turnover that does occur.

Conclusion: Protecting Developmental Relationships in the New Ecology of Afterschool

Over the past 25 years, Palm Beach County has demonstrated that high-quality afterschool generates meaningful developmental and economic returns. The 25-Year Report established that these returns are not automatic; they depend on consistent, high-quality implementation. This Census extends that logic by examining what quality requires under changing ecological conditions.

Across interviews, directors describe a convergence of pressures - workforce instability, early-career inexperience, heightened child stress and sustained family strain — that increase the relational demands placed on programs. These conditions do not negate the value of afterschool. Nor do they signal disengagement from quality improvement. Rather, they illuminate how the operating environment surrounding afterschool has shifted, raising the level of support required to sustain developmental relationships in daily practice.

The central system challenge in the current ecology is protecting relational continuity. Developmental science is clear: children engage and learn skills through stable, attuned relationships with adults. When continuity weakens, when emotional containment is stretched or when shared expectations fragment across settings, the relational pathways through which afterschool programs produce long-term developmental and economic returns begin to erode. Because return on investment depends on quality - and quality depends on relationships - protecting relational conditions becomes the core adaptive task for quality assurance systems and the intermediary organizations that administer these systems.

Importantly, these insights emerge from a community with one of the most mature quality assurance infrastructures in the country. Palm Beach County's experience therefore carries

significance beyond local context. If relational strain is increasing within one of the nation's best-in-class systems, similar pressures are likely affecting communities with fewer intermediary supports. In this way, the Census positions Palm Beach County not as an outlier, but as an early indicator of changing conditions across the afterschool field.

The path forward is evolutionary rather than corrective. The findings do not call for abandoning existing structures, but for strengthening and recalibrating them to match rising relational demands. Systems must become more precise in identifying stress signals, more intentional in supporting early-career staff and more aligned across workforce, family and program contexts. In short, quality improvement must adapt to the new ecology in order to preserve the relational foundations on which impact depends.

Afterschool remains a powerful protective and developmental space for children — particularly in an era marked by economic uncertainty, workforce volatility and digital saturation. Sustaining that promise requires deliberate system-level action to protect and reinforce the human relationships at the heart of engagement and learning. In the new ecology of afterschool, the quality of developmental relationships is both the central challenge and the central opportunity.

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Appendix A. Methods

1. Study design

This study employed a qualitative, census-style design to document afterschool program directors' perspectives on current conditions affecting program quality, workforce stability, and child development.

2. Sampling and analytic approach

A total of 130 afterschool program directors participated in interviews as part of the Census. For analytic purposes, two independent random samples of interviews were drawn ($n = 16$ and $n = 12$). Each sample was coded and analyzed separately to assess convergence in patterns and themes. Because results across the two samples were highly consistent, the samples were combined into a single analytic dataset ($n = 28$), which forms the basis for the findings reported here.

3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a common protocol. Questions focused on workforce conditions, child behavior and engagement, family circumstances, program priorities and directors' visions for the coming year.

4. Data preparation

Interview responses were compiled into a structured dataset, with responses organized by question and director to support systematic analysis.

5. Coding process

Interview responses were coded using a predefined codebook consisting of 14 codes grounded in prior research and Prime Time's quality framework. Coding captured recurring topics related to workforce conditions, child development, family context and program practices. Coding was non-mutually exclusive, allowing multiple codes to be applied to a single response.

6. Theme development

The 14 codes were analytically synthesized into seven higher-order themes through iterative review. Themes reflected patterns observed across interviews rather than isolated mentions and were refined to align with the core constructs examined in the Census. See Appendix B for definition of each theme.

7. Prevalence estimation (director-level)

For each theme, interviews were reviewed to determine whether the theme was substantively present. The proportion of directors whose interviews reflected each theme was calculated to estimate prevalence across the analytic sample.

8. Thematic density estimation (dataset-level)

Codes were rolled up to the thematic level, and the total number of coded statements associated with each theme was calculated as a proportion of all coded statements. This provided an indicator of each theme's relative prominence within the qualitative dataset.

9. Findings development

The seven themes were further interpreted and integrated to produce five cross-cutting findings that capture how changing ecological conditions shape developmental relationships, workforce stability, and program capacity.

Appendix B. Seven Higher-Order Themes

Below, we present each theme with a generic definition of what the theme means in the Census data and two exemplary quotes that exemplify the theme.

Result 1: Workforce Instability and Inexperience (93%)

Nearly all directors described challenges related to staff turnover, staffing shortages and onboarding new or inexperienced staff. Workforce instability was identified as a central constraint on program consistency and quality.

“The challenge that I anticipate for next year will be with new staffing. Children like to see familiar staff and that repetition can be comforting. Bringing in new staff always makes for a difficult transition.”

“Staff turnover continues to be one of our biggest barriers. We are constantly onboarding and retraining.”

Result 2: Professional Socialization – Foundational Norms (93%)

An equally widespread theme involved the need to support new staff in learning foundational professional norms associated with helping professionals. Directors emphasized reliability, professional communication, compliance and understanding the seriousness of working with children.

“Many of our new staff are still learning what it means to be professional - showing up on time, communicating appropriately and understanding the seriousness of the role.”

“Some staff are new not just to afterschool, but to working in a professional environment at all. There is a learning curve.”

Result 3: Child Stress, Behavior, and Attention Challenges (71%)

A strong majority of directors reported increased child stress, behavioral challenges and difficulty sustaining attention, particularly during transitions. These concerns appeared across multiple Census questions and were often discussed in relation to staffing consistency and routines.

“Behavior management has been one of our biggest challenges this year, especially during transitions.”

“Children need consistency and reassurance. When routines change or staff change, behaviors escalate.”

Result 4: Parent–Program Alignment on Child Development (71%)

Many directors identified challenges related to aligning family expectations with developmentally appropriate practice. Responses emphasized the need for communication with parents about children’s emotional and behavioral development.

“Sometimes parents expect more than what their child is capable of emotionally, and we have to help explain that.”

“We spend a lot of time explaining why consistency and structure matter for children at this age.”

Result 5: Professional Socialization – Developmental Practice (61%)

Beyond foundational professionalism, a majority of directors highlighted the need for staff to learn how to work developmentally with children - particularly around behavior support and emotional regulation. Directors emphasized that this learning often requires modeling and coaching rather than standalone training.

“Staff need more support in how to handle behaviors appropriately and understand why children respond the way they do.”

“Training is helpful, but staff really need modeling and coaching to know what to do in real situations.”

Result 6: Vision Focused on Stability and Continuity (57%)

When asked about their vision for the coming year, more than half of directors emphasized stability, continuity and relational coherence rather than program expansion or innovation.

“My vision is to have consistent staff who feel supported and confident, so the program can run smoothly.”

“I want a calmer environment where kids feel safe and staff feel prepared.”

Result 7: Parent Stress and Family Circumstances (46%)

Nearly half of directors explicitly referenced family economic strain and logistical stress as factors shaping program participation, consistency and communication.

“Many of our families are juggling multiple jobs, which makes participation and consistency difficult.”

“Parents are under a lot of stress financially, and that affects their availability and engagement.”