



25th Annual

LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL

ADVOCACY
TOOLKIT

ACTNOW
Afterschool for Children & Teens



October 24, 2024

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**LIGHTS ON
AFTERSCHOOL**

A PROJECT OF THE AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE

INTRODUCTION

It's time to celebrate afterschool programs! This year Lights On Afterschool (LOA) is taking place on October 24, 2024. Afterschool programs support students by offering them opportunities to learn new things and discover new skills.

This year is the 25th Annual Lights On Afterschool! Launched in October 2000, Lights On Afterschool, hosted by the Afterschool Alliance, is the only national celebration of afterschool programs. During this time, afterschool programs are celebrated for the impact they have on youth, families, and communities! This event provides the opportunity for afterschool programs to get the recognition needed and send a powerful message that millions of kids need quality afterschool programs.



Afterschool program help children build life and social skills, get help with homework, and engage in learning opportunities.



7.7 Million children are alone and unsupervised afterschool.



24.6 Million children would participate in afterschool program if one were available.

ACT Now knows that out-of-school time (OST) experiences are a vital resource for so many youth and families. **Afterschool programs have been proven to keep youth safe, increase learning outcomes, and help students develop social and emotional skills. That is why we are inviting program providers across Illinois to join in on the celebration!** Examples of ways that program providers can celebrate Lights on Afterschool include highlighting your program on social media, engaging with legislators, and/or planning a Lights on Afterschool events!

Register your Lights on Afterschool event! When you register your event as an official Lights On Afterschool celebration, you'll receive an event starter kit, which includes 10 free posters to help you promote your event, and will make you eligible for cool prizes each week. Click [here](#) to register your event!

Planning Your Own Event

Lights On Afterschool is a great time to showcase all the amazing work your program is doing. **Below are four tips to keep in mind when planning your event.**

1

Think about who you want to reach.

Examples of groups you might want to garner attention from are policymakers, educators, funders, local business leaders, and media outlets.

2

Stay organized and start planning early.

For planning and organizing, assign someone, or a team of people, to help with the logistics of the event.

3

Include young people in the process!

Encouraging youth to be involved in the planning process will teach them important skills. Young people will also offer a unique and valuable perspective.

4

Think about what format you want to use to get your message across.

Do you want to host a panel? Do you want to host an in-person or virtual event? Go with an idea that is right for your program!

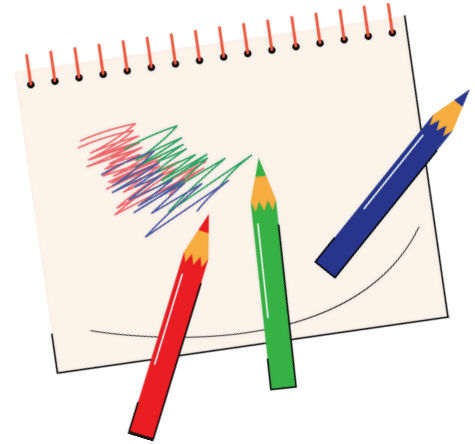
To aid in the planning of virtual and in-person events, the Afterschool Alliance has dedicated a [webpage](#) full of events and ideas for providers. The Afterschool Alliance has also released materials to help programs understand the timeline, work out logistics, and more!

Activities for Youth

Elementary School-Aged Youth

Letter and Drawings To Policymakers

Develop a Mad Libs-style letter to policymakers where students fill in the blanks about why their program is important. For instance, you could have them describe how afterschool has allowed them to develop and sustain meaningful connections with fellow peers and afterschool staff. You might also ask students to draw something that reflects their experience in afterschool and include those pieces of art when mailing letters to legislators.



Afterschool Letter Exchange

Partner with another afterschool program and have students exchange pen-pal letters. Ask students to share with their pen-pals what they do in their afterschool program and draw a picture to reflect that. Students can also exchange light bulb art!

Art Day

The Afterschool Alliance has printable light bulb art that youth can decorate and write on to creatively demonstrate the importance of afterschool. You can have youth in your program work on the light bulbs in a group setting and send them to local policymakers as a follow-up to your event. This is an initiative that youth across the United States do annually for Lights On Afterschool! To access the Light Bulb Template, click [here](#). Students might also want to do a collage to highlight ways in which their afterschool program has supported, encouraged, and sparked something new in them.



Activities for Youth

Elementary School-Aged Youth



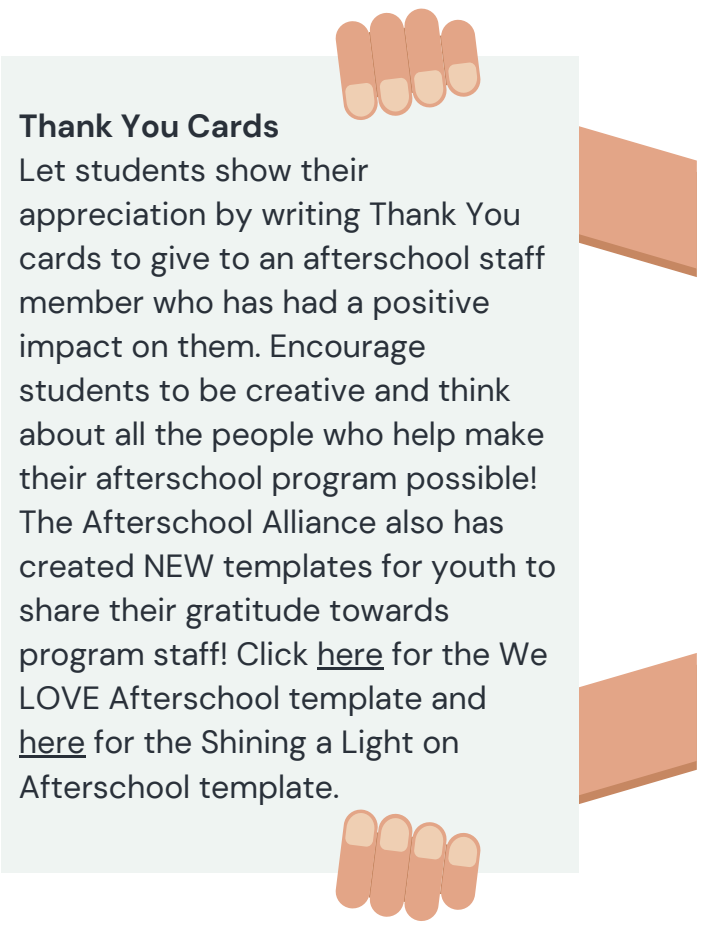
Virtual Afterschool Tour

Have students bring a friend to afterschool – virtually! Students can video call a friend or family member and give them a virtual tour of the afterschool space and programming. This is a great way for other students to see what happens in afterschool. You might even get some new registrants!



Halloween STEM Field Day

As Halloween is right around the corner, connect STEM experiences with fun-filled Halloween theme activities such as decorating pumpkins and learning about the plant life cycle to Frankenstein and the “spark of life.” The NISE Network hosts several resources to celebrate STEM and to host spooky science events! Click [here](#) to access them.



Thank You Cards

Let students show their appreciation by writing Thank You cards to give to an afterschool staff member who has had a positive impact on them. Encourage students to be creative and think about all the people who help make their afterschool program possible! The Afterschool Alliance also has created NEW templates for youth to share their gratitude towards program staff! Click [here](#) for the We LOVE Afterschool template and [here](#) for the Shining a Light on Afterschool template.

Activities for Youth

Middle School and High School-Aged Youth

Social Media Campaign

Utilize some of ACT Now's and the Afterschool Alliance's social media content to help inspire youth in your program to launch a social media campaign about important topics that affect them. Perhaps encourage them to think about elevating successes in the community or ways to solve issues in their surrounding environment. Youth can combine a variety of craft projects to be elevated in this social media campaign. Make sure that youth engage with their elected officials by tagging them in content!



Cross-Program Connections

Help students coordinate a visit with another local afterschool program or host a virtual celebration in collaboration with a fellow out-of-school time (OST) program. Ask students to share some of the things they love the most about their program and highlight any skills and talents they have developed with their peers. Students can share stories, projects, and lived experiences with one another. Combine this event with some of the aforementioned activities to help forge cross-program connections!

Activities for Youth

Middle School and High School-Aged Youth

Cooking Class

Afterschool programs could partner with local businesses/restaurants, and family members to offer a cooking workshop for your youth participants. This opportunity could help students learn how to make simple, low-cost, and healthy meals, while connect them to the local community. Further, cooking experiences are a fun way to engage youth and tie in nutrition education and STEM learning opportunities.

Career Talent Show / Showcase

Collaborate with local businesses, family members, museums, and industry partners and host a show-and-tell to highlight the different career opportunities that are available to students in your program. Encourage participants to host hands-on activities, such as mock interviews, in order to help students develop career readiness skills. Participants might also want to demonstrate a project from their fields to spark interest in a specific sector! For more ideas, click [here](#).

Advocacy Event / Afterschool Program Tour & Visit

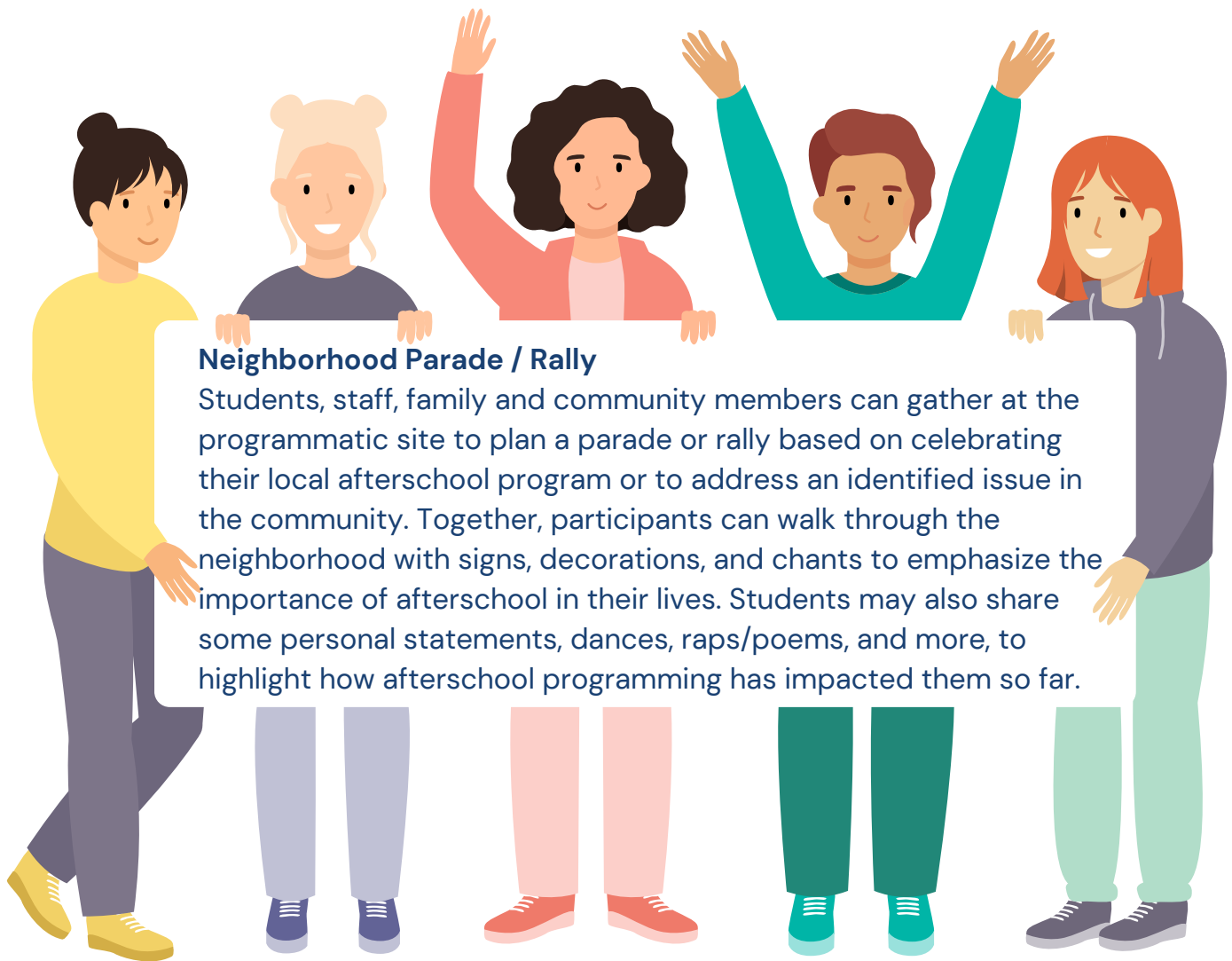
Collaborate with youth in your program to host a conversation with policymakers in the community about the importance of afterschool and expanded learning opportunities. This event may include local legislators and school board members, leaders in your afterschool program, family members, and other elected officials. Help students to create a list of priorities they want to share and provide time to practice and work on public speaking. For guidance and examples of an advocacy event, click [here](#).

Mindfulness and Wellness Day

Encourage students to think about their social-emotional needs and provide space to facilitate wellness activities. These may include but are not limited to, meditation and breathing exercises, [peace circles](#), yoga, and art therapy workshops to promote well-being for students and their program providers.

Activities for Youth

All Ages



Neighborhood Parade / Rally

Students, staff, family and community members can gather at the programmatic site to plan a parade or rally based on celebrating their local afterschool program or to address an identified issue in the community. Together, participants can walk through the neighborhood with signs, decorations, and chants to emphasize the importance of afterschool in their lives. Students may also share some personal statements, dances, raps/poems, and more, to highlight how afterschool programming has impacted them so far.

Plan a Party

There's no better way to celebrate than by having a party! Let students pick the playlist and jam out either virtually or in-person. You can also find easily adaptable improvisation and party games to play as a group. Don't forget to decorate ahead of time!

Cultural Showcase

Celebrate the diverse backgrounds of your student participants by asking them to share their cultural heritage through food, music, art, games, books, dance, and other traditions. Each student may have time to create or bring an example of a meaningful part of their culture and share in a showcase with peers, program facilitators, and family members. Consider facilitating team-building exercises and/or whether the program will create the groups versus students getting to decide their own groups.

Using Social Media as a Tool

Social media is a powerful tool to connect with elected officials, highlight program successes, and spread information! Lights On Afterschool is a great time to engage policymakers by tagging them in your **#LightsOnAfterschool** content or inviting them to join the celebration. Most legislators use Twitter and Facebook to interact with their constituents and local community members. Some also use Instagram to reach more people, specifically youth! Choose the social media content that resonates most with you, your afterschool program, and your community.

The Afterschool Alliance has social media content as well! Click [here](#) to access their social media toolkit.



Message legislators by using their handle on X (see examples below):

Senator Ram Villivalam: @Senvillivalam October 24th is **#LightsOnAfterschool!** Join us in celebrating afterschool providers that offer trauma-informed & engaging programming to youth in Illinois. Thank you for all you do to support afterschool programs!

Illinois Representative Justin Slaughter: @RepJSlaughter Let's put the **#LightsOnAfterschool** for afterschool staff who have risen to the moment to serve our students this year! Every day, afterschool staff work to provide a safe & fun environment & facilitate enriching programs for youth in their community! **#LightsOn2024**

Social Media Templates

Facebook & Instagram Post

Join communities across Illinois in celebrating **#LightsOnAfterschool** on October 24, 2024! Shine a light on the impact afterschool programs are making - inspiring learning and supporting the well-being of youth and families. **#AfterSchoolWorks**

Explore past **#LightsOnAfterschool** events to get inspiration for your own! Get inspired and get involved at afterschoolalliance.org/loa/EventIdeas.cfm
#Inspiration
#LightsOn2024

This year is the 25th annual celebration of **#LightsOnAfterschool!** Now is a great time to celebrate the importance of afterschool programs in Illinois - now and in the future! **#ACTNowLOA**

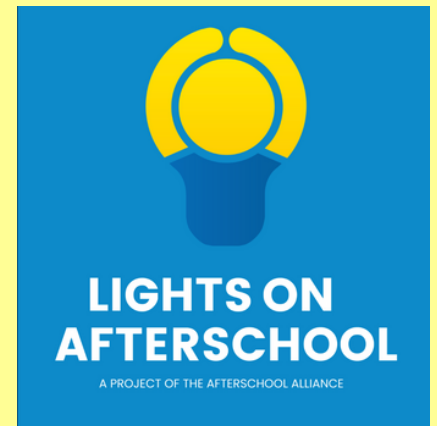
X/Twitter

#LightsOnAfterschool on October 24, 2024 is the perfect time to shine a light on and celebrate afterschool programs!
#AfterSchoolWorks

We challenge you to host an event for **#LightsOnAfterschool!** Get inspired at afterschoolalliance.org/loa/aEventIdeas.cfm

We are celebrating the 25th annual **#LightsOnAfterschool** to showcase all the ways afterschool programs are serving our communities!

Image



Social Media Templates

Facebook & Instagram Post

Want to know how you can help keep the **#LightsOnAfterschool**? Sign up to take part in the celebration on October 24, 2024! [Sign Up Here](#)

X/Twitter

Registration for **#LightsOnAfterschool** is open! Sign up today to join the celebration on October 24th! [Sign Up Here](#)

Image



Take the **#LightBulbChallenge!** Post a photo of yourself mimicking the **#LightsOnAfterschool** lightbulb and challenge your friends, co-workers, or followers to do the same!

Participate in the **#LightBulbChallenge** by posting a photo of yourself mimicking the **#LightsOnAfterschool** lightbulb!



How is your community celebrating **#LightsOnAfterschool**? Find an event happening near you and see firsthand why afterschool programs are essential to the youth and families they serve. [Find an Event Here](#)

See how your community is celebrating **#LightsOnAfterschool!** Click [here](#) to find an event near you.



ADVOCACY DURING LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL

Lights On Afterschool is a great time to remind families, policymakers, and community members about the importance of afterschool programs by advocating for your program and afterschool colleagues!

Advocacy is an action that speaks in favor of, supports, or defends a cause. Advocacy looks different for different people! It is important to find a strategy that works best for you and clearly conveys your message.

Examples of advocacy can be

- hosting a site visit with an elected official and/or community leaders
- contacting an elected official through email or phone
- hosting a social media campaign

By advocating for afterschool you can develop relationships with elected officials, help keep elected officials informed about the state of afterschool, and become a credible source of information regarding youth development practices!

ACT Now has developed different resources that will be included in this toolkit to help in your advocacy efforts:

- Our Action Alert
- Sample letters and phone calls
- Social media templates
- A Letter Writing Campaign

Lights on Afterschool
Action Alert



ACT Now has developed an action alert advocating for afterschool programs. The action alert can also be personalized to fit your message. Once you complete the action alert, it will be sent to elected officials who represent you!

Identifying Elected Officials

Writing an email, composing a letter, talking to an elected official (legislator or policymaker), or encouraging the youth in your program to do so is a great idea! The Illinois State Board of Elections has a [District and Official Search page](#) where you can find your elected state and federal officials.

Please Note: You must enter a complete address with a corresponding zip code (e.g.: 101 N Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606, Cook County) for the map to locate your legislators' information. Otherwise, you may enter the county in which you pertain (e.g.: Macon County, Macon County) in order to find out your elected officials.

ACT Now's Top Tips for Writing to Legislators

1

Remain targeted and highlight where you are from.

You should address letters to the appropriate legislators in the district where you live and/or where your organization is located.

2

Keep it personal.

Tell your elected official why this legislation matters in their community. Include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you.

3

Know the issue.

Legislators are concerned with multiple items, so be sure to provide good background information.

4

Be nonpartisan.

Remember, there is a higher chance of receiving a response to your advocacy if the message does not center on partisanship

Letter Writing Campaign

Youth and family members can use their voices to make a difference and educate key leaders on the importance of afterschool programs. Use the templates below to create a letter-writing campaign to policymakers to encourage them to support afterschool programs.

Elementary Aged Youth

Elementary students can use [this template](#) to write their letters.

Dear Representative/Senator _____,

Paragraph 1: Introduce yourself – include your name, school, and which afterschool program you attend.

Paragraph 2: Include 3–4 sentences about why you love your afterschool program, the impact it has had on your life, and why it is important for students to have access to afterschool.

Paragraph 3: Invite your policymaker to celebrate Lights on Afterschool and support afterschool programs!

Middle/High School Age Youth

Dear Representative/Senator _____,

Paragraph 1: Introduce yourself – include your name, which school your child/children attend, and which afterschool program your child/ children attend.

Paragraph 2: Include 3–4 sentences on why you love afterschool programs as a family member and what your child/children get out of their afterschool program.

Paragraph 3: Invite your policymaker to celebrate Lights on Afterschool and support afterschool programs!

Family Members

Sample Letter/ Email to Policymakers

Dear Senator **[Last Name]** or Representative **[Last Name]**,

My name is **(your name)** and I reside in your district. I am writing to encourage you to support afterschool programs. I want to invite you to join the celebration for Lights On Afterschool, on October 24, 2024.

Lights On Afterschool (LOA) is the only national celebration of afterschool programs. It's an annual event that celebrates the importance of afterschool programs and the role they play in the lives of young people, their families, and diverse communities. Lights On Afterschool is also about showing appreciation for the selfless program providers who ensure youth are provided with enriching and fulfilling experiences. **[insert personal story about your program and the impact it has had on students, families, and/or your community]**.

Afterschool programs help keep youth safe, increase academic outcomes, and support students' mental and physical health. To meet the expanding and diverse needs of youth and families, we need to create new opportunities for publicly-funded Out-of-School Time (OST) programs and expanded learning experiences in Illinois.

You can show support for your local afterschool programs by:

- Visiting your local out-of-school time programs
- Making afterschool a legislative priority for you
- Advocating for Teen REACH programs (state-based program)
- Advocating for Reimagine Public Safety Act youth development programs (state-based program)
- Encouraging local school district leaders to partner with established afterschool programs in your district to leverage community assets and resources

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Calling Elected Officials

Calling the legislators who represent you is one of the most effective ways to share your thoughts. Below are ACT Now's top tips for calling elected officials!

Illinois General Assembly: To reach your legislators in Springfield, you may call the switchboard at 217-782-2000. You can also find the numbers listed for the Illinois House and Illinois Senate.

Congress: The U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate webpages provide direct links to your federal legislators' information (including office phone numbers).

1

Research your legislator.

Learn their position on afterschool programs beforehand. Have they visited a program in your community? Do they have family members that participate in expanded learning opportunities?

2

Prepare prior to the call.

Know the issue you wish to discuss, your goal, or the action you want the legislator to take. Before calling, have your message written in front of you and review it carefully so you know exactly what you want to say.

3

Keep it brief.

Legislative aides receive a high volume of phone calls every day, so keep your call short. You should aim to have the phone call be no longer than 3 minutes.

4

Did you reach the office's voicemail?

That's okay! Leave a brief but detailed message stating why you're calling and urging a specific action. Offices check their voice messages and keep track of concerns of their constituents.

Sample Phone Call to Elected Officials

Staff Member: Thank you for calling Representative/Senator **(Last Name)**'s office. How may I help you?

Caller: Hello, my name is **(Your Full Name)** from **(City or Town)**, and I am calling on behalf of **(Name of Afterschool Program or Organization)**.

Staff Member: Wonderful, what can I do for you?

Caller: I am calling to kindly remind Senator **(Last Name)** or Representative **(Last Name)** that October 24th is Lights On Afterschool! Lights On Afterschool is the annual and nationwide event that celebrates afterschool programs and the integral role they play in the lives of youth, families, and our diverse communities. We ask that you reach out to your afterschool programs on this day, and keep them in mind as you return to the legislative session. **(You can also add why afterschool programs are so important to you and your greater community. Remember, be brief!)**

Staff Member: Thank you for sharing this with us. I will relay your comments to Representative/Senator **(Last Name)**. Do you have a phone number or email address to contact you at?

Caller: Yes, my phone number and email address are **(Insert phone number and email address)**. I appreciate you allowing me to share my thoughts. Have a great day, and I look forward to hearing back from Representative/Senator **(Last Name)**



Follow Up!

Whether you have mailed a letter, sent an email, or have spoken to a legislative aide, jot down their name and contact information. Don't forget to follow up. Try to provide follow up materials and information as quickly as possible. Keep track of your legislator's actions and follow up with a letter expressing appreciation or disappointment. You can keep track of the status of a state bill at www.ilga.gov and a federal bill at www.congress.gov

State Representative:
The Honorable **(Full Name)**
Illinois House of Representatives
Address

Dear Representative **(Full Name)**:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me on **(Date of conversation)** to highlight the importance of expanded learning programs in Illinois and in your district **(Include district number/area)**. **As we discussed, and as you have witnessed on the ground, afterschool programs help to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes, keep youth safe and engaged, and support career development not only in underserved and historically marginalized communities but across the state of Illinois.**

I look forward to speaking with you again to discuss further the ways in which we can work together to ensure that young Illinoisans have access to afterschool programs and the tools they need to successfully transition into educated, creative, empathetic, and skilled adults.

Sincerely,
(Your Full Name)



NOVEMBER

The **Lights on Afterschool** celebration is a great and important time to recognize the vital role of afterschool programs and advocate for kids who need quality afterschool support. This toolkit serves as a resource for advocates, educators, and community leaders dedicated to enhancing afterschool programs. By utilizing the strategies outlined in this toolkit, you can help to effectively promote the importance of afterschool initiatives, engage stakeholders, and maximize program impacts.

In preparation for **October 24, 2024**, review the content to identify sections that best meet your needs. Whether you are looking for outreach strategies or engaging activities, each resource is designed to be easily implemented. Adapt the materials to fit your unique community context. Share successes and lessons learned to inspire collaboration and innovation.

Remember, afterschool programs are vital for the development of our youth, providing safe spaces for learning and growth. By championing these initiatives, the lives of children are enriched and the community is strengthened. Together, let's keep the Lights on Afterschool!

Questions? Contact **Emma Doell** at doelle@actnowillinois.org or call **Emma Giamberdino** at (312) 877-0726.

