

2025

LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL TOOLKIT



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INTRODUCTION

Who is ACT Now?

The **ACT Now Coalition** is a diverse network of afterschool providers, community schools, families, business leaders, community advocates, youth organizations, and policymakers from across the state of Illinois.

We envision a future where all youth and families have access to safe, supportive, and inclusive out-of-school time (OST) programs.

We strive to ensure that young people in Illinois have access to quality, affordable afterschool and youth development programs. Our work includes advocacy for equitable funding, support for diverse professionals, and the provision of resources to improve program quality, fostering belonging and empowering communities for lasting change.

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!



What is LOA?

It's time to celebrate afterschool programs! This year, **Lights On Afterschool (LOA) is taking place on October 23, 2025.** Afterschool programs support students by offering them opportunities to learn new things and discover new skills.

This year is the 26th 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 an opportunity for afterschool programs to receive the recognition they need and send a powerful message that millions of kids require quality afterschool programs.

Lights On Afterschool is designed to celebrate afterschool programs and providers and highlight how essential afterschool is to youth, families, and communities! This makes LOA a great opportunity for community building, celebration, and advocacy.



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.

There are so many ways that you can get involved in and celebrate Lights On Afterschool. This toolkit is going to explore ideas for how you can celebrate Lights On Afterschool this year!

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As you begin planning your Lights On Afterschool celebration, it's important to lay a strong foundation for your event. Before diving into logistics, start by identifying your event goals. Knowing your objectives will help guide every decision you make moving forward. Be sure to consider your audience and think carefully about your event theme.

This section of the toolkit offers helpful tips and key considerations to support you in the early stages of planning. With thoughtful preparation and clear intentions, your Lights On Afterschool event can shine a spotlight on the incredible value of afterschool programs and inspire continued support from your community.

PLAN YOUR EVENT

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



Plan Ahead

Stay organized and start planning your event early! For planning and organizing, assign someone, or a team of people, to help with the logistics of the event. If inviting legislators or policymakers, send invites at least a month in advance to allow for scheduling.



Youth Voice

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.



Additional Resources

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!



Register Your Event

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!

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

When planning your event, the very first question to ask is: **Who is your audience?** Whether it's families, funders, policymakers, or the media, identifying your primary audience will help you shape your event.

Messaging

Your audience will impact your messaging and goals. For instance, if you want caregivers to understand the benefits of your afterschool program, center the narrative on student achievement, growth, and family impact. If policymakers are your target, highlight your program's broader community outcomes and data. The messages you choose, for example, having students share personal stories to caregivers or a local elected official speak to a broader audience, should resonate specifically with your intended audience.

Time and Location

Audience considerations should inform when and where you host the event. Scheduling celebrations between 3 and 6 p.m. aligns naturally with program operation and may make it easier for caregivers and students to participate. If your audience includes media, you may want a morning press event when reporters can file same-day stories; if policymakers are central, consider offering multiple potential times to give flexibility within their schedules. Similarly, the venue matters; a school gym, public library, park, or even city hall can communicate accessibility, community connection, or official endorsement. Consider also hosting your celebration virtually, or having an online component, so community members who may not be able to attend in-person events due to security or safety issues can still participate.

Activities

Define what you want to achieve with your event for each audience group. Are you aiming for media coverage, greater caregiver involvement, stronger ties with local leaders, or new funding? Your activities should align with these goals. For example, showcasing student art or projects can engage families and inspire positive media attention. For funders or community leaders, consider inviting them to speak or recognize their support, underscoring the program's value and successes.

THEMES OF LOA

Lights On Afterschool events and celebrations can take many forms. As you begin planning, consider choosing a central theme to bring focus and cohesion to your event. A theme can help shape activities and messaging, making your event even more engaging for participants. Choosing a theme can also guide decisions about location, time, audience, and visuals, allowing you to align your celebration with what matters most to your program and community.



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During Lights On Afterschool (LOA), there are countless ways to creatively engage youth and families in meaningful celebrations that highlight the power and impact of afterschool programs.

This section of the toolkit offers a variety of activity ideas tailored to elementary, middle, and high school-aged youth. These activities are designed to spark creativity, foster collaboration, and encourage reflection on the importance of afterschool programs in their lives. Use this section as a springboard to plan activities that will excite and empower your students, making your LOA celebration both fun and meaningful.

How Can You Celebrate LOA?

Lights On Afterschool (LOA) is a powerful opportunity to shine a spotlight on the incredible work happening in afterschool programs across the country and to show communities just how essential these programs are to youth, families, and neighborhoods. Whether you're new to LOA or a returning participant, this is your chance to join a nationwide movement and bring attention to the value of afterschool in your local context. Getting involved in Lights On Afterschool doesn't have to mean planning a large-scale event—what matters most is creating a celebration that reflects your program's unique story and engages youth, families, and community members in a meaningful way.

While there are many creative ways to mark the day, from open houses and student performances to leadership summits and community petitions, what's most important is designing a celebration that uplifts youth voices and highlights the positive impact your program has year-round.



Have parents or community members email their legislators about the importance of afterschool



Host a community carnival or festival



Host a site visit with community members or legislators

LOOKING FOR MORE IDEAS?

The Afterschool Alliance has compiled a list of events and activities ideas! Find something that works best for your program and community!

Scan or click the QR code to learn more!



ACTIVITY IDEAS

There are many ways to engage youth during Lights On Afterschool!
Below are a few ideas of activities for different age groups.

Elementary School-Aged Youth

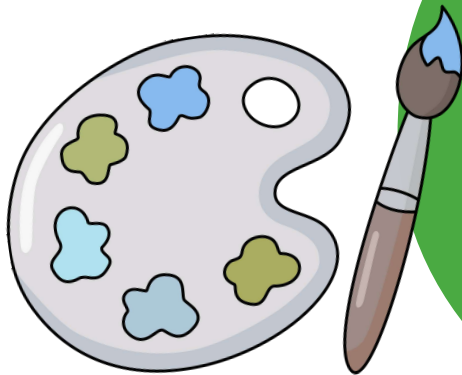


Letter and Drawings To Policymakers

Develop a Mad Libs-style letter to policymakers where students fill in the blanks about why their program is important. 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](#).

"Future Self" Video Messages

Invite students to record short video messages addressed to their future self, for when they graduate from your program, reflecting on what they hope to learn, become, or accomplish through afterschool programming. During the event, show a montage of these clips, or create a "time capsule" video that will be shared later.

Community Mural

Set up a large blank canvas, roll of butcher paper, or wall-safe mural board and invite youth (individually or in small groups) to co-create a visual tribute to afterschool programs. They might draw key activities, write words that describe how afterschool helps them, or visually map ideas for future programming. At the event, display the mural or banner and let families and community members walk alongside to view the collaborative artwork.

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 and families to see what happens in afterschool. You might even get some new registrants!

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.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

Middle/High School Aged Youth

Social Media Campaign

Inspire young people to start a social media campaign. Encourage them to focus on important topics that matter to them, like community achievements or environmental concerns. They can get creative by including various craft projects in their posts. To boost engagement, remind them to tag their elected officials!

Community Collaboration

Collaborate with local businesses, family members, museums, and industry partners to host a show-and-tell showcasing career opportunities for students. Encourage hands-on activities like mock interviews to develop career readiness skills. For more ideas, click [here](#).

Power in Youth Voice

Organize an advocacy event with youth to engage policymakers about the significance of afterschool and expanded learning opportunities. Involve local legislators, school board members, etc. Assist students in creating a list of priorities and provide practice for public speaking. For guidance and examples of an advocacy event, click [here](#).

Afterschool Parade/Rally

Students, staff, family, and community members can unite to plan a parade or rally that celebrates local afterschool programs or addresses community issues. Students might share personal statements, dances, raps, or poems to illustrate the positive impact of afterschool activities on their lives.

"Then & Now" Timeline Walk

Create a physical timeline along a hallway or outdoor walkway that shows "Then to Now" stages of a student's journey. Youth can create panels or stations that reflect their "before afterschool" life (e.g. challenges, gaps) and their "after afterschool" growth (e.g. new skills, relationships, successes). Attendees can walk through the timeline, stopping at stations to hear or read student reflections.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

Light Bulb Challenge

October is a busy month, and not everyone has a chance to host or attend a Lights On Afterschool event. The Afterschool Alliance has a digital event to ensure that everyone who wants to celebrate afterschool programs gets a chance: the Lights On Afterschool Lightbulb Challenge!

Every year, the Afterschool Alliance challenges friends of afterschool across the country to take a photo of themselves posing in the shape of their Lights On Afterschool logo and posting it on social media with the hashtags #LightbulbChallenge and #LightsOnAfterschool. **Be sure to also tag ACT Now so we can also celebrate your Lightbulb Challenge!** Then, participants challenge their followers to do the same!



STAFF & COMMUNITY APPRECIATION

Celebrating staff and community during Lights On Afterschool turns part of the celebration inward toward the people who make the work possible. Programs can visibly affirm the value of their staff's dedication, creativity, and contributions. This kind of recognition helps strengthen morale, deepen buy-in, and reinforce a sense of belonging.

Moreover, when a program publicly honors staff and community stakeholders as part of a high-visibility event like Lights On, it signals externally that the program is a community asset rooted in people. That can bolster goodwill, make staff feel more valued by administration, families, and funders, and help anchor community support.

Incorporating staff and community appreciation into Lights On Afterschool also opens opportunities for meaningful engagement and visibility. As programs host open houses, rallies, student showcases, or light-up events, they can weave in recognition activities (for example, short speeches, tributes, awards) that highlight staff and partners. This helps attendees including families, community leaders, and local media, see the faces behind the work and connect more personally with your mission. It also offers a moment to invite or spotlight community voices in the celebration, deepening your community connection.

Because Lights On is already framed as a nationwide, public celebration of afterschool programs and their impact, adding a staff/community appreciation dimension helps your program stand out among the many events and reinforces your local identity in a meaningful way.



STAFF & COMMUNITY APPRECIATION

Staff and community partners are the heart of afterschool programs, bringing expertise, mentorship, and consistent support that create safe, enriching spaces for youth to grow.

Here are four ideas for ways an afterschool program could show staff and community appreciation during Lights On Afterschool:

Award Ceremony

Create a short awards segment during your event to recognize staff, volunteers, mentors, or community partners (e.g. "Bright Star of the Year," "Community Champion," "Behind-the-Scenes Hero"). Present small tokens or certificates in front of families and attendees.

Gratitude Wall

Set up a board where students, staff, and community members can post thank-you notes, photos, or "lightbulb thoughts" about what others contributed. Make it part of the event so people stop to read and contribute.

Community & Staff Potluck

Host a reception or potluck before or after the main Lights On activity, specifically for staff, families, and partners. Provide refreshments, informal time for mingling, and a few minutes for leadership to speak words of thanks.

Spotlight Video or Photo Display

Prior to the event, collect short video clips, images, or quotes from youth about why they love the program staff. Play the video or display a photo slideshow during the event, so attendees can see and hear about the impact program providers have.

ADVOCACY

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LOA 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. It is important to find a strategy that works best for you and clearly conveys your message. By advocating for afterschool you can help keep elected officials informed about the state of afterschool and influence policy decisions.

Send ACT Now's Action Alerts

STATE



FEDERAL



ADVOCACY DURING LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL

Policymakers at every level of government are critical allies in expanding the resources available to support afterschool programs. Consider engaging with them during LOA and using this event to advocate for afterschool!

On the following pages, we will share tips and scripts for emailing and calling your elected officials. Consider also:

- **Inviting Your Legislators**

- The opportunity to see and hear the impact that afterschool can have on a child's life is invaluable. Invite policymakers to attend your Lights On Afterschool event and see for themselves.

- **Tagging Legislators on Social Media**

- Lights On Afterschool is a great time to engage policymakers by tagging them in your #LightsOnAfterschool content or inviting them to join the celebration on social media.

- **Issuing a Proclamation**

- Proclamations are an easy way for your community to celebrate and can be made by your mayor, local officials, or even organizations. Proclaim the third Thursday in October *Lights On Afterschool Day* in your neighborhood, town, or city!

Not sure who your legislators are? Scan this QR code to find your federal and state legislators!



TALKING TO 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! Below are a few tips to keep in mind when you reach out to your elected officials.

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

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

3

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

4

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

TOP TIPS



SAMPLE LETTER/EMAIL TO LEGISLATORS

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 23, 2025.

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 by supporting ACT Now's OST (Out-of-School Time) for All Campaign
- 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).

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?

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.

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.

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 SCRIPT TO LEGISLATORS

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 23rd 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)

SOCIAL MEDIA

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 Instagram and Facebook to interact with their constituents and local community members. Choose the social media content that resonates most with you, your afterschool program, and your community. On the following pages, find sample posts that you can copy and customize for your social media.



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

Tips for Socials

Grab Attention



Ensure that your graphics are engaging and attention grabbing to your audience and the most important information is the easiest to see.

Tag People



Don't forget to tag your legislators and other relevant people! Tagging your legislator ensures they see it and helps your post be seen by a wider audience.

Legibility is Key



Use fonts that are clear and easy to read, even from a distance. Avoid overly decorative fonts for large text blocks. Use contrasting colors to help ensure your text and graphics stand out against the background for maximum visibility.

SAMPLE INSTAGRAM POSTS

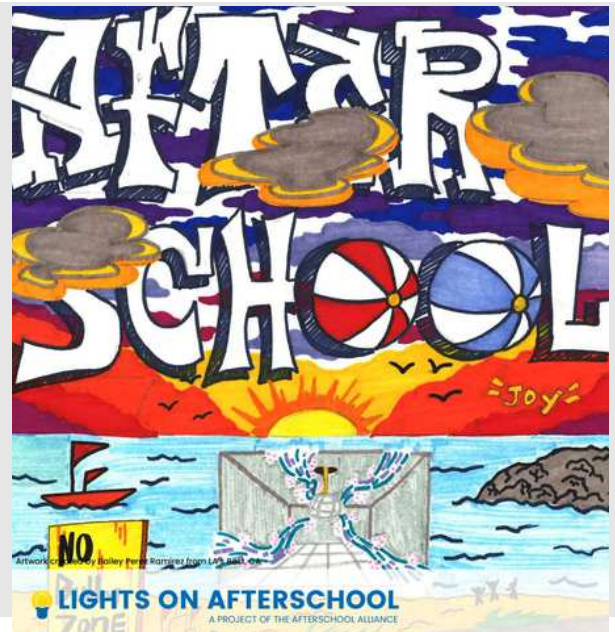
Click the pictures to download the graphics!



We're celebrating 26 years of #LightsOnAfterschool by participating in the #LightbulbChallenge. How are you celebrating?

Sample Caption

We're celebrating 26 years of #LightsOnAfterschool by participating in the #LightbulbChallenge. How are you celebrating?



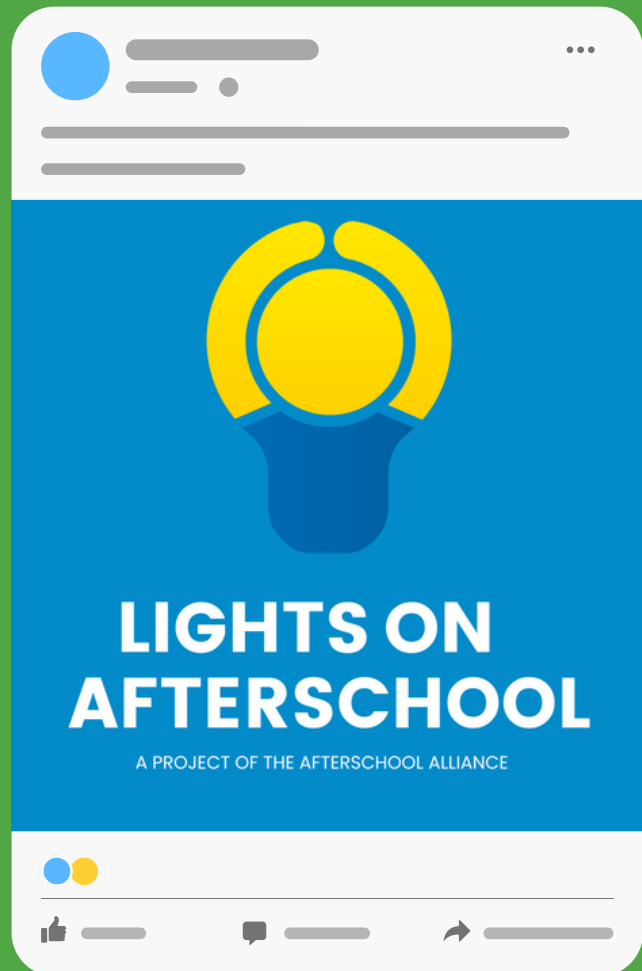
It's on! We're excited to celebrate #LightsOnAfterschool on Oct. 23 highlighting how afterschool and summer programs keep kids safe, support learning, and help working families nationwide.

Sample Caption

It's on! We're excited to celebrate #LightsOnAfterschool on Oct. 23 highlighting how afterschool and summer programs keep kids safe, support learning, and help working families nationwide.

SAMPLE FACEBOOK POSTS

Click the pictures to download the graphics!



Sample Caption

Today's the day! Celebrate Lights On Afterschool with programs across Illinois! Afterschool inspires learning and helps youth reach their potential — but for every 1 student in a program, 4 are waiting. Show your support today! #LightsOnAfterschool

Sample Caption

Join communities across Illinois in celebrating #LightsOnAfterschool on October 23, 2025! Let's shine a light on the power of afterschool programs — inspiring learning and supporting the well-being of youth and families. #AfterschoolWorks

SAMPLE LINKEDIN POSTS

LinkedIn posts can be a powerful tool for advocacy by allowing individuals to share personal experiences, professional insights, or calls to action with a broad, professional audience. This platform is especially effective for highlighting how policies impact industries, workplaces, or communities.

Sample Community Appreciation Post

Format: Group photo or partner logo

Goal: Recognize collaboration, build relationships

Sample Caption:

We couldn't do this without our partners, including [highlight partner organizations]! As we gear up for Lights On Afterschool, we want to thank the incredible organizations and community members who make afterschool programming possible. Together, we're creating pathways to success for youth across [state/city].
#PartnershipsMatter #LightsOnAfterschool #AfterschoolChampions

Sample Leadership or Advocacy Post

Format: Quote, statistic, or policy statement

Goal: Lead the conversation in your area of focus

Sample Caption:

Did you know? Students in afterschool programs are more likely to attend school regularly, build social-emotional skills, and stay on track academically. This Lights On Afterschool, we're advocating for continued investment in expanded learning programs that support the whole child. Let's keep the lights on—together.
#YouthDevelopment #AfterschoolAdvocacy #LightsOnAfterschool

SAMPLE X/BLUESKY POSTS

People can use X (formerly Twitter) or Bluesky to tag their legislators in posts to publicly voice concerns, share personal stories, or urge action on specific issues.

Ensure your legislators see your post by using their handle on X/Bluesky (see examples below). Find your legislators' social media handles on their website.

Example 1: To Senator Tammy Duckworth

@senduckworth October 23rd 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!

Example 2: To Illinois Representative Delia Ramirez

@repdeliaramirez 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! #LightsOn2025



Customize Your Posts!

Custom each of your posts to share our highlights about your program and why afterschool is important in your community!

CONCLUSION

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 23, 2025, 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?

Reach out to hello@actnowillinois.org.

