

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

Akron After School to add childcare under expansion



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Akron Beacon Journal

June 13, 2026, 6:03 a.m. ET

Key Points

Akron After School is partnering with the Akron Area YMCA to offer new childcare options for families this fall.

Akron After School PLUS will be available to students who attend Barber, Seiberling, David Hill and Mason community learning centers.

Additional sites will be added next year.

A popular [Akron after-school program](#) is expanding.

[Akron After School](#), which began roughly 25 years ago and serves about 2,000 students a year, is adding after-school childcare at three elementary schools through a partnership with the Akron Area YMCA.

Desiree Bolden, manager of extended learning for Akron Public Schools, said the expanded program, called Akron After School PLUS, will help working families by providing after-school childcare at their child's school building. The program will continue to help students who are academically struggling and seek to improve student attendance, which has become a [major emphasis](#) among state leaders.

Bolden said the expanded program, which is expected to add additional sites next year, also could help financially struggling Akron Public Schools by retaining existing students and recruiting new students, which will lead to increased state funding.

The expanded program will begin Aug. 27 at Barber, Seiberling, David Hill and Mason community learning centers. Interested families can learn more about the program and possible financial help by preregistering at 330-724-1255 or <https://tinyurl.com/Akron-After-School-PLUS>.

Here are five things to know about Akron After School and its expansion:

1. Parent volunteer began Akron After School roughly 25 years ago

The concept of Akron After School began in North Hill when Bolden was a parent volunteer and substitute teacher at Harris Elementary.

Bolden, an Akron Public Schools graduate, recalls how students at the time had little opportunity to explore their interests after school because few, if any, clubs were offered. She also believed that students needed more time for reading and math than they got during the school day.

Her small program soon became so popular that half of Harris Elementary's students were staying after school.

She and her husband, former Akron City Councilman Bruce Bolden, approached then-Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic about supporting and expanding the program, and he agreed. Since 2001, the city of Akron has annually helped to fund the program, which went districtwide in 2004.

Akron After School targets students who need the most help with math and reading based on district and state test scores.

During this past school year, Akron After School, which is offered free to families, served more than 1,100 students in kindergarten through fifth grade over 16 weeks, from October to April.

Eleven elementary schools offered the full Akron After School program from 2:30 p.m. to 5:15 p.m. four days a week. In those programs, district teachers and staff

provide reading and math help for students for the first 90 minutes and then district staff and community organizations provide **fun activities**, known as enrichment, for the remainder of the time.

At the 15 elementary schools that offered a limited version of the after-school program, only the reading and math help are offered from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. four days a week.

2. Akron After School has improved attendance, test scores

Students who attend the Akron After School program typically show up to school more often than their Akron peers, district attendance figures show.

Figures from the 2024-2025 school year show that the 1,772 students who participated in Akron After School had an attendance rate of 91%, which is 4 percentage points higher than the rate of students who were invited to the after-school program but didn't participate and 1 percentage point higher than that of Akron elementary students districtwide.

District testing scores also show that many Akron After School participants outpaced their peers in catching up academically.

The outcomes align with state and national studies that show students who participate in after-school academic programs attend school more often and perform better on tests. The state has emphasized the need for schools to improve student attendance and recently unveiled an attendance dashboard.

Studies show that students with good attendance are nearly 12 times more likely to graduate on time than students who are chronically absent.

3. Akron After School PLUS adds childcare

The Akron After School PLUS program will provide childcare at the East cluster elementary sites five days a week until 6 p.m., starting with the first day of school.

While the traditional Akron After School program is for academically at-risk students, any student can enroll in the PLUS program.

In the expanded program, YMCA staff will provide homework help, enrichment activities, games, art and physical activities for students until the traditional Akron After School program begins in October.

Beth Kelley, chief officer of youth advancement for the Akron Area YMCA, said the Akron After School PLUS program will allow the YMCA to expand its existing childcare services. This past school year, the YMCA offered a mix of before- and after-school care for students at 10 sites within the Akron City School District.

In the East cluster, the YMCA will expand its existing service at Barber Community Learning Center and add after-school care at David Hill, Mason and Seiberling community learning centers.

“Our goal is always to serve more kids in the after-school space, so this is an ideal partnership,” said Kelley, who said other sites may be closed due to low participation.

She said the YMCA’s current program at Barber typically serves 20 students. She would like to increase participation to as many as 100 students.

As part of the partnership, Kelley said the school district also will train YMCA staff on how to help students in reading and math following the same type of instruction the district provides.

While the traditional Akron After School program is free to families, the PLUS program is not. Families may qualify for a subsidy or a YMCA scholarship to help defray the cost. The cost for families not eligible for financial help will be \$75 a week for YMCA members and \$85 per week for non-YMCA members.

4. Expanded program to begin in the East cluster

Bolden said the district selected the elementary schools in the East cluster for the first phase of the expanded after-school program because the schools have among the highest chronic absenteeism rates in the district, with roughly half of the students missing at least 10% (or roughly 18 days) of school.

She said existing Akron After School sites in the East cluster also typically have strong student attendance and families have expressed a need for consistent aftercare and extended learning.

Bolden said the expansion also complements the Youth Success Summit's middle school initiative. The nonprofit organization was one of seven communities in the country to be selected for the Wallace Foundation's Advancing Opportunity for Adolescence initiative, which is a six-year, multimillion-dollar effort that focuses on connecting youth to meaningful opportunities outside of school and ensuring they have a caring adult to help guide them.

Bolden plans to expand the Akron After School PLUS program to the elementary schools in the Buchtel and Ellet clusters in the spring, to the North and Garfield clusters in fall 2027 and to the Firestone cluster in spring 2028.

5. Expansion comes as after-school funding faces challenges

Akron After School, which has an annual budget of roughly \$1 million, is largely funded by federal grants, including the [21st Century Community Learning Centers program](#).

Bolden said the federal 21st Century grant funds, which are administered through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, have declined and requirements have increased. She said the future of the grant remains uncertain as the federal government has reduced such programs.

Besides federal funding, Akron After School also receives financial support from Akron Public Schools, local foundations and organizations and the city of Akron, which in June agreed to provide \$250,000 for general operating support and \$50,000 for the expanded after-school program.

Funding for the expanded program will come largely from state childcare grants, YMCA scholarships and parent fees for families who don't qualify for other financial help.

Bolden and Kelley said they are exploring ways to provide transportation to those students participating in the expanded after-school program. Students attending the traditional Akron After School program are given rides home if they take the bus to school. The YMCA does not provide transportation.

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