Utah Statewide Needs Assessment of Out-of-School Time (OST) Programs for Elementary-Aged Children

Executive Summary
November 2024

In the Summer of 2023, the Department of Workforce Services-Office of Child Care (DWS-OCC) contracted with the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) to conduct a statewide Needs Assessment of Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs for Utah children in kindergarten through sixth grade during the 2023-24 school year. The UEPC included DWS-OCC, as well as the Utah Afterschool Network (UAN) and the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) as key state partners in the project.

The purpose of this statewide needs assessment was to study the following questions:

- *What are the strengths and critical gaps in OST program services across the state?*
- *What do children and families want and need from OST programs?*
- *What assets and resources are currently used to support OST programs?*
- *What are the challenges OST programs encounter, and what barriers stand in the way of children and family participation in OST programs within their communities?*

The **data sources for the needs assessment** included a variety of qualitative and quantitative data from both existing OST programs and areas of the state lacking OST program services due to a variety of reasons. These data sources included **OST staff surveys**, **family surveys**, **OST funding surveys**, **OST coordinator focus groups and interviews**, and **partner organization focus groups** (USBE, DWS-OCC, and UAN). Other sources of data included the **UAN Annual OST Program Information Form**, **Utah Census data**, **National Center for Education and Statistics data**, and **DWS-OCC and USBE funding data**.

The UEPC developed the data collection process, instruments, and timelines in partnership with DWS-OCC, key state OST partners, and the Needs Assessment Advisory Committee, which included approximately 30 OST professionals representing programs and organizations from across the state. The data collection and analysis were geographically organized by the nine DWS Service Areas (included in the Appendix) and according to six key topic areas with guiding questions that informed the data collection and analysis. These topic areas listed below were

determined through multiple conversations with OST leaders from DWS-OCC, USBE, and the UEPC, as well as data collected from OST program staff and leaders over the past few years. A summary of the findings is outlined below the topic areas.

Program Access and Availability

Under program access and availability, we examined the current gaps in available OST services, particularly for children and families from low-income backgrounds. We also examined the current needs of OST program staff and specific program needs that still exist for children and families. Below are key findings about OST program access and availability.

Demographic data about children and families highlighted the important role that OST programs can play in providing critical services. Given the number of children in each service area eligible for participation in OST programs, including the number of children eligible for free or reduced lunch programs, the number of children considered multilingual learners, the number of students with disabilities, and the number of children in single-parent households, OST programs have the potential to provide pivotal services and resources for these children throughout the state that many schools and families can't do alone.

Current Utah OST programs are heavily concentrated along the Wasatch Front, where the child population density is the highest, with other OST programs operating throughout most of the state. This project explored the locations of approximately 100 OST programs across the nine service areas, along with the child population density of each service area. The areas with the largest numbers of OST programs included Bear River, Wasatch Front North, Wasatch Front South, and Mountainland. Areas with fewer OST programs were also areas with lower child population density.

Many OST program administrators and staff reported operating at full or nearly full capacity, while some reported participant waitlists during the 2023-24 school year. While many of the smaller OST programs (e.g., serving between 1-30 students) have average daily attendance near or at full capacity, the larger programs (e.g., serving more than 30 students) might be able to serve additional children if the programs had the means to increase their capacities, such as fiscal resources, community partner supports, and additional quality program staff. In addition, reports of participant waitlists varied by service area in terms of the lengths and anticipated timelines and were influenced by a number of factors. OST programs with participant waitlists are generally located in urban areas such as Wasatch Front North, Wasatch Front South, and Southwestern.

Some OST teams identified specific challenges in providing needed program services, including transportation for participants, staffing, and rising program expenses, particularly in rural areas of the state. OST staff and leaders specifically discussed these three challenges in relation to their ongoing impact on providing needed

program services for children and families. Despite OST leaders' creative efforts to work through these barriers, these remain some of the most pressing issues faced by program teams.

Programming Capacity

For programming capacity, we examined the total number of children OST programs can accept based on program size, available resources, and OST grant requirements for staff-to-child ratios. We also studied the ability of OST teams to provide services to meet the specific needs of children and families across the state.

OST programs across the state offered a wide variety of critical academic, social, and physical activities for children to ensure their well-being. These included services such as academic enrichment and tutoring, homework help, outdoor recreation, and social skills activities. Family members reported appreciation for the academic and homework assistance provided in many programs.

OST program activities and services offered at least weekly were reported to be generally aligned with those identified by OST staff as most valuable for children and families, with a few exceptions. In general, program activities that OST staff identified as "very important" or "extremely important" for children and families were the same activities that they reported as being offered at least weekly during the programs. Opportunities for additional alignment of needs and services included home visits/calls to families, take-home activities, and social-emotional resources.

OST program staff and families identified the need for mental health resources for staff and children as a high priority. Statewide, staff and families reported that mental health resources and supports are a vital service within OST programs. However, many program teams reported being unable to keep up with this increasing need as they lack adequate resources and training for their staff.

Challenges with staff recruitment and retention were reported to complicate program teams' capacity to provide needed services for children and families. Some OST staff and administrators reported feeling overwhelmed at times with the demands of their programs as well as the needs of the children, particularly regarding mental health needs and behaviors. This can often lead to staff burnout and frequent turnover. OST teams are working diligently to hire and retain quality staff to meet the changing needs of the children and families within their programs.

Program Quality and Continuous Improvement

To study programming quality and continuous improvement, we explored how OST programs access and implement various state and national OST tools and resources. We also explored the benefits and barriers that OST programs face as they work to ensure quality program services and a commitment to continuous improvement.

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OST program administrators and staff reported using a variety of improvement resources/tools and attending professional learning opportunities around relevant topics, albeit at varying degrees based on their roles, as they work to strengthen program quality. Almost 80% of OST administrators and coordinators reported using statewide tools and resources, such as the *OST Quality Tool Self-Assessment, Professional Learning Events,* and the *Program Quality Assessment Observation Data*. Those same three resources were also the most frequently used by OST program staff, yet only approximately 50% of staff respondents reported using these tools.

OST program staff and administrators identified additional topic areas and suggestions for professional learning opportunities/resources that would be valuable to their teams as they worked to strengthen program quality. These additional topics included Cultural Competence for Inclusive Programming, Supporting Students with Post-Secondary Opportunities, Prevention Education/Strategies, and Family Engagement. In addition, OST staff and leaders suggested offering expanded leadership tracks during state and regional professional learning sessions and continuing to offer a variety of in-person and virtual opportunities for differentiated professional learning.

Several OST administrators reported frequent data use or evaluation activities to monitor progress toward program goals, revealing opportunities for these OST leaders to build their staff's capacity in

these areas. The OST staff survey revealed that the largest gaps in data collection practices between the OST administrators and those in other program roles were in reviewing and interpreting data and using evaluation data for program planning and improvement. These gaps suggest opportunities for OST administrators to work alongside their program staff in these specific areas as part of their ongoing commitment to enhance program quality.

Partnerships

For partnerships, we studied how OST programs engage with other community organizations to leverage resources and provide intentional, quality services, such as nutritious meals for program participants and mental health supports. In addition, we explored examples of community partnerships focused on this work and the benefits and barriers that OST teams encounter as they cultivate and sustain these partnerships to achieve program outcomes.

In some Utah communities, strategic, intentional partnerships with local organizations supplement critical services that many OST program teams cannot provide on their own due to limited resources. These partnerships offer additional services and resources for families and children, such as hot meals, mental health supports, and clothing throughout the year. OST leaders emphasized the important distinction between community organizations and OST programs working together to meet families' needs instead of competing for similar resources.

Some rural OST program teams have successfully partnered with existing local coalitions to access needed services for children and families. These intentional, sustained partnerships rely on consistent representation from all organizations and frequent, transparent communication to be most successful. Partnerships coalitions mobilize all available resources to meet the needs of local families and children, particularly within rural areas of the state.

Alignment with the School Day

To understand how OST programs align with the school day, we gathered information from staff and OST administrators about specific alignment practices, including how program teams purposefully align with the context and goals of the school day and which alignment strategies OST staff feel are most important.

Several OST program teams described success in their ongoing efforts to align with the school day, particularly in working with school-day teachers to intentionally support children with their specific needs. Alignment strategies mentioned most by OST staff included talking one-on-one with classroom teachers, attending faculty meetings, and engaging in informal discussions with school administrators. Other alignment strategies identified by OST staff included emailing teachers, working alongside teachers in the OST program, and attending regular meetings with school administration.

Many OST staff and families reported how much they valued the academic support and enrichment activities the OST programs provided, further highlighting the significance of the statewide alignment work. Specific academic and enrichment activities valued by both OST staff and families included individual tutoring, homework help, dedicated reading/writing time, and STEM learning opportunities. These four activities were also reported by 84-98% of OST staff as occurring at least weekly during their programs.

Many OST program teams reported using the statewide supports and resources shared with programs, such as professional learning opportunities and the UAN alignment rubric, to facilitate intentional OST alignment with the school day. Professional learning topic areas in which OST staff reported both attending and perceiving these topics to be "valuable" or "extremely valuable" included school day/afterschool alignment and helping students with academic skills. In addition, 67% of OST coordinators and administrators reported using the state alignment rubric as a resource to help their teams set small, focused goals.

Opportunities exist within the OST/school day alignment work to focus on developing and maintaining reciprocal relationships with the OST program and school teams. While many OST staff and administrators mentioned opportunities to develop and strengthen reciprocal relationships with school day teachers and administrators, to build on the current momentum of OST/school day alignment efforts, these reciprocal

relationships could be prioritized, highlighting the responsibility of both teams to ensure a successful partnership.

Availability of Resources and Funding

To understand the availability of resources and funding for OST programs, we gathered information about funding sources and identified areas of the state where resources are abundant and those areas in which they appear sparse. We gathered information about the processes by which OST programs are funded, how programs use these funds to meet the needs of children and families, and how they leverage and sustain these funds over time. We also identified trends and gaps in OST funding and resources that can be used by funding organizations and policymakers to allocate resources to the areas in Utah with the greatest need.

Federal and state funding sources are available for Utah OST programs to consider, with most involving a highly competitive review process. State and federal OST grant funds are available through both USBE and DWS-OCC. However, the total request for needed funds far surpasses the amount available. Some OST administrators reported that, due to decreases in both state and federal funding allocations, they are scaling back their operations by reducing program hours, cutting part-time staff positions, and limiting enrollment.

OST administrators recognize the impending need to be more creative with local, state, and federal funds to sustain their program services. Many OST programs are trying to determine how to maintain existing program services using other resources. Potential supports for OST programs and schools might include the use of Title I funds, as well as other federal funds (when appropriate and allowed under federal guidance), such as Migrant Education, McKinney Vento, and Child Nutrition Program resources. Another promising funding source for OST programs is the Childcare Assistance Program through DWS-OCC.

Considerations

The following considerations are offered for state leaders, OST funders, and OST program leaders **to encourage engagement in initial discussions at the state and regional levels about the findings presented in this report and how they may be leveraged for ongoing improvement and capacity building to ensure the needs of children and families are met.** Each one also offers timely opportunities for those discussions to deepen as leaders explore the unique contexts within various communities and regions.

◆ *Data-Driven Allocation of State and Federal Funds*
State funders who oversee OST funding competitions are encouraged to use multiple sources of timely data to creatively and systematically allocate competitive OST grant resources for specific regions of the state. These allocations could be based on factors such as current program availability, community and

family needs, and grant funding history.

◆ *Opportunities to Leverage Multiple Sources of Funding for OST Programs*

State and LEA leaders who manage federal and state funds are encouraged to talk with local school, community and OST leaders about opportunities to explore additional state and federal funds that could supplement OST budgets. Leaders who have already engaged in these conversations are encouraged to build an awareness of any new opportunities that will help OST programs and partners provide needed services to families and children.

◆ *Mental Health Supports and Resources*

State OST funders, program administrators and community partners are encouraged to think differently about mental health resources for children in OST programs. Exploring opportunities to expand regional, state, and national resources to more broadly reach OST programs is key. Possible partnerships between Utah colleges and universities and OST programs could significantly enhance community networks with the latest research and resources to support children and families.

◆ *Alignment with the School Day*

State and community leaders should continue to support the OST/school day alignment work. As a national leader in this area, Utah OST leaders could maintain momentum by expanding opportunities for OST program teams to go deeper with their alignment work (i.e. professional learning cohort tracks and virtual Communities of Practice meetings with OST and school day team members). LEA personnel, school administrators and teachers should consider facilitating frequent collaborative discussions on the successes of the alignment work from the school day perspective, as well as exploring opportunities for reciprocal relationships between school day and OST teams

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Appendix: DWS Service Areas Map

Legend:
- Bear River
- Wasatch Front North
- Wasatch Front South
- Mountainland
- Castle Country
- Uintah Basin
- Southeast
- Central Utah
- Southwest

Map labels:
Logan EC, Brigham City EC, Ogden EC, Ogden Admin, Roy EC, Clearfield EC, South Davis EC, Downtown EC, Admin North, South Admin, Metro EC, West Valley EC, South County EC, Midvale EC, CRESC, Park City EC, Tooele EC, American Fork EC, Heber City EC, Provo EC, Provo Admin, Spanish Fork EC, Vernal EC, Roosevelt EC/Admin, Nephi EC, Price EC, Delta EC, Emery County EC, Manti EC, Moab EC, Richfield EC, Beaver EC, Loa EC, Junction EC, Panguitch EC, Cedar City EC, Blanding EC, St. George EC, St. George Admin, Kanab EC

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