K12 ACADEMICS — FOUNDER'S GUIDE SERIES

How to Start an Afterschool Program

A plain-English, sourced founder's guide to out-of-school-time programs: the licensing-or-exemption question, staffing and ratios, safety, the five-layer funding stack, 21st Century grants, and realistic costs.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

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How to use this guide. Almost every hard requirement is set by your **state**, and rules change often. This guide teaches the process and the decision points; for the rules that apply to you, use the links in **Sources & Authorities** at the back.

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PART 1 OF 7

How to Start an Afterschool Program

The first thing to settle, before a lease, a budget or a name, is your licensing status. Whether you must be a licensed child-care program or are legally exempt shapes your ratios, your rules, your timeline and your funding.

AT A GLANCE

First question	**Licensed or exempt?**
Set by	**Operator, hours, ages, purpose**
Legal form	**Nonprofit or for-profit**
Funding layers	**Five**
Runway	**3–12 months**
Scope	**United States**

THE IDEA

Licensing status comes first

Afterschool sits on the line between child care and youth programming, and that line is where founders most often trip. In most states, a regular afterschool program that cares for elementary children is licensed as **school-age child care** through the state child-care agency, which brings ratios, facility rules and screening. But many programs are **license-exempt**, because a school or city runs them, because they are enrichment or recreation only, or because they serve older youth. Your status is decided by who runs the program, how many hours it runs, and which ages it serves, and it determines almost everything else: your ratios, your facility rules, your timeline, and which funding you can tap.

So settle it first, in writing, with your state agency, before you sign a lease, incorporate or build a budget. One caveat that catches people: even a license-exempt program that accepts child-care subsidy must still meet federal background-check, health-and-safety and inspection rules.

WHY NOW

Demand is large and unmet

The need is real. The Afterschool Alliance's America After 3PM 2025 survey found about 7 million children enrolled in afterschool programs, with parents of another 22.6 million saying they would enroll if a program were available. Among families who pay, the average cost is $124.10 a week, and 56% of parents not in a program cite cost as the barrier. To size your own demand, start with the free-and-reduced-price-meal rate of nearby schools, which is also the eligibility test for food reimbursement and 21st Century grants.

STEP 1

Choose your model

The model largely sets the regulatory path:

- **School-run** (district or charter staff): often license-exempt when the school operates it directly.

- **Partner-in-school** (your organization operating in a school under an agreement): frequently must be licensed, rules vary by state.
- **Community-based** (a YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, church, community center): varies; membership organizations are not automatically exempt.
- **Municipal / parks and recreation:** often exempt as a government or public-recreation program.
- **Standalone center:** usually licensed.

Then pick a program type (general care, academic/tutoring, enrichment, drop-in), an age band (elementary care is the most regulated; teen programs often fall outside licensing), and your hours. See Licensed or exempt?.

STEP 2

Form the legal entity

Choose nonprofit or for-profit by your funding plan. A nonprofit 501(c)(3) (board-governed; IRS Form 1023 $600, or the streamlined 1023-EZ $275 for small organizations) unlocks grants, most philanthropy and, importantly, food reimbursement sponsorship. A for-profit LLC fits a tuition-based enrichment business.

> Tax status is not the gate for the two biggest public funds: state child-care subsidy and 21st Century grants admit both nonprofits and for-profits (check your state's grant rules). But USDA food reimbursement and foundation grants heavily favor nonprofits. If you plan to rely on those, form a 501(c)(3).

STEP 3

Work the founder sequence

With model and entity decided, the path is a sequence. Each step has its own page:

- **Licensed or exempt?** — get a written determination first.
- **Health, safety & facilities** — a site (often a school via an MOU), space, and safety plans.
- **Staffing & ratios** — qualifications, ratios and comprehensive background checks.
- **Funding** and **21st Century grants** — the five-layer stack.
- **Program types & costs** — where the paths diverge, plus timelines.

Timeline: roughly 3 to 6 months to open in a school-partner space, or 6 to 12 months for a licensed standalone site (estimate).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the very first step to starting an afterschool program? Get a written licensing-or-exemption determination from your state child-care agency for your specific model, hours and ages. It decides your ratios, facility rules, timeline and funding, so settle it before a lease, entity or budget.

Do afterschool programs have to be licensed? Often, but not always. A regular program caring for elementary children is usually licensed as school-age child care, while programs run by a school or city, or that are enrichment-only or for older youth, are frequently exempt. It is state- and model-specific.

How long does it take to open an afterschool program? Roughly 3 to 6 months in a school-partner space, or 6 to 12 months for a licensed standalone site, counting incorporation, facility approval, background checks and (if applicable) food-program and grant timelines.

Should my program be a nonprofit or for-profit? Decide by your funding plan. Choose a 501(c)(3) if you want grants, USDA food reimbursement or donations; a for-profit fits a tuition-based model. Both can receive child-care subsidy and, in most states, 21st Century grants.

Is there demand for afterschool programs? Yes. The Afterschool Alliance reports about 7 million children enrolled and parents of 22.6 million more who would enroll if a program were available, with cost the top barrier.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE

tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/founding-an-afterschool-program/

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PART 2 OF 7

Licensed or License-Exempt? The Central Question

Whether your afterschool program must hold a state child-care license or is legally exempt is the decision that shapes everything. It is set by operator, hours, purpose and ages, and it varies sharply by state.

AT A GLANCE

The fork	**License vs exemption**
Set by	**Operator, hours, purpose, ages**
Agency	**State child-care licensing**
Exempt ≠	**Unregulated**
Get it	**In writing, first**
Varies	**By state**

THE IDEA

The decision that drives the rest

Everything downstream, ratios, facility rules, timeline, cost and funding, turns on this one question: must your program be licensed, or is it legally exempt? The line is drawn by **who operates** the program, **how many hours** it runs, its **purpose**, and the **ages** it serves, not by the word “afterschool”. Settle it with your state child-care agency, in writing, before anything else.

WHEN YOU ARE LICENSED

School-age child care

A regular, enrolled program caring for elementary-age children, run by a non-school operator above a state hours threshold, is usually licensed as **school-age child care**. Texas, for example, regulates care “for at least two hours a day, three days a week, to children attending prekindergarten through grade six”. New York requires registration for a program serving “seven or more school-age children under 13 years of age”. Licensing brings a pre-licensure inspection, ratios, facility standards and screening, but it also unlocks child-care subsidy and quality-rating participation.

WHEN YOU ARE EXEMPT

The common categories

Many afterschool programs are exempt. The usual categories:

- **Operated directly by a public school or district** (California, New York, Georgia, Texas for accredited schools).
- **Parks, recreation or municipal** programs run by a government agency.
- **Recreation, sports, lessons or single-skill instruction** only (New York excludes “sports, classes, lessons or recreation”; Texas exempts single-skill instruction).

- **Short-term or seasonal** (North Carolina exempts recreation run less than four consecutive months).
- **Religious-sponsored** (often under a notice-of-compliance rather than a license).
- **Older youth only** — programs serving above the licensing age cutoff (12 or 13). See teen programs.

THE CATCH

Exemption must be granted, and it is fragile

You generally cannot just declare yourself exempt. Most states require a written determination, application or self-assessment, Texas takes an exemption request covering operator, hours, ages and numbers; Georgia has required an online self-assessment since October 2024. And exemption is fragile: adding hours, younger children or an outside operator can end it. Get the ruling in writing and re-check it whenever your program changes.

A WARNING

License-exempt is not unregulated

This is the most important point on the page. Being license-exempt does not make you unregulated:

- If you accept child-care subsidy, federal CCDF rules require comprehensive background checks, health-and-safety training, and an annual inspection, licensed or not.
- Food reimbursement still requires you to meet “licensing, health, or safety codes that are required by state or local law”.
- Zoning, building and fire codes, state screening laws, mandated reporting and liability all still apply.

> The practical move: build to licensed-grade background checks and health-and-safety policies from day one, even if you are exempt. It keeps subsidy, food reimbursement and grant funding open, and it is simply safer.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I know if my afterschool program needs a license? Ask your state child-care agency for a written determination. It depends on who runs the program, how many hours it operates, its purpose, and the ages served. A regular program for elementary children run by a non-school operator is usually licensed.

What does license-exempt mean? It means state child-care licensing does not apply, usually because a school or city runs the program, it is recreation or single-skill only, it is short-term, or it serves older youth. It does not mean unregulated.

If I am exempt, do any rules still apply? Yes. If you accept child-care subsidy, federal CCDF background-check, health-and-safety and inspection rules apply. Zoning, fire and building codes, state screening laws, mandated reporting and liability apply regardless.

Can I just declare my program exempt? Usually not. Most states require a written determination, application or self-assessment (Texas an exemption request, Georgia an online self-assessment). And exemption can be lost if you add hours, younger children, or an outside operator.

Does licensing help me get funding? Yes. A license (or legal exempt status meeting CCDF rules) is generally required to accept child-care subsidy, to join a state quality-rating system, and often to participate in food reimbursement.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE →

tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/licensing-or-exemption/

PART 3 OF 7

3 Staffing, Ratios and Background Checks

School-age ratios are looser than preschool and vary widely by state, but the federal background-check rules are strict and uniform, and they apply even to many license-exempt programs.

AT A GLANCE

Ratios	**1:10 to 1:25 (by state)**
Quality target	**~1:10–1:15**
Checks	**FBI + state + registries**
Timing	**Within 45 days; every 5 yrs**
Training	**CCDF + NAA competencies**
Director	**Often 21+ required**

THE IDEA

People, and the checks behind them

Afterschool quality is mostly staff quality. Two things govern it: the staff-to-child ratio, which varies enormously by state, and the comprehensive background check, which is largely federal and uniform. Follow whichever ratio is stricter, your state's or your own quality target, and never cut corners on screening.

SUPERVISION

Ratios vary more than you'd expect

School-age ratios are far looser than the ratios for younger children, and they differ sharply by state:

State	School-age ratio (max group)
New York	1:10 through age 9 (group 20)
Massachusetts	1:13 (group 26)
Illinois	1:20 (group 30)
California	1:14, or 1:28 with an aide
Florida / Georgia / North Carolina	1:25

That 1:10-to-1:25 spread is wider than the commonly cited 1:10–1:15, and it changes your staffing cost dramatically. Even where a state allows 1:25,

about 1:10 to 1:15 is a defensible quality target. Confirm the current number on your state agency's site.

LEADERSHIP & STAFF

Qualifications

States set director and staff qualifications. Florida requires an adult at least 21 on the premises in charge of a school-age program. North Carolina allows staff counted in ratio to be 16 or older, but those under 18 must work under the direct supervision of a credentialed staff member at least 21. Illinois ties school-age director and worker qualifications to college coursework plus experience in a recreation program or school-age care. Identify and credential your lead staff early, see Careers & Workforce for hiring.

THE NON-NEGOTIABLE

Comprehensive background checks

For licensed programs, and for any program receiving child-care subsidy, every staff member needs the full CCDF background-check set:

- An FBI fingerprint check.
- A separate NCIC National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR) check — the federal guidance is explicit that this is *not* satisfied by the FBI fingerprint check.
- An in-state fingerprint criminal-history check.
- An in-state sex-offender registry check.
- An in-state child-abuse-and-neglect registry check.
- The same checks in any state lived in during the past five years.

All components must be completed within 45 days of hire, and repeated at least every five years. New staff may begin only after one qualifying fingerprint result, under supervision, until the rest clear. Many states add their own layers (Florida Level 2 screening, Texas Central Registry).

GROWING STAFF

Training and the NAA competencies

CCDF requires pre-service health-and-safety training plus ongoing professional development. For a growth framework, use the National AfterSchool Association's Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies, ten content areas spanning child development, learning environment, youth engagement, cultural responsiveness, family and community relationships, safety and wellness, and leadership. Several states have adopted the framework outright. Pair it with first aid/CPR and your state's required orientation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are afterschool staff-to-child ratios? School-age ratios vary widely, from about 1:10 (New York, youngest) to 1:25 (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina), with 1:13 in Massachusetts and 1:20 in Illinois. Follow the stricter of your state rule or a quality target of roughly 1:10–1:15.

What background checks do afterschool staff need? For licensed or subsidy-receiving programs: an FBI fingerprint check, a separate national sex-offender registry check, and in-state criminal, sex-offender and child-abuse registry checks, plus the same in any state lived in over the past five years.

How fast must background checks be done? All CCDF components must be completed within 45 days of hire and repeated at least every five years. A new hire may start, under supervision, once one qualifying fingerprint result comes back.

Do background-check rules apply to exempt programs? Yes, if the program receives child-care subsidy. The CCDF comprehensive background-

check requirements apply to licensed and subsidy-receiving license-exempt providers alike.

What qualifications do afterschool staff need? It varies by state. Florida requires an adult 21+ in charge; North Carolina allows 16+ staff in ratio but under-18s must be supervised by a credentialed 21+ staffer; Illinois ties qualifications to coursework and experience.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE

tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/staffing-and-ratios/

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PART 4 OF 7

Health, Safety, Facilities and Enrollment

A set of written safety plans, a compliant space (often a school room under an agreement), and clear family paperwork are the day-to-day backbone of a well-run program.

AT A GLANCE

Safety plans	**9 CCDF topics**
Best site	**School room via MOU**
Space	**State sq-ft minimums**
Field trips	**Extra adult (some states)**
Enrollment	**Forms + fee agreement**
Release	**Authorized pickup only**

THE IDEA

The daily backbone

Three practical systems keep an afterschool program safe and running: written health-and-safety plans, a compliant facility, and clear family paperwork. None is glamorous, but each is where licensing, funding and trust are won or lost.

SAFETY

The written plans you need

Federal CCDF health-and-safety rules set the required topics, and they make a good checklist for any program, licensed or not:

- Infectious-disease control and immunizations.
- Medication administration, with authorizations and logs.
- Food-allergy prevention and response, with individual allergy action plans.
- Building and premises safety; hazardous-materials storage.
- Emergency preparedness, evacuation and lockdown plans.
- Safe transportation of children.
- Pediatric first aid and CPR.
- Recognition and reporting of child abuse and neglect (your staff are mandated reporters).

Add supervision and headcount procedures, especially for transitions and field trips, Florida, for example, requires an extra adult beyond ratio on school-age field trips.

THE SITE

School room, community space or standalone

Most new programs operate inside a school. Negotiate a facility-use agreement or MOU covering rooms and outdoor areas, custodial and utilities, liability and indemnification, storage, restroom and gym access, snack service through the district, and data sharing for grant reporting.

- A school site can simplify facility compliance: North Carolina's 2025 law deems approved school buildings to meet licensed space, fire and building-code requirements for the same students; Illinois treats school-based programs as facility-exempt (but still regulates staff and operations); New York exempts school-building programs from some facility rules.
- A community center, church or standalone site means local zoning (child-care use), building and occupancy permits, a fire-marshal inspection, and health inspection where food is served.

Licensed programs also meet space-per-child minimums, Massachusetts requires at least 35 square feet of indoor activity space and 75 square feet of outdoor space per child, plus restroom counts. These are state-specific; link out to your state rule.

FAMILIES

Enrollment, agreements and fees

Build an enrollment packet: registration and emergency contacts, health and allergy information (and immunization records where required), an authorized-pickup list, media consent, and a fee agreement covering late-pickup fees and withdrawal notice. On pickup, release children only to authorized adults with ID. On fees, the national average among paying families is about $124.10 a week; a sliding scale is commonly pegged to the free-and-reduced-price-meal income tiers, and accepting subsidy widens access.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What health and safety plans does an afterschool program need? Written plans covering infectious disease and immunizations, medication, food allergies, premises and hazardous-materials safety, emergencies and evacuation, transportation, pediatric first aid/CPR, and abuse recognition and reporting, the federal CCDF topic list.

Can I run an afterschool program in a school building? Yes, and it is the most common model. Negotiate a facility-use agreement or MOU. In some states (North Carolina, Illinois, New York) a school building also eases facility-code compliance, though staffing and operating rules still apply.

How much space does an afterschool program need? It is state-specific for licensed programs. Massachusetts, for example, requires at least 35 square feet of indoor activity space and 75 square feet of outdoor space per child. Check your state's rule.

What paperwork do families fill out? Registration and emergency contacts, health and allergy information (and immunization records where required), an authorized-pickup list, media consent, and a fee agreement. Children are released only to authorized adults.

How much do afterschool programs charge? The national average among paying families is about $124.10 a week. Many programs use a sliding scale tied to the free-and-reduced-price-meal income tiers and accept child-care subsidy to widen access.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/health-safety-facilities/ →

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PART 5 OF 7

Funding an Afterschool Program: The Five-Layer Stack

Afterschool rarely runs on one revenue source. The strongest programs layer five: parent fees, child-care subsidy, USDA food reimbursement, 21st Century grants, and philanthropy.

AT A GLANCE

Layers	**Five**
Fees (avg)	**$124.10/week**
Food (free rate)	**$4.76 supper / $1.30 snack**
Food eligibility	**50% free/reduced**
Biggest grant	**21st CCLC**
Rule	**Layer, don't rely on one**

THE IDEA

Build a stack, not a single source

No single source usually covers an afterschool program. The durable approach is to layer five: parent fees, child-care subsidy, federal food reimbursement, 21st Century grants, and philanthropy. Each has its own gate, and together they let you serve families across the income spectrum.

LAYER 1–2

Fees and sliding scale

Parent tuition is the base. Among families who pay, the national average is about $124.10 a week, for an average of 3.7 days and 5.3 hours; over a 36-to-40-week school year that is roughly $4,470 to $4,960 per child (estimate). Because 56% of non-participating families cite cost, a **sliding scale**, commonly pegged to the free-and-reduced-price-meal income tiers, widens access, funded in part by the grants and donations below.

LAYER 3

Child-care subsidy (CCDF)

State child-care subsidy pays the provider directly for eligible low-income families, a major, stable revenue layer. The gate is being licensed or legally operating and meeting the CCDF requirements (comprehensive background checks, health-and-safety training, annual inspection). See Federal Programs for the CCDF context.

LAYER 4

USDA food reimbursement

If your site is in a high-poverty area, the federal food programs are real money. Two routes:

- **CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals** (USDA FNS): for programs offering regular, enrichment activities in an “area-eligible” location, meaning at

least half the children in the school attendance area qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Families fill out no forms; meals are free. For July 2026–June 2027, the free-rate reimbursement in the contiguous states is $4.76 per supper and $1.30 per snack.

- **NSLP Afterschool Snack Service:** run through a school food authority, snacks only, on school days, with every snack reimbursed at the free rate at area-eligible (50%) sites.

Illustration (estimate): 40 children × ($4.76 supper + $1.30 snack) × 180 school days is about $43,600 a year in reimbursement, before food and labor costs. Note: CACFP sponsorship favors schools, government, and nonprofit organizations; for-profits face extra eligibility tests.

LAYER 5

21st Century grants and philanthropy

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is the only federal fund dedicated to out-of-school time, awarded competitively by state education agencies to programs serving high-poverty schools, at least $50,000 a year for three to five years. Because grants taper and expire, treat them as startup and expansion capital, not permanent operating revenue. Round out the stack with foundation, United Way and local-government grants, which usually require 501(c)(3) status.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do afterschool programs pay for themselves? By layering five sources: parent fees (with a sliding scale), state child-care subsidy, USDA food reimbursement (CACFP or NSLP snacks), 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, and philanthropy. Few programs run on one source alone.

How much can an afterschool program get for meals and snacks? At area-eligible sites (50% free/reduced-price), CACFP At-Risk pays the free rate, $4.76 per supper and $1.30 per snack in the contiguous states for 2026–27. A 40-child program could draw tens of thousands of dollars a year before food costs.

What is CACFP area eligibility? A site is area-eligible if at least half of the children in the school attendance area qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Families fill out no applications, and meals are served free to all children.

What is a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant? The only federal grant dedicated to out-of-school time, awarded competitively by state education agencies to programs serving high-poverty schools, at least $50,000 a year for 3–5 years. It typically tapers, so treat it as startup capital.

Do I need to be a nonprofit to get afterschool funding? Not for everything. Child-care subsidy and (in most states) 21st Century grants admit for-profits. But USDA food-program sponsorship and most foundation grants favor nonprofits, so a 501(c)(3) widens your options.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/funding-your-program/

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PART 6 OF 7

21st Century Community Learning Centers Grants

The 21st CCLC program is the only federal funding stream dedicated to out-of-school time. It is competitive, school-linked, aimed at high-poverty schools, and designed to taper, so plan it as startup capital.

AT A GLANCE

Program	**ESEA Title IV-B**
Applied through	**State education agency**
Award	**≥$50K/yr, 3–5 years**
Targets	**High-poverty schools**
Content	**Academics + enrichment + family**
Caution	**Tapers; not permanent**

THE IDEA

The one federal afterschool fund

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (ESEA Title IV, Part B) is the only federal funding stream dedicated exclusively to out-of-school-time programs. Congress appropriated about $1.33 billion in each recent year. The U.S. Department of Education sends it by formula to state education agencies, which must award at least 93% of it as competitive subgrants. It is part of the federal education-funding landscape.

ELIGIBILITY

Who can apply, and who it serves

Eligible applicants are broad: school districts, community- and faith-based organizations, tribes, colleges, and other public or private entities (for-profits are eligible in many states, check the state's request for proposals). But the money is targeted: programs must serve students who attend **high-poverty, low-performing schools**. Iowa, for instance, targets Title I schoolwide-eligible schools where at least 40% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The practical implication: partner early with an eligible school.

THE DEAL

What the grant must fund

A 21st CCLC program must provide three things together:

- **Academic enrichment** aligned to school-day learning.
- **A broad array of activities** — STEM, arts, physical fitness, financial literacy, career and technical education, and more.
- **Family engagement**, including literacy and educational development for families.

For high-school programs the law explicitly allows internships, apprenticeships and in-demand-industry ties, so a teen program fits well.

HOW IT WORKS

State RFP cycles and the taper

You apply through your state education agency on its own competitive cycle, which typically opens 6 to 12 months before the program year. Grants are paid on a reimbursement basis, run three to five years, and vary in size, North Carolina, for example, awards $50,000 to $400,000 a year. Crucially, most states step the award down over time (Iowa cuts 25% in years four and five; Mississippi runs 100/100/80/60), so you must plan to replace the grant with other funding as it tapers.

> A grant is not a licensing exemption. A 21st CCLC award does not remove any state licensing or exemption obligation, keep both in view. And watch policy: a recent federal budget proposal floated folding 21st CCLC into a broader consolidated program, so confirm the current status before you build a multi-year plan on it.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program? A federal grant program (ESEA Title IV, Part B) that is the only federal funding stream dedicated to out-of-school time. It funds academic enrichment, broad activities and family engagement at programs serving high-poverty schools.

How do I apply for a 21st CCLC grant? Through your state education agency, which runs its own competitive request-for-proposals cycle (usually 6–12 months before the program year). The federal government sends the money to states, which award the subgrants.

How big is a 21st CCLC grant and how long does it last? At least $50,000 a year for three to five years; sizes vary by state (North Carolina, for example, $50,000–$400,000). Most awards taper in later years, so treat them as startup and expansion capital.

Who is eligible for a 21st CCLC grant? School districts, community- and faith-based organizations, tribes, colleges and other public or private entities (for-profits in many states). Programs must serve students from high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Does a 21st CCLC grant exempt me from licensing? No. The grant funds programming but does not remove any state licensing or exemption obligation. Keep your licensing status and your grant compliance in view at the same time.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/grants-21st-cclc/ →

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PART 7 OF 7

Program Types, Costs and Federal Rules

Licensed, license-exempt, grant-funded and teen programs share a backbone but diverge at authorization and funding. Here is how each differs, plus realistic costs, timelines, and the federal rules that apply to all.

AT A GLANCE

Paths	**Licensed / exempt / 21st CCLC / teen**
Small program	**~30–60 children**
Startup	**Low-to-mid 5 figures (est.)**
Staff share	**60–75% of budget**
Wages	**Not seasonal-exempt**
Federal	**CCDF, FLSA, ADA**

THE IDEA

Same backbone, different branches

Every afterschool program shares the steps in the founding overview, but four paths diverge at authorization and funding. Knowing which you are on sets your rules and your budget.

THE FOUR PATHS

Where requirements diverge

The branches:

- **Licensed school-age care** — the default for regular care of elementary children; a pre-licensure inspection, ratios and facility standards, but access to subsidy and quality-rating systems.
- **License-exempt** — school-run, municipal, recreation-only or older-youth programs; lighter on paper, but CCDF rules still bind if you take subsidy. See Licensed or exempt?.
- **21st Century grant-funded** — school-linked, high-poverty-focused, competitive; see 21st Century grants.
- **Teen / middle- and high-school** — often outside child-care licensing (age cutoffs of 12 or 13), with drop-in attendance and career-focused programming (below).

THE TEEN BRANCH

Programs for older youth

Programs serving only middle- and high-schoolers often fall outside child-care licensing, because most licensing definitions stop at age 12 or 13 (New York “under 13”; Texas pre-K through grade six). Screening, liability, mandated reporting and facility codes still apply. Teen programming

leans toward youth leadership, homework and credit recovery, mentoring, sports, and career and work-based learning, and 21st CCLC explicitly funds internships and apprenticeships for high-schoolers. Because teens attend by choice, budget on **attendance** rather than fixed enrollment. Food reimbursement still reaches them: CACFP serves youth 18 and under.

THE MONEY & CLOCK

Costs and timelines

There is no national dataset on afterschool startup cost, so these are planning estimates anchored to the few published figures (IRS $600 / $275; 21st CCLC $50,000 minimum; state licensing and fingerprint fees vary).

Item	Small program (~30–60 children)
Startup cash	Low-to-mid five figures (lowest in a school/church partner space)
Operating budget	60–75% driven by staff costs
Timeline — school partner	~3–6 months
Timeline — licensed standalone	~6–12 months (zoning, inspections, food approval)
Multi-site	Each site needs its own license/exemption + food approval; phase over 12–24 months

RULES FOR ALL

The federal baseline

Whatever the path, federal rules apply:

- **CCDF** (45 CFR Part 98): background checks, health-and-safety training and inspections for any subsidy-receiving provider.
- **FLSA:** a school-year program is **not** seasonal-camp exempt (that exemption needs seven months or less of operation), so plan to pay at least minimum wage and overtime, and follow the stricter of state or federal wage law.
- **ADA:** programs open to the public must make reasonable modifications for children with disabilities and provide accessible facilities (see Special Education).
- **Mandated reporting** of suspected child abuse or neglect.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the main types of afterschool programs? Licensed school-age child care (the default for elementary care), license-exempt programs (school-run, municipal, recreation-only or teen), 21st Century grant-funded programs, and teen programs that often fall outside child-care licensing.

How much does it cost to start an afterschool program? For a small 30–60-child program, a low-to-mid five-figure startup is a reasonable estimate, lowest in a donated school or church space. Staff costs typically run 60–75% of the operating budget. No national dataset exists, so treat figures as estimates.

How long does it take to open? Roughly 3–6 months in a school-partner space, or 6–12 months for a licensed standalone site (zoning, inspections and food-program approval). Multi-site programs phase openings over 12–24 months.

Do teen afterschool programs need a child-care license? Often not, because child-care licensing usually stops at age 12 or 13. But screening,

liability, mandated reporting and facility codes still apply, and food reimbursement still reaches youth 18 and under.

Can an afterschool program use the seasonal minimum-wage exemption? No. The FLSA seasonal-camp exemption requires operating seven months or less a year, which a school-year program fails. Plan to pay at least minimum wage and overtime, under the stricter of state or federal law.

READ THIS SECTION ONLINE
tools.k12academics.com/start-an-afterschool-program/program-types-and-costs/

REFERENCE

Sources & Authorities

Primary government, nonprofit and accreditor sources. Verify current fees, deadlines and state rules at these links before relying on them.

HHS Office of Child Care — Comprehensive Background Checks
https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/ccdf-fundamentals/components-comprehensive-background-check

HHS Office of Child Care — Health & Safety Requirements
https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/ccdf-fundamentals/health-and-safety-requirements

45 CFR Part 98 Subpart E — CCDF provider requirements (eCFR)
https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-A/subchapter-A/part-98/subpart-E

U.S. Dept. of Education — 21st Century Community Learning Centers
https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/school-improvement-grants/nita-m-lowey-21st-century-community-learning-centers-title-iv-part-b

USDA FNS — CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals (FAQs)
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/afterschool/faqs

USDA FNS — CACFP Reimbursement Rates 2026–27
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/fr-072726

USDA FNS — NSLP Afterschool Snack Service (FAQs)
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/afterschool-snacks-faqs

National AfterSchool Association — Core Competencies
https://www.air.org/project/building-quality-afterschool/staff-supports/core-competencies

Afterschool Alliance — America After 3PM
https://afterschoolalliance.org

IRS — Form 1023 FAQ (nonprofit)
https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/frequently-asked-questions-about-form-1023

U.S. DOL — FLSA Seasonal Establishment Exemption (Fact Sheet #18)
https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/18-flsa-seasonal-amusement

New York OCFS — School-Age Child Care
https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/childcare/

Texas HHSC — Child Care Licensing Exemptions
https://hhs.texas.gov/doing-business-hhs/provider-portals/protective-services-providers/child-care-licensing/licensing-exemptions

Georgia DECAL — Exemptions
https://www.decal.ga.gov/ccs/exemptions.aspx

California CDSS — Community Care Licensing
https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/child-care-licensing

A note on accuracy. Cost and timeline figures are informed estimates; no authoritative national dataset exists. State rules change often, confirm at the source.