



October 2025

News and Events



Get Connected Conference 2025 in Kearney, NE

This year marked the **20th anniversary** of the Get Connected conference, and you could feel the celebration in the air throughout the event! 2025. What a confusing and change filled year for the afterschool community. Amidst this uneasy time, however, afterschool leaders from all over came together to tackle the arising challenges and to inspire hope in one another. At the 2025 Get Connected Conference, Beyond School Bells, the Nebraska Department of Education, and UNL Extension partnered to engage over 200 participants, including afterschool directors, staff members, teachers, students, and community partners.

The conference featured a Director's Day event with systems change activities, a Meet, Greet, & Get Connected social networking event with many free prizes, and of course, a full day of speakers, sessions, and walk and talk tables. Some topics covered during the conference were advocacy, grant writing, bridging afterschool with the school day, literacy, STEM, and empowering student minds. The keynote speaker, Adam Carrol, started the Friday conference off with his talk on living life at a 10, filling your cup before filling others', because you cannot give what you do not have. The Get Connected conference gave us all the chance to fill our cups and to share and take-home resources and tools to keep creating sustainable, impactful, and engaging afterschool programming for children and families. How will you bring yourself to a 10 so you can pour into your afterschool students?

Save the Date for next year's GetConnected Afterschool Conference: September 25, 2026, at Younes Conference Center SOUTH in Kearney!



Carrie Lienemann Receives Inaugural Michelle Arehart Afterschool Community Champion Award

At this year's GetConnected Afterschool Conference, Carrie Lienemann was honored as the very first recipient of the Michelle Arehart Afterschool Community Champion Award.

Created in memory of longtime KCLC Director Michelle Arehart, this award recognizes an afterschool leader who exemplifies Michelle's legacy of dedication, leadership, and commitment to community.

Carrie was selected from numerous nominations describing her as *"an amazing asset to her district, children, families, and the entire community."* With more than 17 years of afterschool leadership, she has built a program known for exciting activities, strong relationships, and a culture where every child feels valued and supported.

One parent shared, *"My son comes home every day talking about the amazing programming and the powerful relationships he has built. He knows he is loved when he is there."*

The GetConnected Conference is proud to celebrate Carrie as a true community champion whose work continues to inspire the field of afterschool.



2025-26 Catalyst Contracts Awarded

Beyond School Bells is pleased to announce the Catalyst Funding Opportunity has been approved for 21 Afterschool and Summer Learning programs across the state! We are incredibly thankful to all who applied and dedicated their time and effort to advancing ideas for local afterschool innovations that contribute to a statewide community. The Catalyst Funding Opportunity is built upon Beyond School Bells' mission to facilitate continuously improving, high-quality ELO programming; increase and enhance local sustainability of ELO programs; empower afterschool stakeholders and contribute to supportive policy structures; and to fashion innovative programming that reflects youth interests and builds life skills.

The new Catalyst Funding Opportunity creates tailored support for established Expanded Learning Opportunity programs that are committed to innovation, sustainability, and youth-centered learning. Selected programs will participate in statewide learning communities, host Lights On Afterschool events, and collaborate with one another to support long-term sustainability efforts and achieve learning goals, such as connecting youth to future careers and improving literacy. There is much more to come over the year ahead, and we are thrilled to work with the Catalyst program leaders from across the state. Stay tuned for news of innovations and many stories of ELO leadership to come.

Resources

CRUNCH OFF Farm to School Challenge

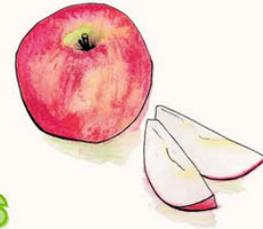
October is National Farm to School Month, promoting local foods in all kinds of fun ways. The CRUNCH OFF is a regional competition for any and every citizen in Nebraska to show up for local food and host an event like a club or family night that encourages people to bite into local foods. Students, teachers, farmers, parents, organizations, community members, and anyone in Afterschool Programs can [register a team and CRUNCH into local food products anytime in October!](#) You can register any Crunch Off event taking place between October 1-31, 2025. The final day to register is October 31. Together, we can take this opportunity to celebrate local food and Farm to School programs throughout Nebraska and reclaim the Crunch Off Championship!

See [NDE Farm to School: Nebraska Crunch Off](#) to find out more about Crunch! **Happy Crunching!**

Visit the Mountain Plains Crunch Off website to register your event and learn more!
<https://www.education.ne.gov/ns/farm-to-school/mountain-plains-crunch/>



Nebraska crunch-able items



- Local food items including all fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, popcorn, and meat that are either grown or raised locally.
- Value-added products that are made by the crunch-ers, such as salsa.



Is there anything that does NOT count?

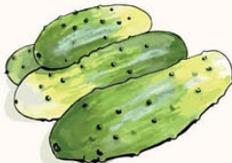


- All liquids, including local juices and milk, will not be included.
- Any value-added products that are purchased, such as salsa and ice cream, would not be included.
- Grains, including local grains or grain-based food products.
- Deep-fried food products.



The Crunch Off is for every citizen in Nebraska to participate, not just schools and childcare centers. Businesses, organizations, community clubs, churches, and more can all participate. The goal is to increase local fruit and vegetable consumption, promote healthy eating habits, and celebrate Nebraska's locally grown food and the producers that work hard to feed us.

<https://www.education.ne.gov/ns/farm-to-school/mountain-plains-crunch/>



OCTOBER

NEBRASKA CRUNCH OFF

DATE OF YOUR
CHOICE
DURING THE
MONTH OF
OCTOBER

October is Farm to School Month. Join thousands of Nebraskans as we compete against other states in our region to Crunch Off! Take a bite into local, CRUNCHY fruits or vegetables.

Register your team today so your Crunch is counted!



SCAN ME

www.education.ne.gov/ns/farm-to-school/mountain-plains-crunch



Walk to Unlock and Farm to School Challenge in October!

This October, we're on the move across Nebraska with Walk to Unlock! Beyond School Bells is championing Farm to School and Walk to Unlock to celebrate Farm to School Month and showcase Nebraska's awesome nature, agriculture, and history along the way.

Afterschool programs can sign up and log miles by getting students active during program – playing a sport, nature walks, laps around the playground, or many other activities. Join the Trek and explore local foods along the virtual trail that Walk to Unlock and NDE Farm to School have created. The challenge takes place from Oct 1 to 31 and can include individuals or teams. Registration is open, join the [Walk to Unlock](#) today!



October Challenge

Join us in the month of **October** as we move around Nebraska using Walk to Unlock! This challenge highlights the new partnership between Walk to Unlock and Farm to School!

What if I don't walk for exercise?

No Problem! Walk to Unlock allows you to log steps in many forms of physical activity and utilizes a step calculator to calculate steps for your activity!

Example: 20 minutes of yard work = 2400 steps

Goal:

Complete the Trek during October. Individually or with a team move around the outer edge of Nebraska

1,332 miles

How to log your miles:

Registering for Walk to Unlock will give you access to a unique virtual trail that takes you all around Nebraska!



Register here!

Opens on Sept. 22nd



walk2unlock.ne.gov

Funding Opportunities

National Geographic 2026 Slingshot Challenge

The Slingshot Challenge is an opportunity to support the next generation of environmental leaders. We're challenging 13–18-year-olds across Nebraska to create a 60-second video sharing their idea for the future of conservation work, with the chance to receive up to \$10,000 in funding.

Beyond School Bells is a firm believer in youth voice and leadership. The Slingshot Challenge is the perfect opportunity for students leading afterschool programs to identify a local environmental challenge they care about, design a solution for it, and engage their younger peers in afterschool programs to learn about the issue or even contribute to the solution.

To learn more about the Slingshot Challenge, visit www.slingshotchallenge.org. If you'd like project support for afterschool programs, reach out to Dakota Staggs (dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org) or Alexis Hansen (ahansen@nebraskachildren.org) on the Beyond School Bells team.

SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS FROM NATGEO:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZaMr9JNQjY8c5YIVrHdNmdQM4heCuLKm?usp=sharing>



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