



July 2026



RFP Announcement!

2026-27 Catalyst Funding

Expanded Learning Opportunities

- Literacy • Career Exploration
- Workforce Development

Applications are due Friday, August 7

Beyond School Bells is excited to offer year two of our Catalyst Funding to support established Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) programs that are committed to innovation, sustainability, and youth-centered learning.

Catalyst 2026-27 is an invitation to join a growing statewide movement focused on improving literacy outcomes and expanding career possibilities for Nebraska youth through high-quality afterschool learning. A limited number of applicants will be chosen for school-year funding and funding for summer 2027 may be offered separately. [See our website for more details.](#)

- There is an informational webinar recording [available at this link](#)
- Applications due **August 7**
- Award Notifications **August 14**
- Funding will run **September 1, 2026** through **May 31, 2027** (9 months)

Applications and questions should be directed to Ann O'Connor (annoconnor@nebraskachildren.org) or Dakota Staggs (dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org).

[Learn More](#)

Lights on Funding Opportunity

Beyond School Bells at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation is pleased to provide reimbursement to afterschool sites for approved expenses associated with hosting a Lights On Afterschool advocacy and awareness event during the month of October to join the nationwide celebration that recognizes the important role afterschool programs play in supporting youth, families, schools, and communities.

Lights On Afterschool, a project of the Afterschool Alliance, is a nationwide rally, celebrating afterschool programs. Held annually in October, it highlights how programs keep kids safe, inspire learning, and support working families. Each year, more than 8,000 communities nationwide host events to celebrate their programs and increase awareness. October 22, 2026 is the date for this year's nationwide Lights On Afterschool celebration, set by Afterschool Alliance, but not all events need to be held on this date.

Download the Application



Nebraska's Afterschool Conference: Registration Open!

GETCONNECTED
NEBRASKA'S
AFTERSCHOOL CONFERENCE

STRONGER TOGETHER:
Connecting People, Programs, and Possibilities!

September 25, 2026
Younes Conference Center South - Kearney, NE



Register below for the 2026 NE Afterschool Conference - let's GetConnected!

- **Attendee Registration:**
<https://dashboard.eventcombo.com/e/attendee/nebraska-afterschool-conferencegetconnected-79094-283c>

- **Presenter Registration:**
<https://dashboard.eventcombo.com/e/presenter/nebraska-afterschool-conferencegetconnected-79094-dazc>
- **Walk-n-Talk Registration:**
<https://dashboard.eventcombo.com/ms/ev/79094/nebraska-afterschool-conferencegetconnected/home?eventRoleId=1baq>

Pre-Conference Networking Event

Join Beyond School Bells for an evening of networking, fun, and celebration on Thursday, September 24, at this year's Networking Event at the Nebraska Afterschool Conference: GetConnected. This special event is included with conference registration at no additional cost and is open to all conference attendees. Whether you're new to the field or a seasoned afterschool professional, this is a great opportunity to connect with colleagues from across Nebraska and build new partnerships. Enjoy: delicious food, entertainment, networking opportunities, door prizes and giveaways, and a cash bar.

Don't miss one of the conference's favorite opportunities to connect with fellow afterschool professionals and partners in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.

Register today for the Nebraska Afterschool Conference: GetConnected and be sure to indicate that you'll be attending the Networking Event when you register!

[Register Here](#)

From the Farm to School Feed!

Move, Unlock, & Reap the Harvest

Bring learning to life through movement, agriculture, and hands-on exploration! The Nebraska Department of Education is excited to invite elementary and middle schools to apply for a **new pilot opportunity for the 2026–27 school year, combining Walk to Unlock virtual trails with Farm to School Harvest of the Month resources**. This initiative blends physical activity with lessons on Nebraska's agriculture, history, and nutrition through interactive "checkpoints" and classroom activities. Participating schools will pilot at least one trail and complete brief surveys - while **receiving \$250 mini-grant funding**. With a **flexible timeline and options to participate as a classroom, club, or after-school program**, this is a great way to engage students in active, experiential learning. Check out the flyer for all the details!

Apply today to be part of this exciting pilot!

[Apply Here](#)



MOVE, UNLOCK, & REAP THE HARVEST

Bring history, nature, and agriculture to life with Walk to Unlock's virtual trails featuring Harvest of the Month local food checkpoints.



FARM TO SCHOOL & WALK TO UNLOCK

Together, the Walk to Unlock and Farm to School Harvest of the Month (HOM) programs will offer four unique trails designed to explore Nebraska's rich agricultural heritage while promoting physical activity and local foods. **During the 2026-27 school year, we are looking for 20 interested schools that would like to help us pilot this new agriculture element to the trails!** Selected schools would be **provided a \$250 mini-grant for their participation** in the pilot upon completion of required deliverables.

PROJECT DETAILS

- Pilot a minimum of 1 of the 4 trails and use the HOM resources on the trail(s).
- Administer pre and post surveys.
- "Move" your way through the trail and complete the HOM activities.
- Max stipend is \$500/school district.
- Flexible timeline - Start when you're ready during the 2026-27 school year and finish by the end of year.

FARM TO SCHOOL 101



Procurement: Local foods are purchased, promoted, and served in the cafeteria, as a snack or in classroom taste tests.



Education: Students participate in education activities related to agriculture, food, health and nutrition.



School Gardens: Students engage in hands-on experiential learning.

See the next page for how to implement Walk to Unlock!

WHO CAN APPLY?

Interested Elementary/Middle Schools can apply:

- As a classroom
- As a school club
- As an After School club (associated with a school district)

Note: The staff member/teacher must be the one to apply on behalf of the school.

NEXT STEPS

Applicants can expect to hear the award notice by early-mid August 2026.



Fill out our form to indicate your interest in participating in this mini-grant opportunity!

QUESTIONS?

Contact: nde.f2s@nebraska.gov

All Paths Lead to Education with...



HISTORY • AGRICULTURE • NATURE **WALK 2 UNLOCK** NEBRASKA

Utilize Walk 2 Unlock as individuals or teams to move (not limited to walking) through each virtual trail, where all participants will gain foundational checkpoint knowledge about Nebraska's history, agriculture, and nature. Checkpoint learning resources are designed for K-8th grade which include supplemental Harvest of the Month lessons that will provide additional resources to enhance the experience. Be Active, and then log in to walk2unlock.ne.gov. Enter steps or minutes of activity into the activity calculator, watch them convert into miles on your trail, choose checkpoint resources to complete, and repeat the process!

HOW TO IMPLEMENT WALK 2 UNLOCK:

Set Up:

Create teams (recommended 10 or fewer per team).



Optional: Invite other teams to join your league and compete.

Move and Log:

Track any activity - our calculator converts minutes into miles.



Teach:

Each trail checkpoint includes several 10-40 minute activities & resources.



Repeat!



Program Resources

NEW School Orchard Lesson Guide

Planting a school orchard - or even a single fruit tree - creates a living classroom where students can explore, observe, and learn through hands-on experiences year after year. Planting and caring for trees, harvesting fruit, and other orchard activities not only nurture lifelong skills but also bolster enthusiasm for eating fresh foods and foster environmental awareness and community connections!

This guide was created to help educators integrate fruit trees into their curriculum to maximize their use as an educational tool.

The guide includes:

- Ten lesson modules designed to connect with K-6 Next Generation Science Standards and other areas of the curriculum
- Learning objectives
- Materials lists
- Educator background information and references
- Full lesson plans with four connected activities
- Slide presentations for each module with a video from ReTreeUS

This guide was developed in collaboration with [ReTreeUS](#) through grant support from the 2024 United States Department of Agriculture Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant and the 2024 Onion Foundation Environment Program Nature Learning Grant.

[Download the Lesson Guide](#)



New Guide Offers Practical Strategies for Strengthening Young People's Life Skills

A [new guide from the RAND Corporation](#), commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, offers practical, ready-to-use strategies for the organizations that support OST providers — including intermediaries, statewide networks, and other capacity-building organizations — in strengthening this important work. Rather than focusing solely on what happens within individual programs, the guide explores how those who support the field can help providers build young people's life skills more intentionally and consistently.

Drawing on lessons from more than 100 afterschool programs that participated in the Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative, the resource highlights three key strategies: establishing a shared life skills framework; connecting providers with evidence-based tools and resources; and offering meaningful professional development that builds staff confidence and capacity. The guide also includes planning templates, field examples, and no-cost resources that organizations can adapt to meet local needs.

[Read More](#)

Program Wrap-up



Conservation Management Internship 2026

The saga continues! BSB's Conservation Management Internship once again supported six high school student leaders as they explored our state and the many professions that help conserve our shared environment.

The Conservation Management Internship exists to introduce youth to Nebraska's vast biodiversity and provide opportunities to learn alongside conservation professionals in the field. Youth are provided hands-on experiences to build skills, explore career paths, and connect to their home state. Students began in Lincoln and traveled to Omaha, Ponca, Aurora, Ogallala, Scottsbluff, Gibbon, Wood River, and Hastings before returning home. This year included eighteen conservation sites, four college campuses, and dozens of professionals. Youth experienced hands-on work clearing invasive species, traversing fields on regenerative farms, and assisting with research in ophiology.

The internship would not be possible without the support of the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the Claire M. Hubbard Foundation, and other supporters. The program is also crucially made possible by conservation partners across the state. A special thank you to these supporters and our hosting conservation organizations: Benson Bounty Farms, Cedar Point Biological Station, Central Community College – Hastings, Crane Trust, Fontenelle Forest, Ian Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, North Platte Natural Resource District, Ponca State Park, Prairie Plains Resource Institute, Scott Campus at UNO, The Grain Place, and Western Nebraska Community College. Many other conservation organizations welcomed our students along their journey. Thank you to our conservation partners for preparing Nebraska's next generation of conservation leaders.

The internship is just one of a growing number of opportunities for youth to engage in conservation across Nebraska. Stay tuned for [Service Learning through Conservation](#) and Conservation Experiences this fall!



BSB Staff News

A Farewell from Stephanie Vadnais

It is bittersweet to share that I've accepted a new position with Center for People in Lincoln, so my time with Beyond School Bells is coming to an end.

It has been such an honor to work alongside so many dedicated afterschool and summer learning champions across Nebraska. Getting to know you and see the phenomenal work you do for kids and families is an inspiration.

Nebraska's kids are lucky to have a network as committed as this one, and I'll be cheering from the sidelines as BSB continues its important work. Thank you for the partnership, the trust, and the friendship over the years.

With gratitude,
Stephanie Vadnais

A Farewell from Lauren Clark

Some additional bittersweet news to share – I have accepted a new position with Early Futures Partnership, so my time with Beyond School Bells is also coming to a close.

I am so thankful for my five years with Beyond School Bells. It has been a true privilege to work alongside and learn from so many passionate people and professionals. While my next chapter takes me into the early childhood field, afterschool will always be near and dear to my heart.

Sincerely,
Lauren Clark

Our Contact Information

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