



October 2026

Afterschool Happenings

Stronger Together: Connecting People, Programs and Possibilities

**What happens when more than 240 afterschool professionals,
partners, advocates, and champions come together in one place?
You GetConnected!**

Beyond School Bells was a proud sponsor of the 2026 Nebraska Afterschool Conference: GetConnected, held Friday, September 25, in Kearney. This year's theme, "Stronger Together: Connecting People, Programs and Possibilities," brought afterschool professionals, partners, advocates, and champions from across Nebraska together to learn, connect, and celebrate the impact of afterschool.

The conference kicked off the evening before with Beyond School Bells' Meet, Greet, and GetConnected Networking Event, bringing attendees together for food, games, prizes, and plenty of opportunities to make new connections and reconnect with colleagues from across the state.

With more than 240 attendees, GetConnected was a great success! The conference offered more than 32 workshops featuring practical strategies, innovative programming ideas, and resources that participants could take back to their programs. Attendees also connected with 25 Walk & Talk exhibitors, expanding access to resources, partnerships, and opportunities available to Nebraska's afterschool programs.

Keynote speaker, Monica Dixon from Search Institute, shared a powerful message about developmental relationships and the important role caring adults play in helping young people thrive.

The conference also celebrated individuals and programs whose leadership, advocacy, innovation, and commitment are strengthening afterschool across Nebraska. Congratulations to the 2026 Nebraska Afterschool Conference Award recipients!

- Bob Whitehouse ELO Policy Champion Award
United States Senator Deb Fischer
- Michelle Arehart Afterschool Community Champion Award
Nicole Everingham, Collective for Youth
- Glow Up Award
D.O.G.S. Academy, Auburn Public Schools
- Stronger Together Award
Gordon-Rushville Afterschool Programs

These honorees represent the leadership, collaboration, and commitment that continue to strengthen programs, expand opportunities for young people, and move afterschool forward across Nebraska.

Mark your calendar! The next Nebraska Afterschool Conference: GetConnected will be held September 24, 2027. Interested in joining us as a sponsor, Walk & Talk exhibitor, presenter, or attendee? Reach out to a member of the Beyond School Bells team to be included in future communications as planning for 2027 gets underway.

Thank you to everyone who helped make Nebraska Afterschool Conference: GetConnected 2026 a success. We are Stronger Together, and we can't wait to "GetConnected" again in 2027!





Lights On Afterschool - October 22, 2026

Beyond School Bells is proud to support seven Lights On Afterschool events taking place across Nebraska this October. Over the past four months, these programs have been planning events that will bring together youth, families, community partners, local leaders, State Senators, and supporters to celebrate the important role afterschool programs play in their communities. Beyond School Bells is proud to co-sponsor these events and help programs shine a light on the impact of afterschool.

Lights On Afterschool is more than a celebration; it is an opportunity for programs to tell their story. These events showcase the learning, relationships, partnerships, and opportunities happening every day after the school bell rings. They also give community members and decision-makers a chance to see firsthand why continued support for afterschool matters.

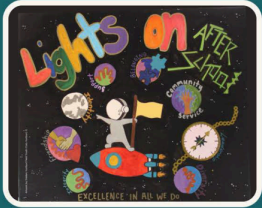
We encourage you to attend an event near you and see the impact afterschool is making in Nebraska communities. And don't forget to check with your local afterschool program to see how they are celebrating Lights On Afterschool this year. Chances are, they have something planned!

Together, we can help keep the lights on and keep opportunities growing for Nebraska's young people.

BEYOND SCHOOL BELLS · NEBRASKA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION

Lights On Afterschool

Nebraska and Nation-wide



Artwork: Afterschool Alliance poster contest

What is Lights On Afterschool?

Each October, the National Afterschool Alliance celebrates Lights On Afterschool to highlight the humans and programs that keep kids safe and learning after the bell rings. This year's national celebration falls on Thursday, October 22, 2026.

Beyond School Bells, Nebraska's statewide afterschool network and an initiative of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, funds and coaches local out-of-school time programs so they can host their own celebrations and connect families and communities with the kids they serve.

Local celebrations across Nebraska

COMMUNITY	DATE	WHAT'S HAPPENING
Auburn	Mon, Oct 19	Pasta with a Purpose: a shared meal and Artisan Alley of program activities.
Alliance	Thu, Oct 22	Interactive activity stations and door prizes for the whole family.
Fremont Aspire	Thu, Oct 22	Discover What's Possible: passports to possibilities with new partner Salvation Army.
Kearney	Thu, Oct 22	Carnival-themed open house with games and staff-led activity stations.
Crete	Fri, Oct 23	A Celebration of Afterschool: a shared meal, displays and stories.
York	Fri, Oct 23	Walk & Learn: a student-led showcase of program booths.
Grand Island (West Lawn)	Tue, Oct 27	Student-led fall showcase with activities and family feedback.

Dates confirmed as of September 2026 — check with your local program for time and location.



Thank you, Governor Pillen and Lt. Governor Joe Kelly, for proclaiming October 22 as Lights On Afterschool Day in Nebraska!

Afterschool and summer programs give kids "real relationships, real experiences, and real places to belong. They keep young people safe, engaged, and seen." said Dr. Alison O'Toole from Beyond School Bells

But 4 in 5 Nebraska kids who want to join a program don't have access. Demand is high and support is strong. What's missing is sustainable investment. From Omaha to Scottsbluff, let's keep the lights on for the next generation.

Op-Ed: Boys in HEAL

Check out our Boys in HEAL (Health, Education, Administration, and Literacy) Op-Ed from the *Lincoln Journal Star* to learn more about the incredible work being done for boys across Nebraska! Read the original article at the [Lincoln Journal Star](#) (will need a paid subscription) or read it on Nebraska Children's blog at the link below.

Read the Op-Ed

Student Opportunities

National Geographic's Slingshot Challenge 2027 —officially launched!



The Slingshot Challenge has officially launched! The National Geographic Society hosts the Slingshot Challenge as a platform for youth to voice ideas about the future of conservation creativity and hope. Students who are between the ages of 13 to 18 years old and are passionate about saving our planet, this challenge is designed for you! Afterschool educators looking for ways to build on youth voice and older student leadership, the Slingshot Challenge is the perfect way to blend service-learning, youth voice, and active learning.

Young Nebraskans are current and future leaders of environmental solutions across the state – the Slingshot Challenge gives them a platform to share their ideas. As part of the challenge, National Geographic will provide workshops and resources along the way, as well as inspiration and support from National Geographic Explorers. [Visit the Challenge Resources page](#) for the educator toolkit, participant toolkit, and quick start guide. You can also sign up for Solution Design Labs and Educator Info Sessions. Beyond School Bells is also eager to support any afterschool programs pursuing Slingshot Challenge projects. Please reach out (dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org) if you're interested!

Participants are asked to create a one-minute video outlining a solution to an environmental issue that they're passionate about. Videos must be submitted by February 5, 2027. Solutions must focus on one or more of five topic areas:

- Address Climate Change
- Reduce Waste
- Protect Nature
- Clean the Air
- Restore the Ocean

The National Geographic Society will select award recipients who will receive up to \$10,000 USD in funding and join a global community of alumni who engage with the Society and its Explorers to continue learning and building their leadership skills as they take action on behalf of the planet.

Slingshot Challenge Resources

STEM Next Flight Crew

The application for the 2027 STEM Next Flight Crew is now OPEN! STEM Next Opportunity Fund has launched a nationwide search for the next Flight Crew — national

youth ambassadors who represent their states as they develop leadership and communication skills, share their stories on regional, state and national stages, and lend their voices to push for more afterschool and summer STEM opportunities.

Please encourage youth ages 13-18, with experience in afterschool and summer STEM learning and an interest in developing public speaking and leadership skills, to apply today. **The deadline to apply is 11:59 PM EST on October 29, 2026.**

More Information and Application



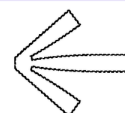
What is the STEM Next Flight Crew?

The STEM Next Flight Crew is a national youth leadership program for teens who have participated in out-of-school (OST) STEM experiences — such as afterschool programs, summer camps, robotics teams, STEM clubs, makerspaces, and community-based STEM programs — and who want to share their STEM story and spread awareness about the power of these opportunities. Selected teens represent their states as they develop leadership and communication skills, share their STEM stories on regional, state and national stages, and lend their voices to push for more afterschool and summer STEM opportunities.

ARE YOU...

- Age 13-18?
- Active in an afterschool STEM program?
- Interested in national STEM advocacy?

APPLY NOW!



stemnext.org/flight-crew

The Flight Crew Experience

➤ Grow as a Leader

Strengthen your communication, leadership and public speaking skills through six months of programming designed to help you become a confident youth ambassador.

➤ Share Your Story

Represent your state while helping others discover the value of afterschool and summer STEM through speaking engagements, media opportunities and digital storytelling.

➤ Build Your Network

Connect with STEM-minded teens from across the country, receive mentorship from Flight Crew alumni and meet professionals working across STEM fields.

➤ Discover What's Next

Take part in exclusive virtual and in-person experiences, explore STEM careers and earn a \$500 stipend upon successfully completing the program.

STEM NEXT
OPPORTUNITY FUND

Afterschool Resources

New Literacy + STEAM Curriculum from Helix Education

Looking for K-2 or Middle School literacy curriculum that incorporates science, technology, engineering, art, and math? Look no further, we have partnered with Helix Education for just that. Check out our website for free access to these resources!

Literacy Curriculum

Afterschool Nutrition Mini Grants from NDE —Now Accepting Applications

The Nebraska Department of Education's Office of Coordinated Student Support Services is pleased to announce that applications for \$2,000 mini grants, funded through a USDA Team Nutrition grant, are now open. This mini grant opportunity aims to support Afterschool Programs, Clubs, and Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS) programs in helping PreK-12 students and/or Transition Program students develop scratch-cooking skills, increase their familiarity with local foods and nutrient-dense ingredients, expand nutrition knowledge, and encourage healthy eating. In addition, these grants will help promote family engagement through take-home recipes and strengthen school wellness efforts. Up to 25 mini grants are available.

Please refer to the [2026 Team Nutrition Mini Grant Overview](#) for examples of allowable activities and a sample budget, as well as the [Allowable & Unallowable Costs Guide](#) for additional details and grant restrictions.

***Only schools/programs operating USDA School Meals Programs (e.g., NSLP, SBP, Afterschool Snack Program) or Child & Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At Risk Afterschool Meals and Outside School Hours Care Centers (OSHCC) are eligible to apply. **Limit of 1 application per school building.**

A copy of the application responses will be sent to the email address of the respondent. A printable reference copy of the application form and mini grant work plan may be accessed below:

- [Mini Grant Application – Reference Only](#)
- [Mini Grant Work Plan – Reference Only](#)

Applications must be completed and submitted by **11:59 p.m. CT on Friday, October 23, 2026**. Incomplete or late applications will not be accepted or considered. Award notifications will be made in late November 2026, and the grant period will end September 15, 2027.

Mini Grant Application

Grow NE 2026-2027—Applications still open!



Beyond School Bells is excited to fund your Grow NE club for the 2026-27 school year! Grow NE supports Expanded Learning Opportunity programs to cultivate youth leadership in Food Systems – gardening, agriculture, local foods, and so much more. Grow NE contracts and technical assistance are offered to support high school student leadership and afterschool club activities that empower youth to understand and lead local food systems. There are four club tracks to support programming: **Innovative Agriculture, Local Food Systems, Sustainable Growing, and Afterschool to Table.** [More information can be found on BSB's website.](#)

Afterschool programs with interest in gardening and food systems are encouraged to apply! Programs may have experienced gardeners or be brand new to food systems lessons. All will be supported to introduce youth to local food systems. Beyond School Bells will host monthly learning communities for club staff and support high school students in leading the club and participating in National Geographic's Slingshot Challenge.

Please reach out to ahansen@nebraskachildren.org or dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org with any questions!

More Information

Celebrate Farm to School Month in October!

Check out the [Nebraska Farm to School website](#) for resources, ideas, and information to help your school or program celebrate Farm to School Month this month.

Participate in the Mountain Plains Crunch Off

The [Mountain Plains Crunch Off](#) is a fun way to celebrate local foods during October by encouraging students and communities to take a bite of locally grown produce. Nebraska schools and childcare centers have accepted the challenge by crunching to higher levels year after year. In 2025, a record-setting total of **96,431** Nebraskans came together to crunch! Registration for the 2026 Crunch Off will open October 1, 2026, and will close on October 31, 2026. Students, teachers, farmers, parents, organizations, community members, and local food enthusiasts can register their team and crunch into local food

products anytime in October! **Help us reach our goal of 100,000 crunches in Nebraska this year! [Register for the 2026 Crunch Off today!](#)**

Join the Nebraska Farm to School Local Food Challenge

Looking for a way to keep the momentum going beyond October? The **Nebraska Farm to School Local Food Challenge** is a friendly competition encouraging schools and early care and education programs to source local foods for Child Nutrition Programs. The challenge runs throughout the **2026–27 school year, August 1, 2026-May 31, 2027**. Each qualifying local food purchase or donation counts toward your school or program's achievement level. There is **no separate registration process**—your first submitted purchase or donation automatically enrolls you in the challenge. Learn more, review the rules and FAQs, and submit your local food purchases or donations here: [2026–27 Nebraska Farm to School Local Food Challenge](#)

Submit your Bean Recipes

We're kicking off Farm to School Month in a big way: the Beanstock recipe contest is ready for submissions! Starting October 1st, you'll be able to enter your original bean recipes on our [online submission form](#). The deadline for submissions is Tuesday, December 1st. The winning recipes may be featured in school cafeterias near you! And remember, our [Beanstock units](#) are free to download and are in compliance with curriculum standards. The Beanstock curriculum is a great place to start to educate students on all the aspects of beans and how important they are to Nebraska.

New Harvest of the Month Lessons Have Arrived

We're excited to announce six new Harvest of the Month lessons are now available on the [Farm to Early Care and Education](#) webpage! New lessons on **basil, carrots, cucumbers, leafy greens, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes** join the original 12 lessons, giving early childhood educators even more fun, hands-on ways to connect children with healthy foods and Nebraska agriculture. Explore all 18 lessons and start growing food literacy in your program today!

Nebraska Farm to School

STEM Next Toolkits for Career-Connected Learning

- The **Eyes on Health Toolkit**, created by STEM Next, gives educators ready-to-use resources that open young people's eyes to the wide range of careers in health and life sciences. Grounded in the four strategies of STEM Next's Career-Connected Learning Framework, the toolkit helps afterschool and informal educators turn curiosity about the human body, medicine, and science into real career exploration. **Click [here](#) to learn more!**
- The **Launching Futures Toolkit**, created by STEM Next and powered by RTX, equips educators with practical resources to connect young people to the fast-growing world of space and aerospace careers. Built around the four strategies in STEM Next's Career-Connected Learning Framework, the toolkit is designed to make it easy for afterschool and informal educators to bring aeronautical and aerospace careers to life. **Click [here](#) to learn more!**

Training: Connecting STEM Activities to Careers Join STEM Next on [October 20 at 2pm ET](#) to kick off the school year with 10 engaging, hands-on STEM and engineering activities designed for youth in grades K–8 using common, low-cost materials that work well in out-of-school time settings. In this interactive webinar, participants will explore how

familiar STEM activities can become powerful career-connected learning experiences when intentionally designed to build the durable skills and STEM competencies young people need for future success.

Register for Training

Afterschool Policy Updates

Meta Settlement Awareness

Nebraska is expected to receive over \$200 million through a landmark multistate settlement with Meta that addresses harms to young people caused by social media. The agreement specifically recognizes afterschool and summer programs as eligible investments supporting youth well-being. Through the national Fund In Real Life (Fund IRL) campaign, Beyond School Bells and our Youth Development Coalition partners are working to ensure these funds meaningfully benefit Nebraska's young people by expanding access to real-world connection, belonging, mentorship, and opportunity. We will keep our partners informed as decisions take shape and opportunities to lend your voice emerge.

For more information on the Fund In Real life campaign, visit the link below.

Fund in Real Life

Youth Development Coalition

Membership in the Youth Development Coalition (YDC) is free and provides a meaningful way to contribute to the future of all Nebraska youth where input and participation from all youth development practitioners, programs, and leaders is valued. The mission of the YDC is to secure dedicated, equitable state resources that broaden access to high-quality youth programs across Nebraska. If you are interested in joining, contact Dakota at dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org or Alison at aotoole@nebraskachildren.org.

Nebraska After 3PM STEM Report

Afterschool programs are leading the way in educating the next generation in the STEM subjects that the jobs of the future will require. Ninety-six percent of parents of Greater Nebraska afterschool students, now say their child's afterschool program offers STEM (science, technology, education, and math) learning. But 50,098 Greater Nebraska children and 38,409 Omaha children whose parents want afterschool programs for them are not enrolled.

Those are among the findings in [Afterschool STEM Takes Off In Greater Nebraska](#) and [Afterschool STEM Takes Off in Omaha](#), released by Collective for Youth and Beyond School Bells. Both are based on a household survey commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance.

Read the STEM Report

Our Contact Information

Nebraska Children & Families Foundation
215 Centennial Mall South
Suite 200
Lincoln, NE 68508
402-476-9401
<http://www.NebraskaChildren.org>