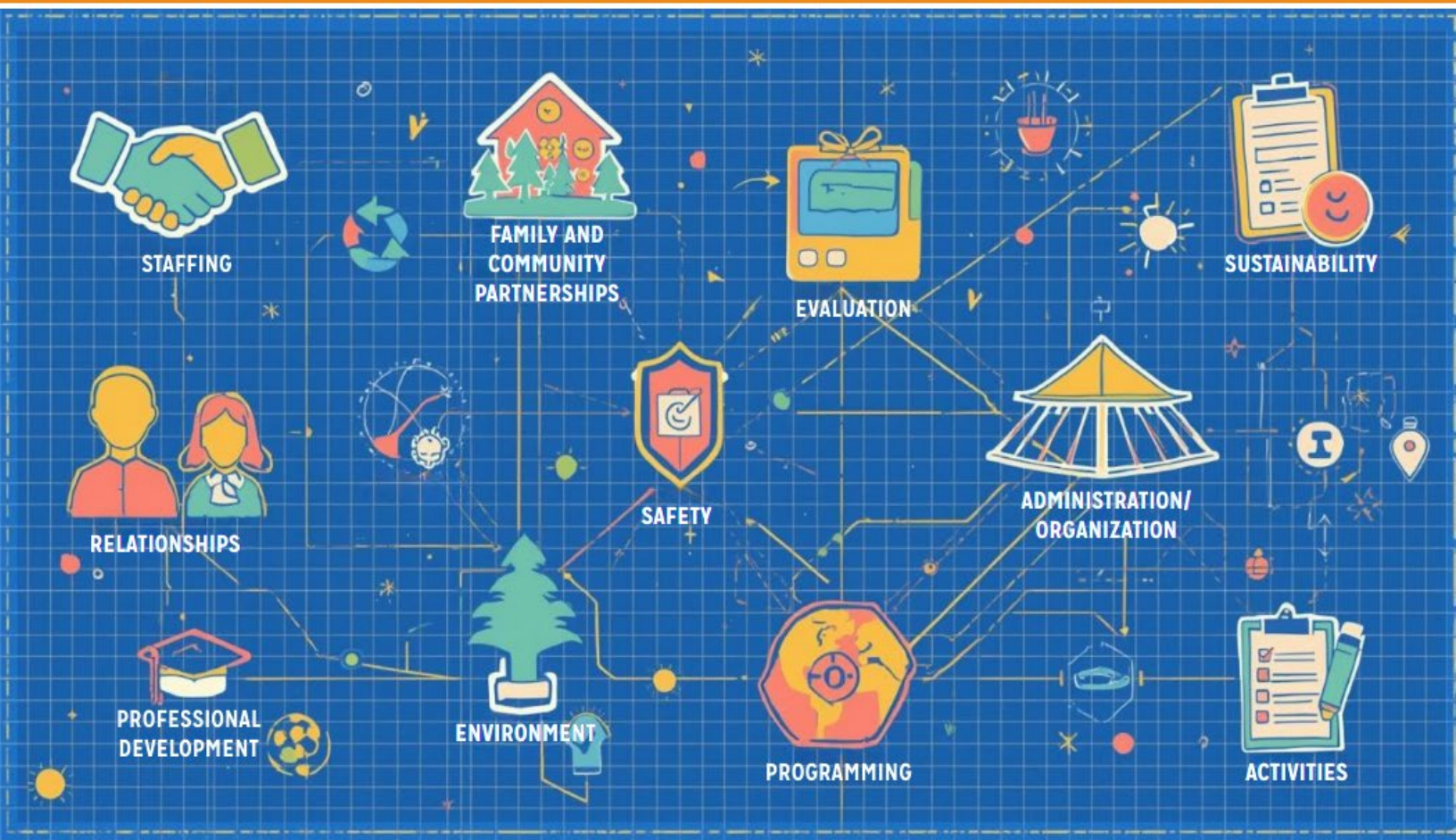


2026 ANNUAL AFTERSCHOOL CONFERENCE

Engineering Quality Afterschool: Defining and Refining



Saturday, November 7, 2026
Hartford Marriot Downtown
www.ctncy.org

CONNECTICUT NETWORK FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Connecticut Network for Children and Youth (The Network) is a statewide intermediary and advocacy organization that strengthens out-of-school time (OST) systems, supports early childhood and social-emotional learning (SEL) efforts, and advances policy and practice that expands equitable opportunities for children, youth, and families.

ENGINEERING QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL: DEFINING AND REFINING

This year's focus is afterschool quality and the ongoing process of defining our quality goals and refining our practices. Our workshops will support your efforts to provide quality relationships, partnerships, environments, programming, structure, professional development, organization, and sustainability.

SCHEDULE AT-A-GLANCE

8:00 - 8:45 AM Registration and Continental Breakfast

9:00 - 9:45 AM Conference Opener

10:00 - 11:30 AM Session 1

11:30 AM – 12:15 PM Lunch

12:30 - 2:00 PM Session 2

2:15 – 3:45 PM Session 3

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



Nichelle Harris, Ten Speed Consulting - As a veteran in OST and non-profit management, Nichelle Harris uses her expertise to coach OST educators, classroom teachers, and administrators to meet the increasingly complex demands of the communities, families and youth we serve. She often advises non-profit leaders on community partnership development, systems change, organizational sustainability and staff support. Harris is the past Executive Director of the Ohio Afterschool Network, a White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellow, and has chaired several national leadership committees for the Out-of-School-Time field. Harris is also a seasoned national presenter on building collaborations and adult learning strategies.

REGISTRATION, PAYMENT & POLICIES

REGISTRATION DEADLINE – OCTOBER 30, 2026

Conference registration fee includes attendance at three workshops of your choice (based on availability and pre-registration is required), opening session, continental breakfast, and lunch. Certificates of attendance will be available for each workshop attended.

PAYMENT

- We accept check, purchase order or credit card via the online registration portal
- Payment by Check – Make check payable to **Connecticut Network for Children and Youth**, and mail to Connecticut Network for Children and Youth, PO Box 1409, Hartford, CT 06143.

DELAY, CANCELLATION & REFUND POLICY

- Due to inclement weather (snow, ice, flooding, etc.) or other emergencies, events may be delayed or canceled. Participants are responsible for checking the Connecticut Network for Children and Youth website or Facebook Page for delay or cancellation notices.
- Refunds will be granted to registrants who cancel their registration by email at mberrios@ctncy.org no later than **November 1st**.
- Refunds will not be provided to registrants who neither cancel nor attend the event. Confirmed registrants who are unable to attend the event may send a substitute in their place at no additional cost. Substitution information must be received by the Connecticut Network for Children and Youth at least two business days prior to the start of the event in writing.

QUESTIONS

- For any conference registration questions, contact Marla Berrios, Director of Operations and Finance, via phone at (203) 483-1846 or via email at mberrios@ctncy.org.
- For any general conference questions, contact Monica Whalen, Conference Coordinator, via email at mwhalen@ctncy.org.

VENUE & CONFERENCE INFORMATION

LOCATION

Hartford Marriott Downtown
200 Columbus Boulevard, Hartford

PARKING

Free Parking passes will be available at the registration table if you park in the Convention Center garage.

CELL PHONES AND DEVICES

Please be respectful and turn your cell phones off during plenary and workshop sessions.

LUNCH OPTIONS

Vegetarian and Gluten Free options will be included in our menu.

EVALUATIONS

The Network is very interested in your feedback on the conference. A general conference evaluation will be available on the day of the event. Please take a few minutes immediately following your session to complete these evaluations. We appreciate you taking the time to complete the evaluation, they are useful tools in our efforts to provide the highest quality training events and conferences for you.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is free in the hotel lobby and other public areas.

SMOKING POLICY

The Hartford Marriott Downtown is a completely smoke-free hotel, which includes all public spaces.

FACEBOOK/INSTAGRAM/LINKEDIN

Communicate with other attendees while at the conference and receive updates. Comment on sessions you attend and let us know which sessions or presenters you enjoyed. Check-in and write your comments using #CTafterschool. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#).

WORKSHOP KEY

Our workshops are pre classified to assist you in choosing the appropriate training to fit your individual professional goals.

- **Age Group**
- **Topic Area**

WORKSHOP CHOICES

Session 1

1A. Venting Vampires: Protecting Your Energy & Encouraging Positivity – This interactive training helps early childhood and school age educators and administrators recognize how chronic venting, complaining, and gossip can drain energy, damage relationships, and contribute to burnout. Participants will explore the difference between healthy venting and toxic negativity, often referred to as “venting vampires”—patterns of communication that pull individuals and teams into stress and survival mode. Participants will learn how emotions spread, why adult regulation matters, and how to provide boundaries that protect both connection and professionalism. Through real-life scenarios, reflection, and hands-on practice, educators will gain practical tools to redirect conversations, reduce emotional overload, and maintain a positive, supportive workplace climate. Tracy Cheney, Three Cheers Consulting with TLC **Elementary School, Supervision/Management, Take It and Run**

1B. The Active Classroom: Theater Tools for K-12 Student Engagement – The Active Classroom: Theater Tools for K-12 Student Engagement is an interactive professional development workshop designed to transform traditional afterschool programs into dynamic learning environments. Educators will discover how to seamlessly integrate improvisation, physical storytelling, and creative drama into daily lessons to boost collaboration and critical thinking. By using these high-energy theater techniques, participants will learn practical strategies to captivate K-12 students, reinforce academic concepts, and foster a supportive classroom community. This workshop provides actionable, low-prep tools that immediately turn passive listening into active, joyful learning. Anthony DePoto, innerAct Theatre LLC **All Ages, Fine Arts/Music/Drama/Dance, Take It and Run, Play-Based Learning**

1C. Step up to the MIC: Making, Invention & Collaborating – In this hands-on workshop we will experience Invention Education as an enrichment pathway to support student voice, reinforce academic learning, and nurture a positive, collaborative afterschool environment. Our theme today highlights how we can help youth see, know, and feel that their ideas matter. We will engage in activities that help students build life-long, future-ready skills like confidence, persistence, STEM interest, and an entrepreneurial mindset. Andrea Dulac, National Inventors Hall of Fame **Elementary School, Middle School, STEM, SEL, Youth Voice and Choice**

1D. Building Organizational Readiness in Afterschool: Practical Leadership for Stronger Programs – Successful afterschool programs depend on more than good intentions. They depend on organizational readiness: the people, practices, communication, structures, and leadership support needed to deliver high-quality programming consistently. This session will help leaders in LEAs and community-based organizations think about how to strengthen the internal conditions that support staff effectiveness, program quality, and long-term sustainability. Participants will explore practical leadership strategies that build stronger alignment, clearer expectations, and better readiness for implementation and growth.

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify key elements of organizational readiness in afterschool settings
- Reflect on leadership practices that support stronger implementation, communication, and staff alignment
- Apply practical strategies to strengthen program readiness, consistency, and quality

Douglas Fetchin, Ed.D., **All Ages**, **Supervision/Management**

1E. Best Me I Can Be – Active Games That Build Health Knowledge and Skills – We will explore a variety of health topics including nutrition, hygiene and disease prevention, personal body safety, and safe use of medicines through active games. The focus will be on the development of health skills, including decision making, developing healthy habits and interpersonal communication. Come ready to play and to consider how these activities might be adapted to include other health information or topics relevant to your students. Amanda Amtmanis, Middletown Public Schools **Elementary School, Middle School, DEI, Active/Nutrition, Play-Based Learning, Take It and Run**

1F. The Connection Lab: Building Social Skills Through Play and Therapy Dog-Inspired Strategies – Afterschool programs thrive when children feel connected and part of a community. In this highly interactive workshop, participants will experience simple, play-based activities that build social skills, communication, and executive functioning through small, repeatable moments inspired by therapy dog principles. Every strategy is low-prep, easy to implement, and designed to strengthen relationships while reducing the need for constant behavior management. Participants will leave with practical ideas they can use immediately to create a more engaged and supportive program culture. Cara Zelas, Big World of Little Dude **Elementary School, Behavior Management, SEL, Take It and Run, Play-Based Learning**

WORKSHOP CHOICES

Session 2

2A. Collaborative Afterschool Activities for Environmental Literacy – Discover easy-to-implement, high-engagement activities that help young people explore relationships among people, resources, and the environment. Learn to facilitate hands-on activities that use collaborative strategies to approach problem solving, including sharing natural resources and planning for sustainable communities. The presented activities foster teamwork, discussion, and critical thinking while building environmental literacy. Take home materials that align with state academic standards for several disciplines and provide stimulating experiences in out-of-school settings. Susan Quincy, Kellogg Environmental Center **Older Elementary School, Middle School, STEM, Take It and Run, Youth Voice and Choice**

2B. Effective Strategies for Maxing Your Minutes – We will explore strategies for creating a culture of belonging, providing the structure of clear routines, developing an agreed upon set of rules, use of transition signals, considerations for large groups, and dealing with student dysregulation. The focus will be on active play spaces. This content will be applicable to all age groups. Amanda

Amtmanis, Middletown Public Schools **All Ages, DEI, Behavior Management, Special Needs/Inclusion, Supervision/Management, Active/Nutrition, Play-Based Learning, Youth Voice and Choice**

2C. Feedback Without Fear: Preparing Young People for the Conversations That Shape Their Futures – Feedback Without Fear equips afterschool professionals with practical, youth-centered strategies for helping young people navigate feedback, correction, disagreement, and other difficult conversations. Participants will explore why feedback can trigger defensiveness, learn a brief regulation practice, and experience an observation–feelings–needs–requests framework that strengthens communication without diminishing youth voice. Through guided reflection, paired practice, and realistic scenarios, attendees will gain activities they can immediately adapt to for their own programs. This interactive workshop helps young people build self-awareness, confidence, resilience, and the ability to stay engaged when conversations become challenging. Cynthia Rae, M.Ed., M.Sc., Pink Blazer **All Ages, SEL, Take It and Run, Youth Voice and Choice**

2D. Watch Them Grow: The Benefits of Afterschool Garden Programs – With or Without a Garden – No garden? No problem! This workshop will highlight the powerful impact of after-school garden programs and how they support hands-on learning, healthy habits, and social connection. We'll share fun, practical ideas for bringing gardening to life using containers, sensory activities, and garden-based lessons, proving that meaningful garden experiences can happen anywhere. Leave with creative ideas and accessible tools to help your students grow, wherever you are. Caroline Fazzina, Keane Kids After School Program **Elementary School, Middle School, STEM, Take It and Run, Play-Based Learning**

2E. Is My Program Neuro Affirming? Designing Systems for Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging – Afterschool leaders are increasingly tasked with creating programs that serve youth with diverse learning, sensory, emotional, and communication needs. This workshop takes a system-level approach to understanding what it means to be neuro affirming, anti-oppressive, and trauma-informed in afterschool settings. Participants will examine how policies, staff practices, and program structures can either support or unintentionally create barriers to inclusion. Through reflection and practical frameworks, attendees will learn how to shift from individual behavior management to organization-wide practices that promote accessibility, emotional safety, and meaningful participation for all youth. Jona Shook, MA, MT-BC, Infinity Music Therapy Services **All Ages, DEI, Behavior Management, Special Needs/Inclusion, Supervision/Management, Program Space Design**

2F. From Ideas to Impact: Adapting Youth Pitch Competitions for Afterschool Programs – This interactive workshop will introduce afterschool staff to a pitch-based entrepreneurship model that can be adapted for out-of-school-time programs. Drawing from Youth Entrepreneurs' work with middle and high school students, participants will learn how to guide youth through a simple "problem-to-pitch" process that builds voice, confidence, communication, teamwork, and career readiness. The session will feature Youth Entrepreneurs Pitch Competition winners, who will share their experiences, demonstrate elements of their pitch, and reflect on the support that helped them succeed. Attendees will leave with practical activities, discussion prompts, and a mini pitch-planning template they can immediately adapt for afterschool programs. Dr. Laquita Joyner-McGraw, Youth Entrepreneurs Inc **Middle School, High School, SEL, Take It and Run, Youth Voice and Choice**

2G. Designing and Refining Afterschool Programs to Build Healthy, Connected Communities

– Afterschool programs can be intentionally engineered to address the rising social isolation and low civic health that are impacting our communities. Programs that act as civic hubs can help address neighborhood fractures and pull communities together. By shifting from a mindset of merely serving kids and families to actively organizing communities, programs can use their space and events to foster trust and connection for everyone in the community. Nichelle Harris, Ten Speed Consulting **All Ages, Supervision/Management, Take It and Run**

WORKSHOP CHOICES

Session 3

3A. Relationships That Build Assets: Big Brothers Big Sisters of Connecticut's Approach to Youth-Centered Mentoring

– Discover how Big Brothers Big Sisters of Connecticut has integrated Search Institute's Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships Frameworks into every stage of its Service Delivery Model to strengthen mentoring relationships and improve youth outcomes. This session will explore how BBBSCT translates research into everyday practice by equipping staff and mentors with practical, strengths-based strategies that intentionally build assets through relationship-centered match support. Participants will learn how developmental relationships can guide goal setting, support quality match conversations, and create meaningful opportunities for youth growth. Attendees will leave with adaptable tools and ideas for embedding asset-building into mentoring, youth development, and human service programs. Ryan Matthews and Shasity Rios, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Connecticut **All Ages, SEL, Youth Voice and Choice**

3B. Connected Learning in Action: Turning Theory into Meaningful Afterschool Practice

– This interactive session introduces participants to the core concepts of Connected Learning, a research-based approach that fosters deeper youth engagement by linking personal interests, supportive relationships, and real-world opportunities. Grounded in more than a decade of work that informs the Chicago Learning Exchange (CLX), Connected Learning offers a powerful foundation for designing programs that expand educational and career pathways.

Participants will explore the philosophy and principles of Connected Learning and practice translating theory into practical strategies for afterschool settings. Activities will guide attendees in understanding what Connected Learning is, how it works, and how they can apply it to strengthen youth experiences in their own programs. Kymberlee Powe, Connecticut State Library **Middle School, High School, Youth Voice and Choice**

3C. Not Your Average Music Club: How Music Enrichment Increases Social/Emotional Learning in Your Afterschool Program

– Not Your Average (NYA) Music Club is an afterschool program designed by Mellany Gomez, MT-BC, and Madison Howell, MT-BC, that was successfully piloted in the 2023-2024 school year. This presentation introduces its audience to the unique way that music enrichment can improve group cohesion and listening, provide multisensory learning opportunities, and foster individuality and creativity in afterschool program attendees. Audience participation will be encouraged as we dive into musical interventions that any teacher can

incorporate as well as ones that music therapists can provide. Mellany Gomez, MT-BC , Melodic Goals LLC **Elementary School, Fine Arts/Music/Drama/Dance, SEL, Play-Based Learning**

3D. Developing Future Leaders: Executive Function Strategies for Youth Programs – This workshop equips after-school professionals with practical strategies to intentionally develop executive function and leadership skills in children and adolescents. Participants will learn how to incorporate activities that strengthen organization, self-regulation, communication, problem-solving, responsibility, and decision-making into their daily programming. Attendees will leave with ready-to-use tools and techniques to help youth build confidence, resilience, and the skills needed for success in school, relationships, and future careers. Jessica Springer-Cap, Doctoral Candidate, M.ed, Jessica Springer-Cap Coaching **All Ages, SEL, Youth Voice and Choice**

3E. Choose Love in Action: Practical Strategies to Build Resilient Youth – In this practical session for afterschool and summer program providers, participants will explore the science of post-traumatic growth and how adversity can be transformed into resilience, connection, and purpose in youth-serving environments. Grounded in neuroscience and trauma-informed practice, the session examines how fear and anger drive stress responses and how intentional strategies can support regulation, reflection, and growth. Participants will learn the Choice Moment Model to help staff and youth pause and respond with intention, along with the Choose Love Formula (Courage + Gratitude + Forgiveness + Compassion in Action) as a simple framework for building emotional safety, connection, and resilience in daily practice. Scarlett Lewis, Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement **All Ages, Behavior Management, SEL, Take It and Run**

3F. Best Practices for Integrating Mindfulness & Yoga Into Your OST Programs – In this session, participants will learn best practices for bringing mindfulness and yoga to the youth they serve. We'll discuss everything from how to ease transitions using mindfulness, to space set up, to staying grounded in your own practice, to making the practice relevant for your students. Participants will leave this session feeling more equipped to incorporate yoga and mindfulness practices within their OST programs. Emily Fleming, M.A.T., E-RYT500, Yoga In Classrooms And Schools Consulting **All Ages, Behavior Management, SEL, Active/Nutrition, Take It and Run**

3G. CLASP STEM 2026: Hands-On STEM! – Are you always on the lookout for fun activities that you can take back to your program and run with tomorrow? What if we told you we have a whole week's worth of activities? After attending this workshop, you will have a list of activities with supplies and step-by-step instructions. You will be able to do these activities repeatedly on a budget! The activities are hands-on, minds-on STEM focused that don't require a fancy technical STEM background. They have been tested and tweaked for effectiveness and FUN to work with kids in real time OST programs. You will be able to ask questions in real time and leave feeling confident. This workshop is led by our very own CLASP STEM Cohort participants (your in-the-field peers). CTNCY 2026 CLASP STEM Cohort **Elementary School, Middle School, STEM, Take It and Run**

CONNECTICUT NETWORK FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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