

# Understanding the Suitability and Perceived Value of the YMCA Beyond the Bell Program

Prepared for  
YMCA of Hamilton Burlington Brantford

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# Contents

Executive Summary .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Overview .....	3
Purpose.....	3
Structure of report .....	4
Methods and Limitations .....	4
Methods .....	4
Limitations .....	7
Findings.....	7
Participant demographics .....	8
To what extent are BTB’s services suitable to meet the target population’s needs? .....	9
What is the perceived value of BTB? .....	14
Other perspectives on BTB program design .....	19
Bibliography .....	25
Appendices .....	27
Appendix A: Educator Survey .....	27
Appendix B: Parent Interview Guide .....	32
Appendix C: Youth Worksheet.....	33

# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an evaluation conducted by the McMaster Research Shop for the YMCA of Hamilton Burlington Brantford Beyond the Bell (BTB) program. The program combines recreation, academic assistance, nutritional snacks, and socialization activities to improve confidence, social skills, physical activity, and learning. While BTB has operated successfully for over 20 years, the recent pandemic has prompted BTB leadership to re-evaluate youth and community needs.

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the needs of the children and families being serviced by BTB and the extent to which BTB is meeting these needs. Our team explored the extent to which BTB's services are suitable to meet the target population's needs and the perceived value of BTB's intended program outcomes. We conducted surveys with educators (n=2) and youth (n=21), and interviews with parents of youth (n=15) in BTB programming.

Our findings reveal that educators and parents feel the current program services are suitable to meet the needs of youth and that the program is valuable, and that youth enjoy the activities provided by the program. Both educators and parents generally perceived the benefits of BTB are in improving learning and physical activity. Many parents felt that even more emphasis should be placed on improving learning through greater academic assistance (e.g., hands-on assistance, homework time). All of the current activities (recreation, academic assistance, nutritional snacks, and socialization) were cited as the best by various parents and youth, highlighting the diverse needs of youth in the BTB program. With regards to program design, educators and most parents were satisfied with the current duration and frequency of the program. Some parents wanted the program to be available for more grades and in more schools. Parents also emphasized the importance of facilitators who are trained to work with youth, and also expressed they wanted clearer and more frequent communication with the program.

Overall, a strength of this evaluation was collecting data from various parents and youth. We recommend that future research also focuses on gathering data from a greater number of educators. Future research efforts should also consider ways to recruit and collect data from participants who are not fluent in English, as we felt we were limited in collecting data from some parents who were not fluent in English.

# Introduction

## Overview

BTB is a fully funded after-school program run by the YMCA that focuses on combining recreation, academic assistance, nutritional snacks, and socialization activities to improve confidence, social skills, physical activity, and learning. The program strives to reduce the impact of financial hardships for families in low-income neighbourhoods by working with students from Grades 1 to 5 who are at risk of falling behind in their academics. Students are deemed at risk if they need assistance in completing their homework, need to further develop their social skills, and/or are doing well at school but are at risk of falling behind due to competing priorities between school and family.

BTB was developed in 2001 by the YMCA of Hamilton Burlington Brantford. It operates at 12 different sites in Hamilton, Burlington, Brantford, and Six Nations of the Grand River. While the program has run successfully for over 20 years, the recent pandemic has prompted BTB leadership to re-evaluate youth and community needs. BTB staff partnered with the McMaster Research Shop to conduct research exploring whether current BTB programming meets the needs of its target population.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research project is to understand the needs of the children and families being serviced by BTB and the extent to which BTB is meeting these needs. The main questions guiding this research are:

1. To what extent are BTB's services (i.e., program activities) suitable to meet the target population's needs?
  - Which of the program activities (e.g., recreation, academic assistance, nutritional snacks, socialization) are perceived to be the most and least effective for the target population?
  - Is the amount of service that program participants receive (i.e., the frequency and duration of program) sufficient?
  - What other services might be needed?
2. What is the perceived value of BTB according to educators, parents, and participants?
  - Which of the intended outcomes (improved confidence, social skills, physical activity, and/or learning) are perceived to be the most and least valuable to the target population?

The goal of this project is to provide BTB with a plain-language summary of our investigation of these questions. The findings from this report will be used by BTB leadership to consider changes to the scope of the program and their service delivery arrangements.

## Structure of report

Our report is organized by the two main research questions that we developed, i.e., the suitability of the program activities to meet the target population's needs and the perceived value of the intended program outcomes. First, we describe the methods used to collect and analyze the data intended to answer these questions. Next, we present the findings for each of the two questions through a written summary, tables, and figures. We conclude the report with a summary of our findings and contextualize our findings within the broader literature.

# Methods and Limitations

## Methods

This study was conducted by a team of student researchers from the McMaster Research Shop who worked with BTB staff (hereafter referred to as the 'community partner'). The researchers met weekly to plan and conduct the study. The research team also frequently checked in with the community partner as needed to ensure the direction of the research was in alignment with their needs. The community partner helped recruit participants for data collection.

We used a variety of qualitative methods to answer the research questions. These methods included interviews, surveys, and youth worksheets. We focused on three populations for this research: educators (principals and teachers), parents, and youth. We describe the methods used for each population below.

### ***Recruitment***

We recruited participants through the recommendations of the community partner. Specifically, the community partner recommended educators if they presently hosted BTB programming in their school, and the parents and youth were currently enrolled in BTB programming. The community partner provided the research team with phone numbers and/or email addresses for the educators and parents. We contacted these individuals with information about the study and provided them the opportunity to participate. All participants who chose to participate provided informed consent either verbally or electronically. For the youth, we obtained written consent from

parents/guardians and assent from the youth (as indicated by willingness to participate in data collection). All participants had the option to withdraw at any point in the research process.

## ***Data collection***

### *Educators*

We aimed to understand the schools' perspectives on the value of the program, so we reached out to educators, including principals and teachers, working at schools where the BTB program operates. We developed an online survey using the research questions, feedback from the community partner, and guidance from published after-school program evaluations (Damooei, 2009; Geiger & Britsch, 2022; Horsey-Adams, 2019). The survey contained multiple-choice questions, open-ended short answer questions, and ranking questions (7-point Likert scales). The survey was built using Google Forms. The survey began with information about the study and participants provided informed consent in order to continue with the survey. The survey asked educators what the program provides to students, what students seem to be gaining, which of the activities are the best for students and why, and which of the outcomes are valuable and why. The survey also asked for educators' perspectives on the current frequency (days per week) and duration (hours per day) of the program. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the survey.

Principals were emailed an invite to complete the survey and asked to forward the survey on to teachers at their school. Members of the research team also emailed some teachers directly.

### *Parents*

We conducted telephone interviews with parents of youth in BTB programming to understand what their needs are and how BTB programming aligns with these needs. We developed an interview guide from the research questions, feedback from the community partner, and from existing surveys with parents (Damooei, 2009; Geiger & Britsch, 2022; Horsey-Adams, 2019). The interview guide contained seven main questions but allowed parents to discuss anything they wished to share. The questions asked about the most helpful part of the program for their child, which of the activities are best, which of the program outcomes are most important for their child, and their perspectives on the frequency and duration of the program. Please see Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide.

Members of the McMaster Research Shop team conducted interviews. All participants provided informed consent at the beginning of the interview. Parents who did not speak

English fluently were provided with an option to have a family member translate during the interview, have a translation service help to conduct the interview, or to fill out a survey in English or Arabic. All parents either participated in the interview in English or chose to have a family member translate during the interview. We recorded interviews with participant consent. We transcribed all recorded interviews for later analysis.

### *Youth*

We administered worksheets with youth in BTB programming to understand what they like/dislike about the program and what would improve their experience. We developed the worksheets (see Appendix C) to be completed by the youth participants with assistance from the community partner if needed. Program facilitators provided the worksheet to youth at each of the four BTB sites. The worksheet asked youth to individually identify the roses (what they like), thorns (what they dislike), and buds (what they would improve) of the program. This method provides a structured way for youth to share ideas using the commonly-known parts of a rose as metaphors for areas of program feedback (Coulter et al., 2021; Croichy, 2019; Pineo et al., 2020). The worksheet also asked youth about which activities they like in the programming and how happy they are with the program.

BTB program facilitators obtained informed consent from parents/legal guardians ahead of the session and asked youth if they agreed to share their answers with researchers at McMaster. We only included youth responses in our research if we received both consent from parents and assent from youth. We collected the individual worksheets for later analysis.

### ***Data analysis***

We analyzed the data using content analysis. Content analysis involves breaking down the data into smaller pieces and finding key themes that answer the research questions (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

For the parent interviews, a member of the research team read each transcript, flagged important sentences, and then labelled the sentences with key words. All members of the research team then met to discuss the labels to reach a consensus on which labels captured key words with the same meaning and if other labels should be added. Members of the research team then repeated the process of flagging and labelling sentences with the agreed upon key words. All members of the research team then discussed these labels and the broader categories that the labels belonged to, including how they belonged to the overarching research questions for this project.

For the written responses in the educator and youth worksheets, we followed a similar process in creating codes and categories. Where applicable, we quantified the responses pertaining to each category for each question. For the numerical data, we used descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts or means, to organize and interpret the data (Kaur et al., 2018).

## Limitations

This research team faced a few constraints while conducting this research.

### ***Tight timelines***

The timeline for this project conflicted with the availability of our target populations. As this project started in May, there was limited time to develop and implement our data collection protocols before mid-June, when the BTB programming ended. This resulted in us recruiting a small number of parents for interviews. Similarly, our attempts to recruit educators happened at the end of the school year (in June), which is a busy time for school staff, resulting in a small sample size. Our further attempts to reach educators after the end of the school year failed, likely because teachers and other staff were on summer vacation. Small sample sizes for parents and educators mean the findings should be interpreted carefully and may not reflect the diversity of opinions among these groups.

### ***Language barriers***

The community partner perceived some difficulties in obtaining consent specifically from parents whose first language was not English, so our sample may not have been representative of the broader population of parents. Further, some interviews were translated by family members or youth, so there is a small likelihood that the meaning of questions and responses may have been misinterpreted. However, the responses from these interviews aligned with other interviews, suggesting that the data still accurately captured parents' responses.

## Findings

This section first describes participant demographics and then presents our findings according to the questions guiding this research. The section concludes with feedback from the participants that fell outside the scope of our guiding research questions, but that provide valuable insight into participants' perspectives on elements of BTB's program design.



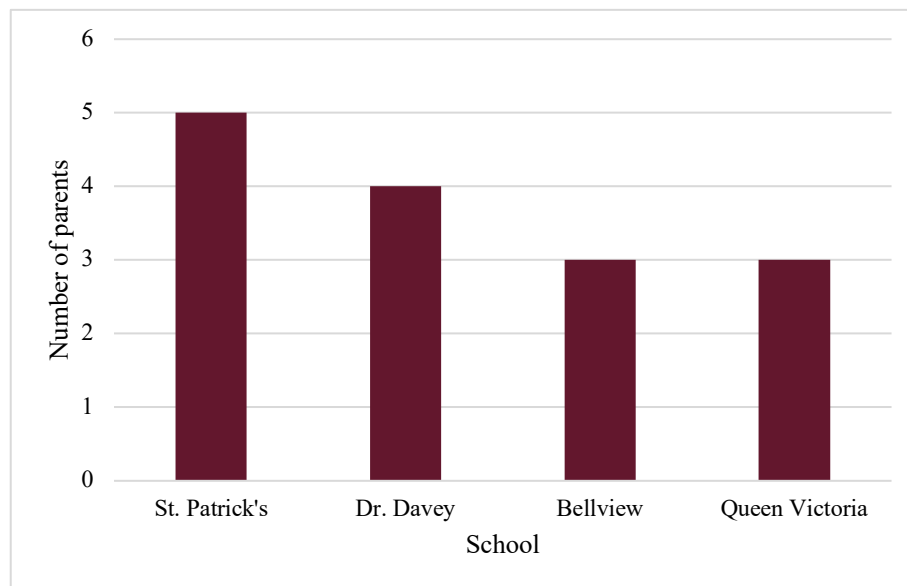
## Participant demographics

### **Educators**

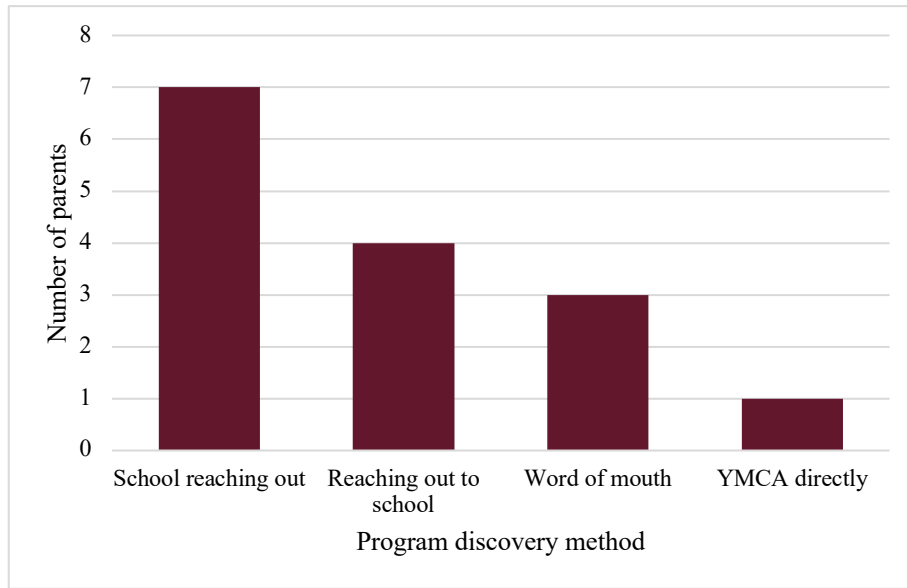
Through the survey, we collected data from two educators from two different schools. The duration that the educators worked at their respective schools ranged from 1 to 3, to 7 to 10, years. No response was received for the respective grade taught by either educator. Both educators reported that they have referred students to the program and are familiar with the activities that are run.

### **Parents**

We conducted interviews with 15 parents. Parents had children attending St. Patrick's (five parents), Dr. Davey (four parents), Bellview (three parents), and Queen Victoria (three parents; see Figure 1). Parents had either one (11 parents) or two children (four parents) in the program. Their children were mostly in Grade 5 (seven children) or Grade 4 (four children), although there were children from Grades 1 to 6. Most children had been in the program for less than one year (seven children; minimum one month) or for one to two years (seven children), followed by more than two years in the program (five children; maximum four years). Parents mostly discovered BTB when the school reached out (seven parents), but other avenues included reaching out to the school (four parents) or YMCA (one parent) directly and through word of mouth (three parents; see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of parents by schools their child(ren) attend(s).



**Figure 2.** Methods through which parents discovered the BTB program.

**Youth**

We collected data from 21 youth (mean age 8.5 (+/- 1.4) years; 1 missing age) from three different schools (St. Patrick’s, Bellview, and Queen Victoria).

To what extent are BTB’s services suitable to meet the target population’s needs?

**Perceived effectiveness of program activities**

***Educator perspectives***

Academic assistance

Out of the four main program activities (recreation, academic assistance, nutritional snacks, socialization), one educator reported academic assistance activities to be the most beneficial. One educator reported that the structure and expectations set by the program are beneficial for student success. In contrast, the other educator reported academic assistance as falling behind socialization and recreation. This educator agreed and somewhat agreed that the activities are meeting students’ needs and that the program enhances students’ motivation to learn or their attitudes towards school, respectively. One educator reported that they did not know whether the curriculum and instruction in BTB reinforced concepts being taught in the classroom.

Socialization

One educator reported socialization to be the most beneficial of the program activities, noting that socialization activities are the most beneficial because of the lack of those opportunities in recent years due to COVID-19. The other educator reported socialization activities to be the least beneficial of the program activities. However, both educators strongly agreed that the socialization activities are meeting students' needs.

### Recreation

Recreation activities were ranked the second most beneficial by educators. However, one educator slightly disagreed with the statement, "The recreation activities are meeting the students' needs."

### Nutritional snacks

Nutritional snack activities were not perceived as being highly beneficial by educators, as these were rated as the third and least beneficial by the educators. The educators provided conflicting perceptions on whether nutritional snacks are meeting students' needs, with one educator agreeing with this statement and another disagreeing.

### ***Parent perspectives***

When parents were asked about their overall impression of the program and its activities, six parents shared that the different activities conducted in the program were their favourite part. When asked to rank the types of activities that the program provides, three parents shared that they are all beneficial for their children, with one parent describing BTB as "almost the perfect program" (Parent 8). Several parents listed more than one activity as being best for their child. We elaborate on parents' perspectives on each activity type below.

### Academic assistance

Ten parents described that academic assistance activities were the best activities for their child(ren). Half of these parents also listed other activities, such as socialization, recreation, and/or nutritional snacks as the best activities for their child(ren). When asked whether they have witnessed a positive change in their children in the program, four parents expressed that their children have progressed in their academic learning. Of the four, one parent shared that their child now recognizes how school is a learning place.

Six parents suggested that BTB facilitators should spend more time helping children with homework, and that this should be one of the program's main priorities. One parent stated that they were unable to help their child at home so providing this service would

be very useful. One parent stated that the program facilitators did not “know how to help their children” and preferred if the time allotted to academic assistance and homework help in the program was scheduled before other activities. The parent stated that staff members “should make sure that the kids get their books out, get to do homework, and then they get to play. The kids should not have a choice.” Another parent discussed that it would be beneficial for their children if staff members showed more initiative by checking in with students to see if they need any assistance with schoolwork or to encourage students to receive schoolwork help.

Two parents shared that their children did not need the academic assistance activities provided by the program as their children either did not receive homework or finished schoolwork before the program’s scheduled sessions.

### Socialization

Approximately half of the parents (7/15) described that the socialization activities were best for their child(ren). Along with socialization activities, six of the parents also described other activities as being best for their child(ren). Two parents elaborated that the socialization activities and interaction in the program have been particularly beneficial for their children after the COVID-19 pandemic, where there have been fewer opportunities and greater barriers to interaction. All seven parents also commented on how their children have created and built friendships and positive relationships with peers in the program. Four parents shared that their child(ren)’s behaviour has improved, such as increased curiosity and engagement, due to the connections and friendships their child(ren) have made in the program. One parent discussed that after attending the program, their child has experienced fewer breakdowns and is now better able to calm themselves.

*“I just think that the Beyond the Bell program is such a great thing for the parent and the kids and just being able to like, interact with other kids and have something to do because [my child] was the only child too, so if [they] were to come home or even if I were home, like even if I didn’t have to work that time period, [they] would have been kind of by [themselves] anyway.” (Parent 8)*

### Recreation

Four parents said that recreational activities were best for their child but did not elaborate on why. All four parents also listed at least one other type of activity as being best for their child(ren). When asked about other services or activities needed, parents suggested more sports activities, such as soccer (3/15) and basketball (3/15). Other sports were suggested, such as badminton, baseball, and ice skating. As well, nine

parents described the importance of the art activities for their children, with seven parents stating that these were their children's favourite.

### Nutritional snacks

Six parents shared that nutritional snacks were best for their child(ren). Along with nutritional snacks, five parents also shared at least one other type of activity as being best for their child(ren). Parents mentioned that their children ate healthier because of the program. For example, one parent noted that, "At the house, [my child] doesn't eat fruit but at school [they] eat it like I don't provide it at home" (Parent 10). Another parent described how their picky child has been encouraged to eat things they would otherwise not try.

*"[My child is a] very picky eater. And [the facilitators] been able to get [them] to eat things, like I would never think that [they] would eat. Like I would never think that [they] would eat like, I think it's like... corn crackers... And like whole wheat crackers. [They] like, absolutely fell in love with them and now makes me buy them... So pretty happy about that." (Parent 9)*

One parent also shared that their child will often ask them to purchase snacks for other children in the program and suggested that it may be helpful if the program provided more snacks.

### **Perceived sufficiency of frequency and duration of program**

#### ***Educator perspectives***

Both educators reported that the program should run for five days per week, as it currently does. As for the duration of each program session, one educator reported that the program should run for 1.5 to 2 hours per day as it currently does, while the other suggested the program be longer.

#### ***Parent perspectives***

Most parents were satisfied with the current frequency and duration of the program.

### Frequency

When asked about what their "dream" program would look like, most parents (13/15) indicated it would run every day of the week, from Monday to Friday, as it currently does. Two parents indicated they would prefer if the program ran every other day. One of the parents who suggested running the program every other day also suggested that the program be run on weekends while the parent worked. This parent expressed that

they would want to be able to “drop them off [for the program] at the same time” that they were heading to work.

### Duration

Parents were generally satisfied with the current duration of the program. All parents indicated that the program should be at least 2 hours long, as it currently runs, and a maximum of 3 hours. Most parents indicated that the program should be right after-school (13/15).

The program is currently administered after-school and while the specific start time depends on the bell times at each school, the program usually starts at either 3:00 pm or 3:30 pm. For example, at Dr. Davey Elementary School, the day ends at 3:10 pm, so the program starts at 3:30 pm. When suggesting specific times for the program to run, 3:00 pm to 5:00 pm was the most popular suggestion (6/15), which aligns with a program that starts right after a school day ends at 2:50 pm.

### **Perceived need for other activities and services**

#### ***Educator perspectives***

When asked about other potential activities that would benefit their students, one educator reported that teaching youth “how to handle unstructured times or transition times [during the school day] would be of benefit” to their students.

#### ***Parent perspectives***

### Additional program activities

Some parents provided suggestions for additional activities to be included within the program, including outdoor time (4/15), problem-solving (3/15), science activities (2/15), board/card games (2/15), and computer activities (2/15). One parent suggested debate activities for children to develop their critical thinking skills. Three parents shared that they wished the program provided opportunities for the children to learn basic cooking skills, such as how to make a sandwich, and one of them suggested that children could grow vegetables, providing children with the opportunity to understand where their food comes from. Another suggestion was teaching financial literacy by having a pretend store where children could spend “money” that they earned throughout the week. The remaining suggestions received support from one parent each: reading, finding [animal] tracks, and language activities.

One parent suggested partnering up with other schools to run some of these activities, such as going on trips.

### Additional services

One parent suggested that mental health and counselling resources should be available for students in the program. This would provide "someone to confide in" and a "third party" for children. There was also a suggestion for just having time to talk about their feelings and for the facilitators to check in on how the children are doing. Another parent shared that she noticed some children in her school may be coming to school hungry and suggested "maybe providing a warm breakfast" for children who are not able to get one.

### ***Youth perspectives***

When asked what activities they liked to engage in other than homework, snacks, being active, and time with friends, 10/21 youths suggested additional activities. The most reported "other" activities were electronics (e.g., iPads; 5/21) and free/play time (5/21).

When asked about the "buds" (possibilities/improvements) from the program, 7/21 youth suggested more food. The suggestions mostly included a desire for junk foods and having milk in the hot chocolate. Important to note is that 9/21 and 6/21 youth did not report any thorns (dislikes) or buds, respectively.

What is the perceived value of BTB?

### **Perceived value of BTB intended outcomes**

#### ***Educator perspectives***

Educators were asked to rank the following outcomes from most to least important for the students: improving confidence, social skills, physical activity, and enhancing learning. Both educators strongly agreed and agreed that it is valuable for students in the program to improve their confidence and social skills, respectively. The educators shared similar sentiments about the need for better and positive social interaction and coping skills. One educator reported that improved self-confidence in their students will help them be confident in all future learning opportunities whereas another educator reported that their students gain a sense of self-confidence and belonging through the program. Both educators somewhat agreed that it is valuable for students in the program to increase their physical activity. One educator somewhat agreed that it is valuable for students to enhance their learning.

#### ***Parent perspectives***

##### Improved learning

Seven parents indicated outcomes related to academic achievement to be the most important outcomes of the program and a total of 11 parents highly valued the academic aspects of the program. Three parents also shared that their favourite part was the learning that occurs with their child in the program. Parents for whom English was not their first language were especially grateful that their children were able to receive homework help at BTB. One parent shared that they did not know how to help their children with their homework and four parents mentioned the development of their child's English language skills such as reading, writing, and spelling as the most important outcome of the program.

*"[My child] really needed like, practice, and especially in writing... And it's not something that [they] wanted after... a certain age. [They] just really didn't want to read and write in front of me. So I see it was like, a place where [they] could do that, that wasn't like... pressure from mom."* (Parent 10)

One parent shared that she appreciated the learning opportunities that the program provided but that it would be even better if children could receive additional targeted support in the areas that they needed to work on the most.

Six parents also appreciated that the program provided their children with opportunities to be more creative. Parents valued creative activities as they knew that this was something their child enjoyed, these activities gave their child(ren) the opportunity to learn new skills, and it increased their self-efficacy as the child(ren) were proud of their creations.

#### Improved physical activity

Some parents discussed the importance of physical activity afforded to their children through the program. One parent believed that physical activity was the most important outcome of the program. Another parent shared that their children had been less physically active over the past two years during the COVID-19 pandemic and thought that it was important for them to start being more active and running around again.

*"I think that physical activity...is pretty important...I know like at home and stuff...I'm busy and I'm doing things. And... even though we used to do like bike rides and stuff like that... [my child] just didn't want to do that sort of thing with me at least anymore. So I think Beyond the Bell having some time outside and... time to go and like play and stuff, I think that was like the most beneficial."* (Parent 11)

#### Improved confidence



Two parents stated that building confidence was the most important outcome of the program for their child. One other parent shared that one of the things they hoped their child would gain from joining the program was to become more confident.

*“[All goals are important] equally but confidence is good because if you believe in yourself, it is like you will improve the problem and improve [one’s] life. If I believe in myself, I improve my life.” (Parent 1)*

### Improved social skills

Socialization was considered to be the most important outcome of the program by four parents, and it was discussed as being valuable by a total of 11 parents. Eight of the parents shared that their motivation for having their child(ren) attend the program was for them to have more opportunities to be around children their own age and to make friends in-person.

*“These children... they need to learn how to be more social. I think this program is teaching them that. Because most of these kids will go home after-school and they end up on a video game on YouTube or on this tablet, because... during COVID... I let them be on their tablets and play their games... but at some point, now that we’re getting back... social thing is very important. So that’s what I like about the program.” (Parent 5)*

One parent also shared that one of the reasons they wanted their child to join the program was for them to “interact with different kinds of kids no matter what the age, culture, and everything like that” (Parent 6).

Some parents mentioned specific competencies that they hoped their child would develop such as learning how to share with others and communication skills. Three parents shared that their child(ren) previously had difficulties making friends in other settings, but that this had not been the case at BTB. For example, one parent shared that their child “is very shy, but during this program, [they] learn how to talk [with] other children, and educators, and everyone” (Parent 7). Two parents also made comments that they highly valued the relationships that their children developed with the BTB facilitators.

### **Other valuable program outcomes**

#### ***Educator perspectives***

When asked about the opportunities provided by the program to their students, one educator reported that the program provides a different perspective for various academic subjects. Another educator stated that the program provides an extension of

the day in a different setting and a sense of belonging for students. They also elaborated that the program allows for greater intervention due to a smaller student to staff ratio. Regarding what students gain from the program, one educator stated that students that participate in the BTB program seem to be less stressed in class and are pleased to attend at the end of the day.

### ***Parent perspectives***

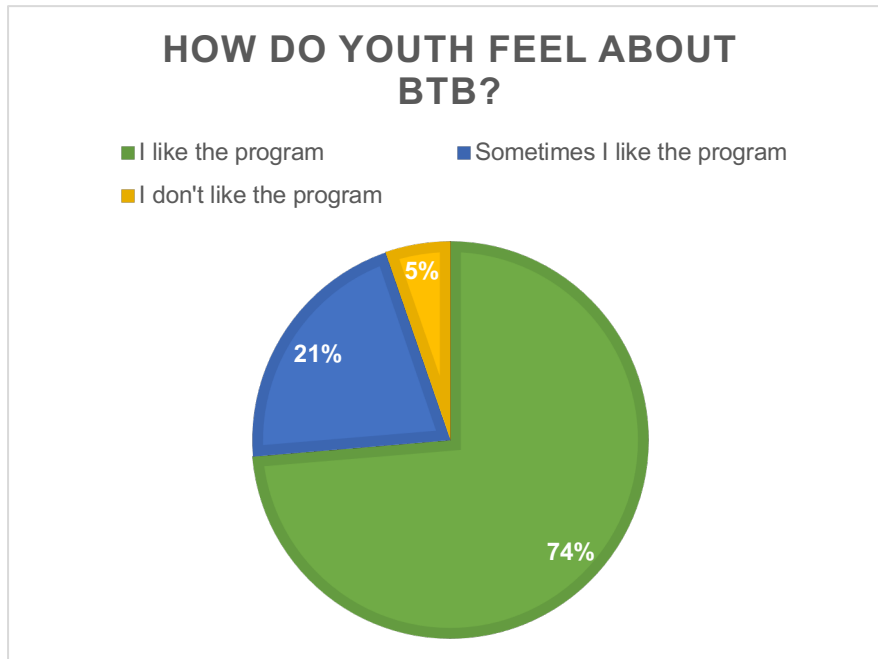
Aside from the program outcomes, four parents valued the program as after-school care as some of them work full time. One parent also expressed that the program has been helpful financially, noting that, “plus it’s free, like that was another bonus is it seems like a lot, like it helps a lot financially because I’m a single parent” (Parent 8).

Parents also perceived the program being valuable for their child(ren)’s well-being. Eight of the parents commented on how their children feel happy and have fun in the program, while five parents discussed how they noticed a positive change in their children through the activities (e.g., increase in engagement, willingness to listen). One parent said that one of the reasons they wanted their child to join the program was to have a chance to relax after the school day.

One parent shared that their children no longer enjoy the program as they have outgrown the activities and services provided.

### ***Youth perspectives***

Youth were asked to rate their satisfaction as either Happy (“I like the program. It makes me happy.”), Neutral (“The program is okay. Sometimes it makes me happy”), or Unhappy (“I don’t like the program. It does not make me happy”). As seen in Figure 3, 73.7% (14/19) of youth were happy, 21.1% (4/19) were neutral, and 5% (1/19) were unhappy.



**Figure 3.** Youth perspectives on how they felt about the BTB program.

Youth were also asked about what they like to do after-school, with the four main program activities as options. The results are reported below; note that most youth liked to do more than one activity.

Academic assistance

On their worksheets, 2/19 youth stated they enjoyed doing their homework.

Socialization

57.9% of youth (11/19) stated they enjoyed spending time with friends. However, one of the most reported “thorns”, or disliked elements, of the BTB program were some specific individual behaviours of other participants (e.g., when people talk out of turn/are rude/noisy). Specific behaviours were reported by 5/21 youth.

Recreation

When asked which activities they like to engage in, 89.5% (17/19) of youth stated they enjoyed being active. The most reported “roses”, or liked elements, of the BTB program by youth included gym/sports and outdoor time. Gym/sports were reported by 10/21 individuals and included basketball and capture the ball. Outdoor time was reported by 9/21 individuals. One of the most reported “thorns”, or disliked elements, of the program were specific activities (e.g., slime not working, trivia), which was reported by 4/21 individuals. The most reported “buds”, or wanted elements, were to add more

play/game time (4/21), more internet/video games (3/21), and more messy activities (3/21). Suggestions for internet/video games included Fortnite, Minecraft, and YouTube. Suggestions for messy activities included messy activities in general and slime.

### Nutritional snacks

When asked which activities they like to engage in, 68.4% (13/19) of youth stated they enjoyed snacks. One of the most reported “roses”, or liked elements, of the BTB program by youth included snacks/food. Snacks/food were reported by 11/21 individuals and included general snack time and specific mentions of hot chocolate.

### Other perspectives on BTB program design

When asked to describe the elements of their dream program and/or if they wished to share any additional comments, parents and educators provided feedback on elements of the BTB program design that fell outside of the scope of our guiding questions. Comments related to the program facilitators, location, communication between the program and parents, and program availability.

#### *Facilitators*

Six parents expressed that one of the favourite aspects of the program for their children were the facilitators due to the connections they were able to make with their children. Five parents shared similar comments about the positive influence staff members were able to have on their children, as well as their ability to communicate and accommodate. When asked whether parents have witnessed a positive change in their children, five parents shared that the influence of the program staff has been helpful. One parent described how children were comfortable with staff members yet maintained a level of respect for them.

Most parents (10/15) stated that they want program facilitators who are experienced in working with children in some capacity. Early Childhood Education (ECE) specialists, teaching assistants, and teachers in training were some examples of suggested personnel. One parent discussed the importance of using appropriate language and jokes for staff members when interacting with the children in the program. The parent stated that being more mindful of jokes and statements is important “because kids probably hang on to your every word”.

Two parents also noted that facilitators should be experienced in caring for children with special needs and different temperaments. Parents described the ideal facilitator as “fun and outgoing”, “patient”, and “passionate”. One parent suggested that facilitators should also be “strict” and commended facilitators who “did not let things fly so easily”.

According to this parent, because their child has ADHD, the child “really thrived” in that environment. Another parent suggested hiring young facilitators because they are “more open minded” and “can relate with children more”. Relatedly, another parent suggested that facilitators should have a “good imagination”. One parent suggested that facilitators should “know how to do [physical education]” such as teaching children how to play basketball. In the past, this parent’s child enjoyed having a facilitator that taught them how to play basketball.

One educator commented that an increase in staff would be beneficial.

### *Location*

Most parents (12/14) were satisfied with the program running at school because it is “convenient”, “children are already used to the [environment]”, and they “feel comfortable in it”. These parents expressed satisfaction with the program running at school because this means they do not have to worry about getting their children from school to a different location for the program. However, some parents (4/14) suggested that the program might run in a different location than a school classroom. One parent who made this suggestion suggested that going to a different location after a long day in the classroom may have benefits for the child's mental state, stating that “it's a mental thing to get your kid out of one spot to a different spot.” Two parents suggested the program run “near school, but not at school”, as long as the location is easily accessible for children. This would mean that parents do not have to worry about dropping off their children to a new location in the middle of the afternoon. The park and a community centre were two other suggestions for places where the program could be held.

### *Communication between program and parents*

For parents whose children joined because a teacher recommended them to, these parents also wanted to know why their children are being chosen by teachers to join the BTB program. One parent suggested the program should be advertised better so that more parents are “aware of it”.

Some parents suggested that there should be more communication between program facilitators and parents (4/15). A parent said that they want to know what their children are working on during the program and potentially “provide some of the same activities for their children at home”. The same parent felt that they could not help their children improve (academically and socially) “unless staff tell them what they need to improve on.” Finally, one parent found it difficult to reach their child’s specific program facilitator and suggested the program provide parents with facilitators’ contact information.

### *Program availability*

Some parents commented that they want the program to be available for children after Grade 5 and across more schools. For example, one parent noted, “For us it’s good if you have... the program... for grade six and seven, too. We are really worried about the next year” (Parent 1). Further, one educator suggested the program be expanded to before and after-school care.

## Discussion

In this report, we explored the extent to which BTB’s services are suitable to meet the target population’s needs and the perceived value of BTB’s intended program outcomes. Overall, our small sample of educators and parents provided feedback on ways BTB’s services are meeting the needs of participants while providing suggestions on helpful ways to modify or expand existing services. Youth enjoyed the activities provided by the program.

### **Suitability of program and further improvements**

#### ***Program value***

Educators and parents generally perceived that the benefits of BTB are in improving learning and physical activity. Many parents felt that even more academic assistance should be provided, and a large proportion of parents feel that facilitators should spend more time working with children on homework. This may mean that parents are not aware of the time their children spend on homework at the program. Program coordinators may consider emphasising this aspect of the program as they advertise and communicate to parents about it. This also ties into parents’ requests for more communication between program facilitators and parents about the specific activities that children do when they are in the program. Alternatively, BTB may not be meeting children's needs for academic assistance. In this case, facilitators may need to spend more time on homework during the program. Some parents, especially those who were not as fluent in English, thought that reading and writing support specifically, rather than homework support in general, was important. This might be something the program considers offering if it is not already being provided.

#### ***Program activities***

Many parents felt that a greater diversity of activities should be included. Important to keep in mind when considering our findings is the fact that each youth is different. Things that may work well for one child may not be effective for another, which explains the different wants and needs between parents. This ties in with participants asking for a greater diversity of activities. Youth requested a diversity of specific activities (e.g., more messy activities) and parents indicated a desire for activities that address a wider

range of skills and abilities (e.g., problem solving activities, gardening, debate/critical thinking). While participants were overall happy with the type of activities provided, there is always room to grow and try new activities to meet the needs of a broader range of youth.

Our findings suggest that BTB's provision of snacks are likely meeting the nutritional needs of the children in the program. While educators did not perceive nutritional snack activities to be highly important, most of the youth stated that they enjoyed snacks and some parents shared that BTB's snacks improved their children's healthy eating habits. Our findings align with Iverson et al. (2011), who found that after-school programs can have a positive impact on children's fruit and vegetable intake. Activities that allow youth to be immersed and to interact with their food, such as gardening and food preparation activities, can further increase awareness of healthy eating (Hermann et al., 2006). To further develop the nutritional snack activities, BTB may consider collaborating with the local school, educators, community members, and family members to establish a comprehensive healthy foods curriculum (Colley et al., 2019).

A parent suggested BTB include mindfulness activities and counselling resources to support the mental health and well-being of youth in the program. There is evidence that mindfulness practice is a beneficial activity for youth that can be easily incorporated into after-school programming. A YMCA after-school program in London, Ontario incorporated a 10-minute mindfulness practice into its programming (Nadler et al., 2017). Calmness significantly increased among children who participated, even though the facilitator of this activity had limited background in mindfulness practice (Nadler et al., 2017). Another study explored the impact of yoga classes on children aged 6 to 10, finding that children developed relaxation techniques they could apply in other settings (e.g., conflicts with friends, challenges with schoolwork) (Martin et al., 2022). As mindfulness practice is not a service currently provided at BTB and there is increasing evidence of its benefits, BTB may consider implementing mindfulness activities into their program activities.

Both educators and some parents appreciated the opportunities that BTB provided for youth to play outside and engage in physical activity. As well, approximately half of the youth reported enjoying gym/sports and outdoor time. While BTB provides opportunities for outdoor physical activity, the program could consider further developing the current programming to incorporate green and natural settings. Physical activity in natural environments has a positive impact on mental health (Douglas et al., 2017; Vucic & Tomicevic-Dubljevic, 2018). Play in natural areas has also been linked to greater social interaction and more creative thinking than outdoor play in less natural, more equipment-based outdoor areas (Kemple et al., 2016). One parent suggested incorporating outdoor nature activities, such as searching for animal tracks. Other

activities that could be incorporated include creating a multisensory garden and encouraging children to develop a sense of responsibility and help care for it, creating bird feeders with recyclable materials, and encouraging children to develop their observation skills using magnifying glasses and binoculars (Kemple et al., 2016). Overall, BTB leadership may consider a greater focus on outdoor activities, rather than indoor, for the recreational goals of the program.

### ***Program design***

When parents were asked about their ideal program design, a few main themes emerged. First, parents wanted facilitators to be trained to work with kids and to be passionate and patient individuals. They wished that the program take place in or near the school grounds and they wanted the program to be available for more grades and in more schools. Lastly, parents wanted clearer and more frequent communication about the program.

Both educators and most parents expressed that they were satisfied with the current duration and frequency of the program. Overall, there is limited research on the benefits and disadvantages of various lengths and frequencies of after-school programs. In one literature review, it was reported that there is a general positive correlation between contact hours in an after-school program and student benefits, suggesting that a regularly scheduled and structured program will be most helpful for students (Branch Associates Inc, 2008). As BTB programming occurs on a regular basis for five days a week, it would likely be beneficial for the program to continue its current schedule and structure.

Many parents commented on the importance of facilitators, which aligns with other studies in the literature. Vandell et al. (2007) found that youth who are adequately supervised in after-school programs have better work habits, reduced problematic behaviours, and improvements in social skills compared with youth who are unsupervised. Parents also provided suggestions for facilitator experience. Huang and Dietel (2011) reported that quality after-school programs often recruit facilitators with previous substantial after-school experience. As suggested by our findings, facilitators act as role models for students and establish norms for appropriate behaviour and positive attitudes towards learning (Huang and Dietel, 2011).

### **Strengths, limitations, and future directions**

This study has both strengths and limitations. One strength was being able to speak to many parents and youth. As such, our findings for this project were informed by a diversity of experiences and opinions. Due to a tight timeline, we were unable to gather information or opinions from many educators, who are a clear stakeholder in the



program. Further, we were limited in collecting data from parents who did not speak English as a first language, thus our results may not fully represent the opinions of all parents. We suggest that future research seeks input from more educators and integrates more languages during data collection.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Educator Survey

### Background Questions

1. What is the name of the school you are employed at?
2. How long have you been working at this school?
  - a. Less than 1 year
  - b. 1 -3 years
  - c. 4- 6 years
  - d. 7- 10 years
  - e. 10+ years
3. Which grade do you teach?

### Program Questions

1. What is your relationship to the Beyond the Bell program?
  - a. I have referred students to the program but do not know much else about the program.
  - b. I have referred students to the program and I am familiar with the activities that are run.
  - c. I have referred students to the program, I am familiar with the activities that are run, and I have checked-in with the program while it is running.
  - d. [Comment option]
  - e. I have not referred students to the program but have heard of the program from others.
  - f. Other: [short answer]
2. Beyond the Bell works with students from grades 1 to 5 who are at risk of falling behind in their academics. From your perspective, what opportunities, if any, do after-school programs like Beyond the Bell provide to these students?
3. From your perspective, what do your students seem to be gaining from participating in Beyond the Bell?

### Program Activities

1. Beyond the Bell focuses on providing recreation, academic assistance, nutritional , and socialization activities for its participants. From your perspective, which of these activities are most beneficial to participants? Please rank the options below from most to least beneficial:
  - i. Recreation
  - ii. Academic assistance
  - iii. Nutritional snacks

iv. Socialization

- a. Please elaborate on why you ranked the activities this way.
- b. What other activities, if anything, do you feel would benefit the students in the program?

4. The recreation activities are meeting student's needs.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ prefer not to comment

5. The academic assistance activities are meeting student's needs.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ prefer not to comment

6. The program enhances students' motivation to learn/attitudes towards school.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ prefer not to comment

7. The program effectively addresses students' needs in the area of homework and classwork assignments.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ prefer not to comment

8. The curriculum and instruction in the afterschool program reinforce concepts being taught during the school day.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ prefer not to comment

9. The nutrition activities are meeting student's needs.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

10. The socialization activities are meeting student's needs.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

11. What other activities do you feel are needed for the students in the program?

### Program Outcomes

1. Beyond the Bell's intended outcomes are to improve participants' confidence, social skills, physical activity, and learning. From your perspective, which of these outcomes are most important for students in the program? Please rank each outcome from most to least important.

- i. Improve confidence
- ii. Improve social skills
- iii. Increase physical activity
- iv. Enhance learning

- a. Please elaborate on why you ranked the outcomes this way.
- b. What other outcomes, if any, do you feel would benefit students in the program?

2. I feel that it is valuable for students in the program to improve their confidence.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

3. I feel that it is valuable for students in the program to improve their social skills.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

4. I feel that it is valuable for students in the program to increase their physical activity.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

5. I feel that it is valuable for students in the program to enhance their learning.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

6. What other areas do you feel would be valuable for the students in the program?

### Program Outreach

We will now ask you about the students being reached by the program. Beyond the Bell aims to reduce the impact of financial hardships of families in low-income neighbourhoods by working with students from grades 1 to 5 who are at risk of falling behind in their academics. Students are deemed at risk if they need assistance in completing their homework, need to further develop their social skills, and/or are doing well at school but are at risk of falling behind due to competing priorities between school and family.

1. I feel that the target population is being adequately reached by the program.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

Why or why not: [short answer]

2. I feel that there are students who would benefit from the program who are not currently being reached.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |

Why or why not: [short answer]

3. I appreciate that I can refer individual students to BTB.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |                       |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |                       |

4. Parents respond positively when I mention the program to them.

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                                      |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>                | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1.                    | 2.                    | 3.                    | 4.                    | 5.                    | 6.                    | 7.                                   |                       |
| Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Somewhat disagree     | Somewhat agree        | Agree                 | Strongly agree        | Don't know/<br>prefer not to comment |                       |

5. Beyond the Bell runs throughout the school year for 1.5 to 2 hours every day of the week. In your opinion, how often should the program run?

- a. The program should run for 5 days per week as it currently does.
  - b. The program should run for 3 to 4 days per week.
  - c. The program should run for 1 to 2 days per week.
6. In your opinion, how long should the program run?
- a. The program should run for 1 hour per day.
  - b. The program should run for 1.5 to 2 hours per day as it currently does.
  - c. The program should run for 2.5 hours per day.
  - d. Don't know/unsure

#### Concluding Questions/Reflections

1. If Beyond the Bell had unlimited resources to grow and expand, what could the program do or change to better meet the needs of its participants, if anything?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share about the Beyond the Bell program?
3. Would you be interested in speaking to us more about the program in a follow-up interview?



## Appendix B: Parent Interview Guide

1. I want to begin by asking you a bit about your child's participation in the program.
  - a. How many of your children participate in Beyond the Bell?
  - b. What grade is your child(ren) in?
  - c. Which school do they attend?
  - d. How did you find out about the program?
  - e. How long has your child been in the program?
  - f. What did you hope that your child would gain from participating in this program?
  
2. What's the best or most helpful thing about the Beyond the Bell program for you and your child?
  - a. Does your child have a favourite part about the program?
  - b. Does your child look forward to attending? Why or why not?
  
3. Have you noticed any positive changes in your child since they started attending the program?
  - a. (If yes) What changes have you noticed? What do you think caused those changes?
  - b. (If no) Why do you think that is?
  
4. Beyond the Bell provides children with recreational activities, socialization activities, nutritional snacks, and academic support (such as homework help). Which of these activities do you think are best for your child?
  - a. Are some more important than others?
  - b. Are there other activities or services that the program could provide that would benefit your child?
  
5. The goal of the program is to improve confidence, social skills, physical activity, and learning. Which of these goals is most important for your child? Why?
  - a. Are there any other goals for your child that would help them in school?
  
6. Now that I understand a bit more about your thoughts on the program, I would like to understand more about what else would be helpful for your child. Pretend you are the manager of an after-school program like Beyond the Bell. How would you design the program?
  - a. What activities would it include?
  - b. How long would it last?
  - c. What time would it be held?
  - d. How frequent would it be?
  - e. Who would run it?
  - f. Where would it be held?
  
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Appendix C: Youth Worksheet



**Rose**

What I like:

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**Thorn**

What I don't like:

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**Bud**

What I would add:

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I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

# After school I like to:



Finish my homework



Have a snack



Be active



Be with my friends



Add your own!



Add your own!

# How I feel about this program:



I like the program.  
It makes me happy.



The program is okay.  
Sometimes it makes me happy



I don't like the program.  
It does not make me happy