

Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers

2014–15

Executive Summary



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Prepared for: Texas Education Agency

May 2016

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Executive Summary

Background and Context

A large body of research has shown that afterschool programs can have a positive impact on the young people who attend them, particularly young people from low-income communities. In fact, studies have shown that participating in high-quality programs on a regular basis can contribute to improved academic and social and emotional outcomes, including attendance, discipline referrals, achievement tests, and critical thinking and self-management skills (Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Kauh, 2011; Miller, 2003; Naftzger et al., 2013).

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, originally authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, provides academic enrichment opportunities during nonschool hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and/or low-performing schools.³ The federal formula grants are awarded to state education agencies, which, in turn, make competitive grant awards to eligible entities to support afterschool and summer learning programs.⁴ In July 2002, the federal government awarded the Texas Education Agency (TEA) \$24.5 million to fund TEA's first cohort of 21st CCLC grantees for the 2003–04 school year. Since then, Texas has received annual awards that have been used to fund eight grant cycles, and the ninth cycle will begin in the 2016–17 school year.⁵ All centers funded by the Texas 21st CCLC program, known in Texas as the *Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE)*,⁶ are expected to provide programs and services designed to support student performance in the following areas: academic performance, school attendance, school behavior, promotion rates, and graduation rates.

³ For more information, review the authorizing legislation as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001), Title IV, Part B at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg55.html>. ESEA was replaced in December, 2015, by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which continues funding for the 21st CCLC program. For more details on ESSA, see https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/ESSA_Progress_Report.pdf.

⁴ Grantees include local education agencies, nonprofit organizations, for-profit organizations, institutions of higher education, and city or county government agencies.

⁵ A cycle represents a cohort of grantees that receive funding for five years. Cycle 5, for example, represents the fifth such cohort to receive funding since TEA began funding for this grant.

⁶ In Texas, the 21st CCLC program has its own unique brand that communicates the characteristics of the program and creates statewide awareness so that all Texas centers can identify themselves as part of a bigger picture. Although 21st CCLC is the federal funding source, the programs in Texas are referred to as *Afterschool Centers on Education*, or *Texas ACE*. The term *ACE* will be used throughout the report to refer to the programs in Texas unless reference is made to the federal funding source, in which case the term *21st CCLC* will be used.

The ACE programs have been a long-established resource for providing Texas students with academic support and enrichment opportunities. In 2012, TEA sought to utilize the ACE programs to provide more focused academic support to Texas students who were at risk of academic failure, as measured by the state’s assessment of student learning, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) that was new at that time. STAAR is administered to students in Grades 3–8, and the STAAR end-of-course (EOC) assessments are currently administered after completion of various high school courses.⁷ Although overall pass rates for the state were approximately 50% for mathematics and 67% for English language arts (ELA) in 2013, students identified as economically disadvantaged passed at much lower rates than their more advantaged peers (by an average of 26 percentage points) (Center for Public Policy Priorities, 2013).

To provide more focused academic support to academically at-risk youth, TEA created a supplemental grant program as part of its ACE program initiative, with funding beginning in the 2012–13 school year and continuing through the 2013–14 school year. This program, called the *STAAR Pilot Project* (SPP), provided additional funding for ACE programs to increase their academic support in core subjects using evidence-based interventions. Fifteen grantees were awarded competitive grants to establish SPP programming in selected centers where they already had established ACE-only programs.⁸

Statewide Evaluation: Year 1 (2010–11) and Year 2 (2011–12)

Beginning in fall 2010, TEA contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) and its partners at Gibson Consulting Group and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality to conduct a statewide evaluation of the ACE program, geared toward two primary research objectives that TEA established for the project:

⁷ STAAR includes annual assessments in reading and mathematics for Grades 3–8, writing at Grades 4 and 7, science at Grades 5 and 8, social studies at Grade 8, and EOC assessments for English I, English II, Algebra I, biology, and U.S. history.

⁸ *Grantee* refers to the organization that serves as the fiscal agent on the 21st CCLC grant, and *the center* refers to the physical location where grant-funded services take place. The centers have defined hours of operation and a dedicated staff; they are required to have a position akin to a site coordinator. Each ACE grantee must have at least one center and may have as many as 20 centers. With regard to SPP centers, there were not dedicated SPP centers specifically, even though programs were sometimes referred to that way. Rather, SPP centers were ACE centers that included targeted interventions as the part of the programming that students were recruited to attend. Moreover, there were also ACE-only students and traditional ACE programming at a given SPP center that was available to all students enrolled in the center. The key distinction is that only certain ACE centers received specific supplemental grant funding to include SPP programming, either alongside other traditional ACE programming or as stand-alone programming.

- **Research Objective 1:** Identify and describe innovative strategies and approaches implemented by successful 21st CCLC programs.
- **Research Objective 2:** Conduct a statewide assessment of 21st CCLC programs, operations, participation in the program, and student achievement outcomes.

The results of the initial years of the evaluation are presented in [two reports](#) (Naftzger, Manzeske, Nistler, & Swanlund, 2012; Naftzger et al., 2013). Key findings were as follows:

- Three instructional approaches were found to be associated with high levels of student engagement: clarity of purpose, intentional use of time, and an active and interactive activity leader.
- Organizational practices associated with high levels of quality included intentional program design, staff development and collaboration, methods to monitor improvement, linkages to the school day, and community connections.
- There was some evidence of a connection between high-quality programs and high levels of participation.
- Higher levels of attendance (60 or more days) in 21st CCLC–funded programs were associated with higher levels of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)-Reading/ELA and mathematics performance, reduced school-day disciplinary incidents and school-day absences, and supported grade-level promotion. In addition, a high level of point-of-service (POS) quality was associated with fewer school-day disciplinary incidents and a greater likelihood of grade-level promotion.⁹
- For high school students, participation in an ACE program increased the likelihood of being promoted to the next grade level by 97%. There were similar findings for elementary and middle school students, but the magnitude was much smaller.

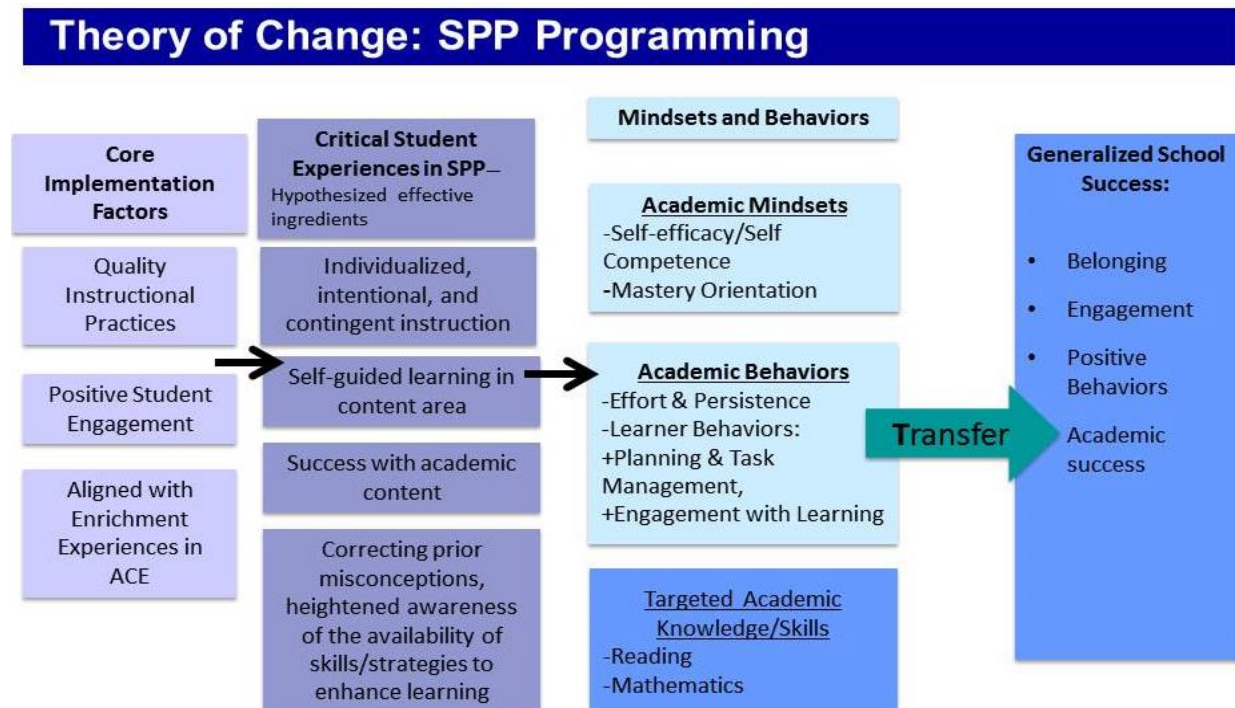
Statewide Evaluation: Year 3 (2012–13) and Year 4 (2013–14)

The introduction of the SPP program led to a change in the evaluation focus, although the overall scope remained the same. For the 2012–13 and 2013–14 evaluations, AIR focused its activities and questions specifically on the SPP program as it compared with traditional ACE programming. In order to make that shift in focus, the evaluation team worked with TEA to develop the SPP theory of change, depicted in Figure ES-1. This theory of change articulates the key facets of SPP implementation that contribute to the

⁹ The point of service is where adults and students interact, such as the during program activities.

experiences youth may have in the program. The hypothesis is that a sequence of high-quality, engaging experiences across time will lead to students developing key beliefs and skills, both social-emotional and academic in nature. Improving these key mindsets and behaviors will, in turn, affect youth performance on key metrics during the school day.

Figure ES-1. SPP Theory of Change



The results of the 2012–13 and 2013–14 evaluations are presented in [a combined report](#) (Devaney et al., 2015). Key findings from those two years were as follows:

- SPP programs were more academic in nature than were ACE-only programs. This finding was expected given the purpose of the funding for SPP programming and the stated and explicit intention that SPP programs help students at risk for academic failure improve their skills. More specifically, SPP programs hired more certified teachers; SPP students spent more time in academic activities; and SPP activities used smaller groups and longer activities to support academic learning.
- Students participating in SPP programming tended to be more academically at risk and less proficient in key academic mindsets and behaviors than were their ACE-only peers at program onset. This finding is important because it indicates that the SPP program was successful in recruiting the types of students it intended to serve—that is, those at risk for academic failure.

- SPP programs and ACE-only programs had roughly the same level of average overall quality based on a sample of program observations conducted by the evaluation team. Although overall there was not a significant difference between the quality of ACE-only and SPP programs, youth-reported engagement was lower in SPP programs than in ACE-only programs.
- SPP activities that used a Learning Strategies approach, a combination of Computer-Based and Face-to-Face delivery, and a low staff-to-youth ratio, were the most engaging to young people. In addition, the Learning Strategies approach was associated with higher levels of quality than was any other approach.
- There was a small but positive impact of both SPP programming and ACE-only programming on many of the measured academic mindsets and behaviors in the 2012–13 school year.

Statewide Evaluation: Year 5 (2014–15)

The evaluation of the ACE program has concluded its fifth year and was designed to bring all four years of evaluation together to examine the program as a whole and its impact statewide as well as continue exploring the validity of the theory of change. The final year of the statewide evaluation of the ACE program was designed to answer three key research questions, all related to the two overarching objectives of the evaluation to identify innovative strategies and to examine overall program impact. The three research questions (RQ) and associated subquestions are as follows:

- RQ 1—What key practices, strategies, and approaches are especially related to quality programming that leads to improved youth outcomes?
 - RQ 1.1—What is the relationship between program quality¹⁰ and student outcomes?
 - RQ 1.2—How does the relationship between quality and student outcomes differ for SPP students and ACE-only students?
 - RQ 1.3—How does the level of youth engagement mediate the relationship between quality and outcomes?
 - RQ 1.4—How do changes in youth mindsets and behaviors mediate the relationship between participation and outcomes?

¹⁰ Program quality is determined, for the purposes of this evaluation, by observations of program activities using the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), Observation of Child Engagement Scale (OCES), and sections of the Assessment of Program Practices Tool (APT). Broadly, these tools ask raters to examine the extent to which staff are able to create a safe and supportive environment, the interactions among staff and youth, how staff engage youth, how youth demonstrate engagement in activities, and the explicit academic content of the programs. More details on these tools and their constructs are included in Appendix B of the main report.

- RQ 2—What is the cost effectiveness and sustainability of the SPP program?
 - RQ 2.1—What is the per-student cost of the SPP program relative to school-related student outcomes?
 - RQ 2.2—What is the relationship between the allocation of grant spending to specific activities and student outcomes?
 - RQ 2.3—What is the return on investment for SPP programs?
 - RQ 2.4—In what ways has the SPP experience impacted the work of project directors in how they organize and deliver afterschool programs, and which organizational or instructional components have they incorporated into 2014–15 afterschool programming?
- RQ 3—What is the impact of ACE programming on a range of student outcomes?
 - RQ 3.1—How does the impact of programming differ by attendance level for both the overall ACE program as well as students specifically enrolled in SPP activities?
 - RQ 3.2—What impact does participation in SPP+ACE have on youth outcomes compared to similar youth that participated only in ACE activities?
 - RQ 3.3—If SPP+ACE is found to have a significant impact on youth outcomes, what program typologies are associated with larger program effects?

RQ 1 and RQ 2 serve as a continuation of the 2012–13 and 2013–14 evaluations, concluding analysis of the SPP theory of change. With RQ 3, the evaluation team revisits the analysis done in the 2010–11 and 2012–13 evaluations, looking at the overall impact of the ACE program and attempting to better understand subsets of the participating population (e.g., students participating in SPP activities, students participating in activities employing certain typologies). The 2014–15 evaluation serves as a culminating analysis of the ACE initiative over the past five years.

A Summary of Findings

The 2014–15 evaluation is organized around three key research questions that support the overarching goals of examining program implementation and impact. This summary outlines each research question and the findings associated with it, then provides some overarching conclusions based on five years’ worth of evaluation findings, and finally concludes with a series of recommendations for the ACE program as a whole going forward.

2014–15 Evaluation Conclusions

RQ 1—What key practices, strategies, and approaches are especially related to quality programming that leads to improved youth outcomes?

Analyses undertaken to explore this research question revealed that **there is a positive relationship between quality and outcomes**, but that relationship and **the mediating effect of youth-reported engagement on it is not clear, potentially because of the presence of explicit academic content in SPP programming**. In addition, **youth mindsets and behaviors do not appear to have a relationship to participation and outcomes**, although more research is needed to understand these complicated relationships. The findings that contribute to this overall conclusion include:

- *High-quality programs may lead to improved outcomes under certain conditions.* The evaluation team found evidence of a relationship between quality and outcomes when ACE and SPP programs were examined separately. Participation in both high-quality ACE and SPP programs was associated with fewer absences, and participation in high-quality SPP programs was associated with improved mathematics achievement.
- *High-quality and high-academic content activities can lead to positive outcomes despite low engagement.* Although the evaluation team saw a negative relationship between quality and engagement and between quality and outcomes when examined separately, there was still a positive relationship between high-quality programs and outcomes when viewed through the lens of engagement. This indicates that it is still possible for students to improve outcomes when participating in high-quality programs even if their engagement is low. It is the evaluation team’s hypothesis that programs with explicit academic content may not be as engaging to youth while still being high quality. The majority of activities observed and included in the analyses, both SPP and ACE-only, this year were academic in nature, which may have led to the results. However, analysis to test this hypothesis was beyond the scope of this evaluation.
- *No relationship was found between improvement in youth-reported mindsets and behaviors and school-related outcomes.* The evaluation team did not find a mediating effect of mindsets and behaviors on the relationship between participation and outcomes. Although it is possible that mindsets and behaviors have no relationship to participation and outcomes, the evaluation team believes it is more likely that the youth report survey used to measure mindsets and behaviors is imperfect or that only a subset of youth see improvements on certain skills and belief areas and that it may be difficult to detect these improvements when examining students in aggregate. Sample size considerations and project

resources did not afford the evaluation team the opportunity to consider all of these options.

RQ 2—What is the cost effectiveness and sustainability of the SPP program?

By conducting a thorough return on investment and cost per student analysis as well as interviews with project directors, the evaluation team was able to determine both that **the amount of funds that centers dedicated to SPP was not related to student outcomes** and that **the SPP program did lead to changes in staff operational and instructional practices** in most centers. This combination of findings may indicate that intensive academic interventions such as SPP can lead to sustained change in practice regardless of how much funding is dedicated to the process. More specifically, the evaluation team found the following:

- *There is no significant relationship between per-pupil SPP program spending and academic performance, regardless of activity type.* Analyses did not reveal any relationship between per-student spending and performing on the STAAR-Reading and STAAR-Mathematics exams overall and when taking the delivery mode (i.e., Computer-Based or Face-to-Face) into account.
- *Implementation of SPP programming contributed to changes in organizational and instructional practice in many centers.* Most project directors indicated that their experience with implementing the SPP program changed their philosophy toward afterschool program delivery, making them more focused on academic content, alignment to the regular school-day curriculum, and building meaningful partnerships with school leaders and regular school-day staff. This change in philosophy has resulted in the incorporation of SPP-related organizational and instructional approaches into their current afterschool work, including those related to staffing and staff training, program monitoring, and recruiting students. Many programs are sustaining components of SPP in their programs despite the conclusion of the funding cycle.

RQ 3—What is the impact of ACE programming on a range of student outcomes?

By conducting rigorous impact analyses on the ACE programming overall as well as a variety of correlational analyses looking at the impact of subsets of students and programs, the evaluation team was able to determine a **relationship between participation and improved STAAR mathematics performance as well as participation and reduced school-day disciplinary incidents and absences**. Findings appear to be **strongest among students who participate at high levels (60+ days) and who are in Grades 9–12**. Specific findings that contribute to these overall conclusions include:

- *Students who participated in ACE for 60 or more days showed improved STAAR mathematics performance.* Analyses comparing ACE participants to similar nonparticipants found a small relationship between participation and improved mathematics performance. Findings were largest for students in Grade 9. Although small, the results were similar to those found in other statewide 21st CCLC evaluations, including the 2011–12 evaluation of ACE programming.
- *Students who participated in ACE for 60 or more days were more likely than nonparticipants to have a decrease in school-day disciplinary incidents and absences.* Here again, there were larger effects for high school students than for elementary and middle school students, but overall, there appears to be a strong relationship between high levels of participation in ACE and decreases in problematic school-related behaviors.
- *Although there does not appear to be an impact on academic performance when comparing SPP participants to nonparticipants, there does appear to be an added benefit to participating in SPP+ACE programming rather than ACE-only programming.* Analyses looking at SPP participants compared to those who did not participate did not find a positive relationship between participation and academic performance. However, when looking at the added benefit of participating in SPP+ACE programming versus ACE-only programming, analyses showed that SPP+ACE was associated with improved performance on STAAR mathematics. This suggests that participating in SPP programming alone may not lead to improved outcomes, but participating in SPP+ACE may contribute to improved outcomes.
- *The Learning Strategies and Face-to-Face approaches may be associated with improved mathematics performance and decreased school-day disciplinary incidents.*¹¹ In conducting an analysis of the various program typologies, the evaluation team found evidence of a relationship between Learning Strategies and Face-to-Face approaches and improved STAAR mathematics performance. In addition, although both the Learning Strategies and Skills-Based approaches were associated with a decrease in school-day disciplinary incidents, the Learning Strategies approach had a larger effect. Finally, the Face-to-Face approach was also associated with a decrease in school-day disciplinary incidents. Although these findings were simply correlational and cannot definitively point to these two approaches as superior, the analysis results are consistent with the 2012–13 evaluation results that found a Learning Strategies approach was associated with higher quality programming.

¹¹ *Learning Strategies* approach focuses on learning how to learn and gathering skills applicable to many different content areas rather than building skills in one specific content area.

Broad Conclusions About the Effectiveness of the ACE Program

Conclusions About Impact

- Students participating in ACE programming at high levels (60 or more days per year) do see improvements on key school-related indicators. The largest impacts were consistently related to on-time grade-level promotion followed by fewer absences and decreased school-day disciplinary incidents. The program has also had a small impact on mathematics achievement.
- The largest impacts were felt by students in Grades 9–12, especially for on-time grade-level promotion. These impacts were very high in the 2011–12 evaluation and somewhat smaller but still substantial in the 2014–15 evaluation.
- The results related to the SPP program were somewhat less conclusive. Participating in SPP, as compared to not participating in ACE programming at all, was associated with substantial decreases in school-day disciplinary incidents and somewhat smaller but still strong decreases in absences. It was also associated with slight declines in both mathematics and reading performance on the STAAR exam.
- Participating in SPP+ACE rather than ACE-only programming was associated with significantly improved STAAR mathematics performance. Participation in this combination of programming was also associated with decreased school-day disciplinary incidents and absences. These findings suggest that an intensive academic intervention paired with ACE enrichment may provide the right combination of programming to support positive outcomes.
- A *Learning Strategies* approach may be the most effective in supporting student learning. In 2012–13, the *Learning Strategies* approach was associated with higher quality and greater student engagement. In 2014–15, analyses suggested that a relationship may exist between participation in programs using a *Learning Strategies* approach and decreased school-day disciplinary incidents and improved STAAR mathematics performance for students experiencing both SPP and ACE programming.

Conclusions About Quality and Engagement

Conclusions about program quality and engagement as a result of the five-year evaluation are somewhat more complicated than those related to impact. They are further complicated by the introduction of SPP programming to the evaluation starting in 2012–13. Collectively, the five-year evaluation has told us the following about the relationship between quality and engagement:

- **Program quality is related to cognitive engagement.** In 2010–11 and 2012–13/2013–14, the evaluation team looked at the relationship between quality and engagement at the activity level. In both sets of analyses, AIR was able to closely link Program Quality Assessment (PQA) quality scores with youth-reported engagement scores for the same activity and found significant and positive relationships. In 2014–15, the evaluation team did not find this same level of relationship. This might be due to the fact that the analysis was done at the center level rather than the activity level, where there was a more direct connection between what was observed and what youth experienced as a result.
- **Explicit academic content may depress engagement.** In 2013–14, the evaluation team conducted analyses of the relationship between quality and engagement. Analyses were conducted at the activity level and revealed a strong positive relationship between quality and youth-reported engagement in most cases, while SPP–funded activities and activities with explicit academic content were negatively related to engagement. The evaluation team hypothesized at the time that the explicit academic content present in SPP activities may contribute to decreased engagement. This hypothesis could also explain the findings from the 2014–15 analysis that found no relationship between quality and youth-reported engagement because most activities observed, both SPP and ACE-only, were academically oriented. Investigation of this notion was beyond the scope of this evaluation and is an area for further study.
- **Program quality can be related to improved outcomes, even when engagement is low, if academic content is explicit.** Findings from the 2011–12 and 2014–15 evaluations found a relationship between quality and outcomes, albeit through somewhat different paths. In 2011–12, analyses found a relationship between higher quality programs and improved student outcomes when the programs provided intensive academic activities and had high levels of observed engagement. In 2014–15, analyses found a relationship between higher quality programs and improved student outcomes when youth-reported engagement was low. Although these findings seem contradictory, it is important to note that the relationship between quality and outcomes is consistent, and that the measure of engagement varied in the two years. The evaluation team hypothesizes that it is the presence of SPP programming that accounts for this discrepancy.

In sum, the five-year evaluation has demonstrated that there does appear to be relationships among program quality, engagement, and student outcomes for youth participating in ACE programming at high levels.

Recommendations

Based on findings from the specific 2014–15 evaluation and the overarching five-year evaluation, AIR would recommend the following key next steps for the ACE program and the Texas Education Agency.

- ***Continue to support the growth and development of ACE programs across the state.*** The ACE program as a whole is having an impact on student outcomes and may be a worthwhile investment that is helping schools in their ultimate mission to support student success.
- ***Continue to emphasize and support quality programming through continuous improvement.*** Program quality appears to play an important role in youth outcomes. Therefore, it stands to reason that providing support for continuous program improvement for the ACE centers is a critical step. It may be beneficial to provide training on specific practices outlined in the PQA related to creating a supportive environment, supporting strong interactions between adults and youth in programs, and engaging youth in activities.
- ***Encourage use of the Learning Strategies approach.*** The evaluation revealed that a *Learning Strategies* instructional approach may be more effective than the *Skills-Based* approach in engaging youth and contributing to youth outcomes. A *Learning Strategies* approach focuses more on learning how to learn and gathering skills applicable to many different content areas rather than learning specific skills associated with one content area. TEA may consider working with its technical assistance provider to develop training related to this approach.
- ***When considering intensive academic interventions, always couple them with traditional ACE enrichment.*** There was some evidence that an intensive academic intervention such as SPP can be successful within an out-of-school time (OST) setting when students experience it alongside traditional ACE programming. SPP activities alone were associated with low levels of engagement and may not have been effective on their own. However, when paired with ACE programming, they appeared to have positive impacts on participants. There may be value to supporting intensive academic sessions, but students still need the fun and engaging enrichment opportunities that ACE provides.