Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Year 2 Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

Prepared for: Texas Education Agency

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February 2013

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CREDITS

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Executive Summary

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, 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 (NCLB), supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and/or low-performing schools.[1] The federal grants are awarded to state education agencies (SEAs), which, in turn, make competitive awards to eligible grantees to support afterschool and summer learning programs.[2] 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. As of 2010–11, this and subsequent federal funding has resulted in 281 grants being awarded in Texas over seven funding cycles.[3] All centers funded by the Texas 21st CCLC program, known in Texas as the Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE),[4] 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.[5] These five areas were examined by the evaluation team, and findings on gains made toward meeting the performance objectives will be presented in the Year 2 Evaluation Report.

To ensure that grantees funded by the ACE program are positioned to achieve program objectives, TEA has developed a research-based Critical Success Model (CSM). This model includes four Critical Success Factors (CSFs) which represent behavioral changes that should be demonstrated by students and families enrolled in the program, or by the adults working on their behalf, to ensure success in meeting programmatic goals and objectives. The CSFs and corresponding milestones (key strategies that establish the foundation on which critical success factors are built) follow.[6]

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[1] For more information see http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg55.html

[2] Grantees include local education agencies, non-profits, for-profit organizations, institutions of higher education, and city or county government agencies.

[3] 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.

[4] 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. While 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.

[5] 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

[6] Beginning in 2009–10, with the sixth funding cycle, program guidelines were revised to require grantees to develop and implement programs in alignment with TEA's research-based CSM. Cycle 6 grantees were required to use this model to establish program goals and implement their programs. In addition, Cycle 6 grantees must collect and report performance measure data to TEA based on milestones and CSFs. Cycle 5 grantees are not subject to these requirements, although they were made aware of the

- CSF1 emphasizes both student and family engagement. Student engagement and family engagement are not necessarily achieved together, because they require different strategies and activities. The milestone for this CSF is predicated on the implementation of research-based, innovative instructional techniques and opportunities that encourage student and family engagement.

- CSF2 addresses student involvement in school, exemplified through more participation in extracurricular activities, and more mentors supporting students. The milestone for this CSF emphasizes the role of adults as advocates for students.

- CSF3 addresses the use of assessment data to evaluate and revise student activities and services. A milestone strategy is for program staff to conduct ongoing and continuous assessments to identify student needs and how to revise program services.

- CSF4 addresses staff professional development. The milestone strategy is for programs to provide all staff the "required training opportunities," which are then implemented in the afterschool program.

Overview of the Evaluation

Through a contract with TEA, the evaluation is being conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and its partners, Gibson Consulting Group, Inc. (Gibson Consulting) and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (the Weikart Center), from January 2011 through August 2013 and possibly through August 2015 if additional funding is identified. To date, state evaluation efforts have been focused on programs that were awarded grants during Cycle 5 and Cycle 6.[7] The overarching goal of the evaluation is to determine which program strategies and approaches are most effective within particular contexts in encouraging student behaviors (CSFs) that lead to improved student outcomes. As such, the evaluation is designed to address two primary research objectives:

- **Research Objective 1:** To conduct a statewide assessment of ACE programs, operations, participation, and student achievement;

CSM when Cycle 6 was first implemented and are encouraged to use the model as a guide for improving programs.
[7] At the beginning of the 2010–11 school year, Cycle 5 programs began their third year of implementation, and Cycle 6 programs began their second year of implementation. Programs funded by the Texas 21st CCLC program are funded for five years. Applicants that received funding in previous 21st CCLC cycles are eligible to apply for funding to serve new or existing programs; however, the pre-existing grant must expire before the project start date of the new grant cycle.

- **Research Objective 2:** To identify and describe innovative strategies and approaches implemented by successful Cycle 5 and Cycle 6 grant-funded programs.[8]

The second year of the evaluation extends the work conducted in the first year of the evaluation, for which findings were presented in the Interim Report. As in the first year, data collection and analysis in the second year of the evaluation focused on program quality—how it was demonstrated in program activities and organizational processes, and its impact on student participation and student academic and behavioral outcomes. By the second year, observation and interview data had been collected on 80 ACE programs (in spring and fall 2011). These data were used first to select 15 centers that were visited again in spring 2012, with selection of those centers based on indicators of quality. The data from the 2011 site visits were also used to examine more deeply the instructional practices in sessions where students were consistently engaged. At the 15 centers visited in 2012, comprehensive descriptions of program activities were developed from observations, and summaries of organizational practices were developed from interviews with key stakeholders (the site coordinator, principal, and project director, as well as teachers whose classes were observed).

The evaluation in the second year included extensive analysis of staff survey data (collected in 2011 at the centers where site visits were conducted), and observation data, also collected in 2011, which included three observation protocols (the Youth Program Quality Assessment, PQA; the Observation of Child Engagement protocol, OCE; and portions of the Assessment of Afterschool Practices Observation Tool, APT-O) that address academic content. For each of the protocols, observers applied scores on the included constructs. The data available from the TEA provided information on program and student characteristics, available through the TX21st CCLC Student Tracking System (TX21st); as well as student outcome data, using Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scale scores in reading and mathematics as outcomes. Additional information on student demographics, discipline incidents, school-day attendance, and grade promotion came from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Campus-level performance data from the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) was used to create a non-participant comparison group.

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[8] These research objectives may be expanded to include new grantees in later years of the evaluation.

Overview of Findings

The issue of program quality can be conceptualized as the binding thread that is woven throughout the CSM, adopted by TEA to guide implementation of ACE programming in a way that is likely to impact the lives of participating youth in meaningful and lasting ways. The 2010–12 evaluation was guided by seven research questions, most of which address quality practice in ACE programs, and how program quality influences student outcomes. Each of these questions is outlined below, along with a summary of key findings resulting from analyses oriented at answering each question.

1. ***What instructional approaches are associated with high levels of student engagement at the point of service?***

The analysis of observation data from both the 2011 and the spring 2012 site visits showed that three instructional approaches distinguished high quality activities. One of these was clarity of purpose, whereby the activities were clearly designed to achieve explicit objectives. In the high quality academic enrichment sessions, the instructors clearly stated the learning objectives and then led students through a variety of learning activities related to those objectives. In the non-academic enrichment sessions, the objectives may not have been as explicitly stated, but the activities were still purposed toward learning within the context of the sessions.

A second feature was intentional use of time. This feature, which was anchored in planning and pacing, was found to be essential for keeping students busy and engaged throughout the observed sessions. Materials were ready when the sessions began. Routines were worked into sessions so little time was wasted when students began sessions and transitioned from one activity to another. The pace was generally quick, and, as a result, student accomplishments by the end of the activities were evident.

The third feature was an active and interactive instructor, who continually engaged with students, even when students were working in small groups or on their own. The instructors moved about the room, looked over students' shoulders, asked questions that deepened student knowledge, noticed and helped when students had trouble, and managed student behaviors before any students became disruptive.

2. ***What organizational processes are found to be drivers of instructional/point of service quality at high performing centers?***

Several organizational processes were examined to determine whether they were drivers of instructional and point of service quality. Center intentionality was a key dimension that was examined. Center intentionality refers to the center's purpose and the degree to which the purpose is defined and appropriate resources provided. Among the 15 ACE programs in the sample, those with high center intentionality with respect to academic enrichment programming showed a strong focus on meeting academic objectives that were emphasized during the school day core classes. This was

particularly evident in the elementary centers and one middle school center that had developed curricula for their academic enrichment activities and consistently aligned the curricula to school-day learning objectives. Intentionality with respect to non-academic enrichment programming was uneven across all grade levels. Across the centers, there did not appear to be a shared understanding of what non-academic enrichment programming is. Numerous respondents referred to these activities as opportunities to relax, play games, and be physically active—thus, they were non-academic but did not provide opportunities to learn new knowledge and skills associated with a non-academic subject area or discipline.

Practices to monitor for improvement (that is, to improve the quality of activities) were evident in the majority of the centers in the site visit sample. Particularly strong were the centers that systematically approached monitoring of academic enrichment activities and modifying curricula and instructional approaches to better engage students and meet learning objectives. To an extent, this was more obvious among the elementary centers in the sample. In the secondary centers in the sample, where monitoring was assessed as high, attendance was typically the foremost factor in monitoring and making improvements in programming. Site coordinators and, in some cases, project directors considered student attendance and student motivation to participate—that is, were students interested in the activities? Were the sessions themselves appealing? Were there barriers to attendance that needed to be addressed? Responses to monitoring of this type included implementing different types of activities, particularly non-academic enrichment activities, based on student interest, and working with instructors to better align instructional methods with students' developmental needs. This type of monitoring seems appropriate in high schools where students have a high level of choice regarding participation.

Nearly all of the 15 centers showed a clear linkage to the school day. Close ties with the school were reflected in information transfers related to students and school learning objectives, availability of space, and administrative support.

Staff development and staff collaboration were other means of supporting program quality. Among the 15 centers in the 2012 site visit sample, staff development and opportunities for collaboration, particularly collaboration in scheduled sessions, were more available to instructors who were not certified teachers than those who were teachers during the school day. The school-day teachers had little time to meet formally, although they had some opportunities for sharing information on an informal basis. The scheduling constraints, a site coordinator said, made it difficult to improve instructional methods of staff in order to make them more engaging for youth. In this group of ACE programs, the elementary centers were more reliant on non-certified teachers (usually affiliated with the grantee organization) to instruct sessions than secondary centers, where activities were frequently instructed by certified teachers. Thus, it was elementary

centers in the sample—more than secondary centers—that provided opportunities for both staff development and collaboration for at least a majority of instructors. Providing opportunities for staff development and collaboration for certified teachers may be a persistent challenge for many afterschool programs. Sometimes, this is addressed through the professional development of site coordinators, which was extensive for the majority of the centers in the sample.

Finally, community connections were important to many of the centers, most of which had developed partnerships with organizations and agencies that resulted in expanded opportunities for programming, youth, and parents.

3. What innovative strategies and approaches can be identified from these centers that warrant replication and emulation?

Many innovative strategies and approaches from centers serving youth in elementary, middle, and high schools are presented in the Year Two Evaluation Report. They are too numerous to list in this summary chapter, but they may be referred to as models that might be replicated. It is important to note that although the type of activities that were observed and presented as exemplars are varied, they all exemplified the three instructional features described in Chapter 2: clarity of purpose, intentional use of time, and an active and interactive instructor.

4. What is the relationship between the characteristics of individual youth, center quality, and other center characteristics and levels of student participation in ACE programming?

Getting students to participate in ACE-funded programming consistently and on a sustained basis over time is a critical first step in enhancing the likelihood that students will achieve desired program outcomes. A hypothesis was that students enrolled in centers demonstrating higher quality would be more likely to participate in more total hours of programming, and for a longer duration, during the course of the 2010–11 school year (measured by the number of days between the first day of participation and the last day of participation).

In order to test this hypothesis, centers visited in 2011 were classified into different quality profile types based on observation and staff survey data collected during this period. Four profile types were defined based on observation data: 1) *high POS (point of service) quality*; 2) *low POS quality*; 3) *high APT-O/Academic Climate*; and 4) *high OCE.* It was expected that participation-related outcomes would be better in centers classified in the *high POS quality* cluster, because centers assigned to this cluster were characterized by high program quality on each of the three observation protocols employed: the PQA, the OCE, and the APT-O. In addition, centers assigned to the *low POS quality* cluster were expected to do less well on participation-related outcomes

because of lower levels of observed program quality, based on the same three protocols.

When multilevel models were run to explore these relationships, the hypothesized pattern of results was found: students enrolled in *high POS quality* centers participated in programming for a significantly longer duration during the 2010–11 school year, while students enrolled in *low POS quality* centers participated for a significantly shorter duration.

However, a similar result was not found when the total hours of ACE programming attendance was used as an outcome. Neither *high POS quality* nor *low POS quality* was predictive of this outcome.

Surveys completed by activity leaders asked respondents to report the extent to which they engaged in quality-related practices. From the analysis of these responses, two quality-related clusters were identified: (1) *lower reported quality* centers, and (2) *higher reported quality* centers. The hypothesis was that centers in the *higher reported quality* cluster would demonstrate better participation-related outcomes than centers enrolled in the *lower reported quality* cluster. When the total hours of participation in ACE programs was used as an outcome, the hypothesized relationships were found, suggesting that the implementation of higher quality practices was related to more hours of participation. However, implementation of these same practices was not found to be related to the duration of participation.

Overall, the approach adopted by the evaluation team to construct quality profiles based on observation and staff survey data did not yield variables that were consistently predictive of both the total number of hours of ACE participation and the duration of participation. However, each analysis resulted in significant findings that supported, at some level, the hypothesized relationship between program quality and participation outcomes.

5. Does the impact on student outcomes vary by relevant ACE program characteristics, including center quality?

One of the primary objectives of the ACE evaluation is to understand the relationship between participation in ACE programs and student improvement, particularly improvement on outcomes related to academic performance, school-day attendance, disciplinary incidents, and promotion rates. It is these outcomes toward which ACE programs are to direct their programming.

Using the observation and staff survey-based quality clusters employed to answer research question 4, a three-stage analytic strategy was developed to assess how program quality was related to the effect of participating in ACE programming on a variety of student outcomes associated with the 2010–11 programming period:

- TAKS-Reading/ELA and TAKS-Mathematics scores

- The number of school-day absences

- The number of disciplinary incidents

- Grade level promotion

It was hypothesized that centers demonstrating higher quality would have a stronger, positive effect on each of these outcomes, while lower quality centers would have a weaker effect. This hypothesis was borne out in the following findings:

- Centers assigned to the *high POS quality* cluster were found to have *higher* effect sizes in terms of supporting a decrease in disciplinary incidents than centers assigned to other quality types

- Centers assigned to the *high POS quality* cluster were found to have *higher* effect sizes in terms of supporting student grade promotion than centers assigned to other quality types

- Centers assigned to the *low POS quality* cluster were found to have *lower* effect sizes in terms of supporting student performance on the TAKS-Reading/ELA assessment than centers assigned to other quality types.

No relationship was found between higher quality programming and larger effect sizes in terms of program impact on TAKS-Mathematics scores and school-day absences.

6. ***To what extent do students who have higher participation rates demonstrate better academic and behavioral outcomes as compared with similar students who participate in 21st CCLC at lower levels?***

Analyses were undertaken to explore the extent to which students who attended programming for 60 days or more demonstrated better outcomes than similar students who participated in ACE programming for 30 to 59 days. Results from these analyses demonstrated that higher levels of attendance in ACE-funded programs were associated with higher levels of TAKS-Reading/ELA and Mathematics performance, reduced disciplinary incidents and school-day absences, and supported grade promotion. However, the effect of higher levels of attendance on TAKS-related outcomes was quite small. Higher levels of attendance in ACE programs proved to be more impactful in terms of reducing disciplinary incidents and school-day absences and particularly in supporting grade promotion. In the latter case, students attending 60 days or more had a rate of grade promotion 23% to 40% higher than students attending 30 to 59 days. This information provides ACE programs with additional understanding regarding how much additional program impact can be derived from keeping students engaged in ACE programming for 60 days or more.

7. *To what extent do students participating in services and activities funded by 21st CCLC demonstrate better achievement (along with other student outcomes) as compared to similar students not participating in the program?*

Analyses were undertaken to assess the impact of the ACE program on student outcomes by comparing ACE program participants with students who were similar in all observable ways except program attendance. Program participation was defined in two separate ways to create a sharper contrast between participants and non-participants. A group of "low" program participants was identified as having participated in at least 30 days of programming, and these students were compared to students who did not participate in any ACE programming. A group of "high" program participants was identified as having participated in at least 60 days of programming, and these students were also compared to students who did not participate in any ACE programming.

For both low- and high-attending students, ACE program participation had a statistically significant impact on TAKS scores, discipline, absences, and grade promotion for many of the grade levels relative to students that did not participate in the program.

- For Grades 9–12 only, ACE program participation was associated with higher TAKS scores in Reading/ELA and Mathematics.

- For Grades 6–12 only, ACE program participants had fewer disciplinary incidents than non-participating students.

- For low-attending students in Grades 4–5 and high-attending students in Grades 4–11, program participation was associated with fewer school-day absences.

- Program participation was associated with increased likelihood of grade promotion in Grades 6–11 for low-attending students and in Grades 4–11 for high-attending students.

The magnitude of each of these program effects was primarily in the small to moderate range, with the largest effects associated with reductions in school-day absences and grade promotion. However, for both low- and high-attending students, impacts on grade promotion were especially substantial in Grades 9–11. In this case, participation in an ACE program increased the likelihood of being promoted to the next grade level by 79% and 97%, respectively. The magnitude of this effect size is large.

In addition, while the impact of the program on each of these outcomes was found to be significant in the Interim Evaluation Report, the level of impact was significantly larger for students in both the low- and high-attending groups, demonstrating the importance of retaining students in programming beyond the 30-day threshold.

Primary Themes and Recommendations

Most of the findings outlined in this report can be distilled down to two primary themes, both of which can guide future evaluation work and inform how TEA approaches the design and delivery of training, technical assistance, and professional development for staff working in ACE-funded programs:

- *Program Quality Matters.* In some instances, measures of program quality employed during the evaluation to assess center functioning in the adoption of practices to support academic skill-building and youth development were related to both student participation in ACE programs and the achievement of student outcomes. In particular, measures of program quality were found to be related to levels and duration of participation in ACE programming, a decrease in disciplinary incidents, grade promotion, and performance on TAKS-Reading/ELA. Each of the measures employed to formulate quality estimates detail specific practices that program staff can adopt to support implementation of quality programming that supports academic skill-building and mastery and youth development among participating students. TEA should consider reviewing these measures to see how the practices articulated in each measure may further inform the formulation and delivery of training, professional development, and technical assistance oriented at supporting centers in improving the quality of their offerings. Each of the tools operationalize the features of high quality activities noted in this report, helping to ensure clarity of purpose and intentional use of time, and to provide markers for the types of behaviors that define an active and interactive instructor.

  In addition, states are increasingly working on the development and implementation of quality assessment tools and mechanisms, such as leading indicator systems, to feed data on program quality back to 21st CCLC programs to support quality improvement efforts. Most of these systems are predicated on supporting program adoption of specific quality-related practices. TEA is encouraged to review their current efforts in this regard to see what additional approaches could be implemented to get actionable quality data into the hands of program administrators and staff.

- *High School Students Especially Benefitted from ACE Participation.* Consistently, across each of the outcomes examined, program effects were found to be the greatest for high school students participating in ACE programming. (The 15 centers in the 2012 site visit sample showed that academic support was mainly available through tutorials that were highly aligned to the school day, which may be one reason for the benefits for high school students.) In some instances, these effects were quite large, particularly in relation to grade promotion, where students attending 60 days or more demonstrated a 97% better chance of being

promoted to the next grade level as opposed to similar students not enrolled in the program.

Such results warrant further examination into what attracts these older youth to ACE programming, and what keeps them participating for an extended period of time. Engaging in such an examination is of particular importance since efforts to identify the features of high quality offerings detailed in this report consistently demonstrated lower performance on the part of high school programs on key facets of program quality. This may suggest there is something unique about high school students that opt to participate in ACE programming that makes it particularly likely they will benefit from their participation in such programming. It is the hypothesis of the research team that student motivation plays a strong role in how high school students interact with and benefit from their participation in ACE programming. Understanding what role motivation plays in how high school students connect with afterschool programming would be especially helpful to TEA and the field in understanding how to reach out and engage older youth in a manner that is likely to lead to positive academic achievement outcomes.

The information in this report provides concrete evidence for, and examples of, how program quality can support the achievement of desired ACE program outcomes. What has not been measured or assessed to date is how youth change as a *direct consequence* of ACE program participation, and how these changes transfer outside the program to impact the types of student academic and behavioral outcomes examined in this report. These more immediate, *within-program outcomes* can fall within a wide spectrum of categories, including social emotional learning; critical thinking and decision-making; initiative and self-direction, and so on (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois, & Ji, 2011). In addition, acquisition of content-specific skills in areas like reading and mathematics are likely to be more targeted in nature within a given ACE program, both in terms of the area of emphasis within a given program and the student's unique area of need, particularly in relation to students falling below proficiency. As we move into Year 3 of the evaluation, we will focus more on understanding how programming impacts more immediate student skills and functioning that translate into desirable academic and behavioral outcomes.

More specifically, with the onset of the 2012–13 school year, TEA will be providing current ACE grantees that have demonstrated a capacity to provide higher quality programming with the opportunity to obtain a State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Supplemental Academic Support Grant to better identify and serve students who are particularly in need of help and support in developing STAAR-related skills. In many respects, the decision by the TEA to develop such a program provides a number of opportunities to structure the Year 3 21st CCLC evaluation in a way that

allows for a variety of research questions to be addressed that further build on and extend evaluation efforts conducted to date, including:

1. How are recipients of STAAR Supplemental Academic Support Grants using these funds to identify and recruit high need students into programming; what steps are being taken to align programming with the CSM adopted by TEA for the 21st CCLC program; and to what extent is programming being delivered in a manner that is consistent with afterschool quality frameworks?

2. What characteristics are associated with Supplemental Academic Support Grant-supported activities where there are high levels of youth-reported engagement?

3. What impact does programming funded by the STAAR Supplemental Academic Support Grants have on short-term program outcomes, like student task persistence, motivation, and academic self-efficacy?

Taking steps to answer these questions will provide additional valuable information on how the quality of programming funded by ACE leads to important changes in the knowledge and skills of youth that ultimately translate into academic achievement and success.