

# Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers

## 2012–13 and 2013–14 Combined Evaluation Report Executive Summary

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Prepared for: Texas Education Agency

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1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200  
Naperville, IL 60563-1486  
800-356-2735 • 630-649-6500  
[www.air.org](http://www.air.org)

## CREDITS

### **American Institutes for Research**

1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200

Naperville, IL 60563-1486

Phone: 630-649-6500

[www.air.org](http://www.air.org)

### **Gibson Consulting Group**

1221 South MOPAC Expressway, Suite 355

Austin, TX 78746

Phone: 512-328-0884

[www.gibsonconsult.com](http://www.gibsonconsult.com)

### **David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality**

301 W. Michigan Ave., Suite 200

Ypsilanti, MI 48197

Phone: 734-961-6900

[www.cypq.org](http://www.cypq.org)

### *Contributing Authors*

#### **American Institutes for Research**

Elizabeth Devaney

Neil Naftzger

Feng Liu

Janet Levings

Sarah Cristobal

Matt Vinson

Michael Hutson

Mary Nistler

#### **Gibson Consulting Group**

Joseph Shields

Shana Shaw

#### **David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality**

Barbara Hillaker

Samantha Hallman

### *Submitted to*

#### **Texas Education Agency**

1701 North Congress Avenue

Austin, Texas 78701-1494

Phone: 512-463-9734

# 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, when young people attend high-quality programs on a regular basis, improvement occurs in a variety of academic outcomes, including attendance, discipline referrals, achievement tests, and grades (Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Kauh, 2011; Miller, 2003; Naftzger, Manzeske, Nistler, & Swanlund, 2013). Likewise, these programs can have an effect on social and emotional outcomes as well, particularly when the programs are focused explicitly on developing those skills (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, attempts to provide academic enrichment opportunities during nonschool hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and/or low-performing schools.<sup>1</sup> The federal grants are awarded to state education agencies, which, in turn, make competitive awards to eligible grantees to support afterschool and summer learning programs.<sup>2</sup> In July 2002, the federal government awarded Texas Education Agency (TEA) \$24.5 million to fund TEA's first cohort of 21st CCLC grantees for the 2003–04 school year. This and subsequent federal funding resulted in 297 grants being awarded in Texas throughout eight funding cycles.<sup>3</sup> All centers funded by the Texas 21st CCLC program, known in Texas as the *Afterschool Centers on Education* (ACE),<sup>4</sup> 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.

In 2012, TEA created a supplemental grant program as part of its 21st CCLC program initiative, with funding beginning in the 2012–13 school year and continuing through the 2013–14 school year. This new grant program, called the *STAAR [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness] Pilot Project* (SPP), was designed to provide current 21st CCLC grantees with additional funding to provide academic intervention in core subjects and help students at risk for academic failure to meet or exceed academic

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, review the authorizing legislation as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001), Title IV, Part B see <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg55.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Grantees include local education agencies, nonprofit organizations, for-profit organizations, institutions of higher education, and city or county government agencies.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

standards. Emphasis was placed on helping students improve performance on the state's new assessment of student learning, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Grantees were awarded competitive grants to establish SPP programming in selected centers where they already had established ACE-only programs.<sup>5</sup>

Consistent with the requirements for ACE programs, the grantee agencies were required to develop SPP programs that were aligned with the ACE program's Critical Success Model (CSM), specifically the following:

- Innovative instructional techniques based on research and best practices be implemented.
- Adult advocates support student involvement in school.
- Preassessment and postassessment data be used to identify student needs and provide targeted interventions.
- Professional development be provided to staff to increase their effectiveness.

In November 2012, 15 21st CCLC grantee agencies were awarded SPP supplemental grants through a competitive process and established SPP programs in 46 centers where they also were implementing ACE programs. The grants were continued into the 2013–14 school year, but two Cycle 5 grantees ended their ACE programs at the conclusion of the 2012–13 school year, so only 13 grantees were included in the 2013–14 evaluation.

## **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 Texas ACE program, geared toward two primary research objectives TEA established for the project:

- **Research Objective 1:** Identify and describe innovative strategies and approaches implemented by successful 21st CCLC programs.

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<sup>5</sup> *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 they 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 2:** Conduct a statewide assessment of 21st CCLC programs, operations, participation in the program, and student achievement outcomes.

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

- There were three instructional approaches 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 include 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 state assessment scores in reading/English language arts and mathematics performance, reduced disciplinary incidents and school-day absences, and supported grade promotion. In addition, a high level of point-of-service (POS) quality was associated with greater impact on reduced disciplinary incidents and grade promotion.
- For high school students, participation in an ACE program increased the likelihood of being promoted to the next grade level by 97 percent. 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)

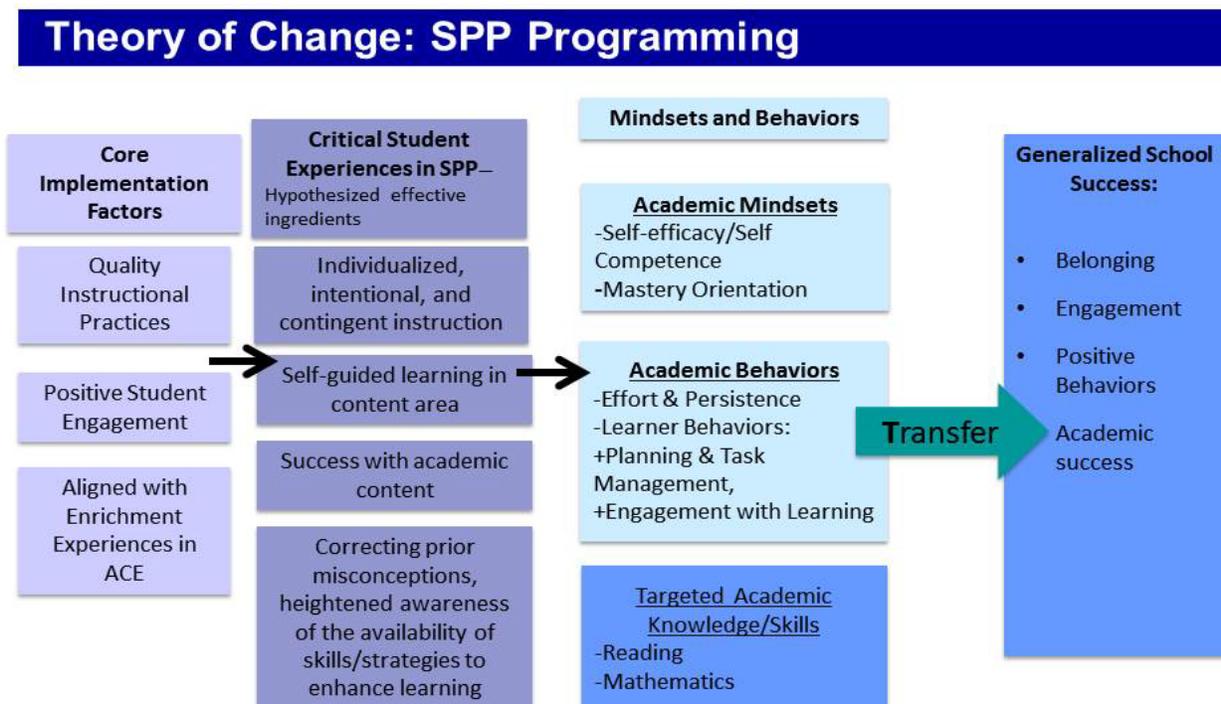
The introduction of the SPP program led to a change in the evaluation focus, although the scope remains the same. Beginning with the 2012–13 evaluation, AIR focused its activities and questions specifically on the SPP program as it compared with traditional ACE programming.

### Linking Quality to Outcomes Through a Theory of Change

As noted previously, program and activity quality are expected to affect student engagement and, thus, student learning. Research supports the SPP theory of change that was developed by the evaluation team in partnership with TEA (Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Kataoka & Vandell, 2013; Kauh, 2011; Smith et al., 2012).

The SPP theory of change, depicted in Figure ES1, articulates the key facets of SPP implementation that contribute to the experiences youth may have in the program. 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 ES1. SPP Theory of Change



## Research Questions

The evaluation of the SPP programs had six research questions (RQs) that continue to support the broader statewide evaluation objectives of impact and implementation and are designed to explore the validity of the SPP theory of change presented previously. Questions focus on describing the similarities and differences between ACE-only programs and SPP programs, particularly differences associated with program operations, activities, and participating students; examining the quality of SPP programming, variations in quality across programs, and the program operations that SPP grantees have implemented to support quality programming; and learning how and the extent to which the SPP programming impacts participating students. The six RQs that guided the 2012–13 and 2013–14 evaluation activities are as follows:

- **RQ 1:** How does SPP programming compare with ACE-only programming in centers administered by the same grantee?
- **RQ 2:** How do students participating in SPP programming differ from students who participate in ACE-only programming?
- **RQ 3:** How does the quality of delivery differ between SPP and ACE-only programming?
- **RQ 4:** What instructional and administrative practices lead to high student engagement?
- **RQ 5:** How engaged are young people in SPP and ACE-only programming? What is the relationship between quality of delivery and student engagement?
- **RQ 6:** What is the impact of SPP programming on students' academic mindsets and behaviors? How does this compare with ACE-only students?

## A Summary of Preliminary Findings

The evaluation explores this theory of change by examining program quality, staff experiences in the program, youth mindsets and behaviors, and school-related outcomes. The preliminary findings across RQs are as follows. Some RQs were addressed only partially at this time because of the intention to conduct more rigorous impact analyses in 2014–15. The 2012–13 and 2013–14 evaluations were intended to be more descriptive and exploratory in nature in order to inform additional analyses in 2014–15.

**RQ 1.** How does SPP programming compare with ACE-only programming in centers administered by the same grantee?

Overall, findings from 2012–13 and 2013–14 indicate that **SPP programs were more academic in nature than were ACE-only programs**. This finding is what 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. Specific findings that contributed to this overall conclusion include the following:

- *SPP programs hired more certified teachers.* In both years of study, a far higher percentage of SPP activity leaders (85 percent in 2012–13 and 81 percent in 2013–14) than ACE-only activity leaders (51 percent in 2012–13 and 42 percent in 2013–14) were credentialed teachers.
- *SPP students spent more time in academic activities.* Students participating in SPP activities spent much more of their time in academic activities—particularly in academic enrichment activities and tutoring (82 percent in 2012–13 and 66 percent in 2013–14 for SPP students compared with 45 percent in 2012–13 and 33 percent in 2013–14 for ACE-only students). Compared with ACE-only students, SPP students spent very little time in recreational activities (8 percent versus 33 percent in 2012–13 and 25 percent versus 33 percent in 2013–14). Students participating in SPP activities also spent much less of their time in homework help sessions compared to students participating in ACE-only activities. In 2013–14, SPP students began participating in recreation programs and other nonacademic enrichment to a larger degree, but there was still a substantial difference between the participation of the two types of students.
- *SPP activities used smaller groups and longer activities to support academic learning.* SPP activities typically met in smaller groups than did ACE-only activities, and SPP activity leaders served fewer students (on average six fewer) per week compared to ACE-only activity leaders. In addition, on average, SPP academic activities were 90 minutes long, compared with 60 minutes for ACE-only academic activities.
- *SPP and ACE-only activity leaders used different instructional strategies.* SPP activity leaders were more likely than ACE-only activity leaders to plan activities that explicitly promoted skill building related to state standards. They were also more likely than ACE activity leaders to use instructional strategies that explicitly addressed content knowledge—the use of computer-based learning programs, direct instruction, and the review and practice of concepts learned during the school day.

**RQ 2.** How do students participating in SPP programming differ from students who participate in ACE-only programming?

Analysis of student assessment data and youth survey data revealed that the students participating in SPP programming tended to be more academically at risk and less proficient in key academic mindsets and behaviors<sup>6</sup> 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. Key differences between the two types of students were as follows:

- *SPP students had higher academic needs than did ACE-only students.* Students who attended SPP programs in 2012–13 appeared to have higher academic

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<sup>6</sup> Students were measured on the academic mindsets and behaviors through a survey given at program onset and again the spring after program completion. The survey measured competencies such as *Effort and Persistence*, *Learner Behaviors*, *Engagement*, and *Sense of Competence as a Learner*.

needs than did ACE-only students, as shown by their performance levels on the 2012 STAAR assessment. Specifically, between 19 percent and 36 percent fewer SPP students than ACE-only students met satisfactory proficiency levels on the various STAAR exams in 2012.

- *SPP students scored lower on the Mindsets and Behaviors Survey than did ACE-only students.* SPP students at all grade levels and across almost all constructs in both years scored lower than ACE-only students did on the Mindsets and Behaviors Survey at the program outset. In several cases, those differences were statistically significant. ACE-only students appeared, in particular, to be at a significantly higher level at the start of programming on constructs measured on the survey, including *Learner Behaviors* (at the K–3 and 4–12 grade levels) and *Academic Performance* (at the K–3 level).

**RQ 3.** How does the quality of delivery differ between SPP and ACE-only programming?

The evaluation team conducted analyses of the overall quality of both program types and found that **SPP programs and ACE-only programs had roughly the same level of overall quality.** The two types of programs were not the same, however, and the evaluation team found that **activity leaders differed in their administrative practices in several key ways:**

- *SPP activity leaders had more Internal Communication.* Activity leaders for SPP activities reported higher levels of *Internal Communication* than did those who led ACE-only program activities.
- *SPP activity leaders were more likely than ACE-only activity leaders to report Program Challenges.* The challenges they cited most frequently were inconsistent program attendance, student behavioral issues, and low levels of student interest in the activities. Challenges with technology also were noted.
- *SPP activity leaders focused on academic skills.* SPP activity leaders were more likely than ACE-only activity leaders to report implementing programs and activities focused on specific academic skills, particularly those connected to the state standards, and to direct students in *Academic Learning Activities* more frequently than were ACE-only activity leaders.

These differences, although not directly related to the point of service, affect the quality of program delivery. The last finding, in particular, is important because it connects to other findings in the report related to levels of youth engagement in explicitly academic programming.

**RQ 4.** What instructional and administrative practices lead to high student engagement?

By reviewing scores from observations of youth engagement, as well as youth responses to an engagement survey, and connecting those with observed and reported activity leader practices, the evaluation team was able to conclude that **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.**

The specific findings that supported this overall conclusion include the following:

- *Generalized Learning Strategies were associated with engagement.* SPP programs had two different approaches associated with curricular content. One was a *Learning Strategies* approach, which emphasized general learning strategies that were applicable across different content areas. A second common approach was a *Skills-Building* approach, which emphasized specific skills associated with a subject area. The *Learning Strategies* approach was associated with higher levels of quality than any other approach. That, combined with the findings in this report connecting quality and engagement, suggests that students may be more engaged when participating in activities using a *Learning Strategies* approach.
- *A combination of face-to-face and computer-based instruction was most engaging to students.* SPP activities also used two modes of delivery: computer-based delivery, in which students typically worked individually on an academic skills computer program, and face-to-face delivery, in which students worked mainly in small-group sessions facilitated by an activity leader. The majority of SPP programs used a combination of computer-based and face-to-face delivery modes. The observations of the SPP program activities, as well as the student engagement survey, indicated that engagement levels were higher among students in activities that combined computer-based and face-to-face delivery modes than among students in activities using only a single mode of delivery. Reported engagement was lowest among students in only computer-based activities.
- *Low staff-to-youth ratio was associated with youth engagement.* A low staff-to-youth ratio was associated with higher levels of youth engagement during observations of youth engagement.

**RQ 5.** How engaged are young people in SPP and ACE-only programming? What is the relationship between quality of delivery and student engagement?

An analysis of 2013–14 quality and engagement data showed that 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.** The analysis of these two types of data also revealed that **overall, higher quality programs engaged students at higher levels, but in SPP programs, the relationship between program quality and youth-reported engagement was weaker, a finding that is hypothesized to be related to the provision of higher levels of academic content in SPP programs.** More specifically, the evaluation team found the following:

- *The Learning Strategies approach was associated with higher levels of quality than was any other approach.* The three SPP activities with the highest Program Quality Assessment (PQA) scores used a *Learning Strategies* approach for which there was an established curriculum.

- *SPP programs were consistently associated with lower levels of youth-reported engagement.* It is hypothesized that this finding is related to the provision of higher levels of academic content in these programs.
- *Youth development principles were associated with youth engagement.* SPP and ACE-only program activities that employed youth development principles like those outlined in the PQA (e.g., engaging youth in activities that lead to a tangible product, offering youth choice, and providing opportunities for reflection) had higher levels of youth self-reported engagement.

**RQ 6.** What is the impact of SPP programming on students' academic mindsets and behaviors? How does this compare with ACE-only students?

Findings related to this RQ were somewhat inconclusive, partly because the 2013–14 analysis was preliminary in nature at the time of this report. However, **there appears to be a small but positive impact of both SPP programming and potentially ACE-only programming on many of the measured academic mindsets and behaviors.** Again, this is important because improved mindsets and behaviors ultimately can lead to improved academic outcomes according to the SPP theory of change. Findings contributing to this conclusion include the following:

- *The 2012–13 results showed growth on the Academic Mindsets and Behaviors Survey.* The 2012–13 impact analysis showed some significant growth for students participating in SPP programming on the academic mindsets and behaviors measured on the student survey, including *Effort and Persistence* and *Learner Behaviors* for Grades K–3 and on *Effort and Persistence* for Grades 4–12. However, the amount of time between pre- and postsurveys was very short because SPP programming ran for only one semester in 2012–13, so students took the pretest in January and the posttest in April.
- *A Learning Strategies approach may support improvement in academic mindsets and behaviors.* Results suggest that students in Grades K–3 who participated in SPP programming using a *Learning Strategies* approach demonstrated a significantly<sup>7</sup> higher level of improvement on the Academic Mindsets and Behaviors Survey on *Effort and Persistence* and *Learning Behaviors* than did students in Grades K–3 who participated in SPP programming using a *Skills-Building* approach.
- *The 2013–14 results on the Academic Mindsets and Behaviors Survey were mixed.* In 2013–14, the analyses considered pre-post change in scores on the Academic Mindsets and Behaviors Survey for both types of students. Changes were positive and significant from fall to spring for both SPP and ACE-only students in Grades K–3 on all of the areas measured by the survey. The changes

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<sup>7</sup> Statistically significant differences are defined in this report as those with a *p* value of 0.05 or below, which means that there is 5 percent probability (or less) of randomly observing a difference of this size or greater if no difference exists. A moderately significant difference would yield a *p* value less than 0.1, where there would be a 10 percent probability of observing a difference of this size by chance. Essentially, these two terms help to illustrate the degree of confidence the research team has in the findings.

from pre- to posttest were higher for ACE-only students, indicating that the program may have had a greater impact on ACE-only students' mindsets and behaviors than on SPP students'. For Grades 4-12, the analysis showed no improvement on the constructs for SPP students and a decrease in the mindsets and behaviors for ACE-only students—that is, their scores declined from fall to spring. These findings are inconclusive and should be viewed with extreme caution. The evaluation team has not conducted the more rigorous statistical analysis needed to answer some of the questions these preliminary findings raise. Right now they simply point to an interesting finding worth exploring in more detail in the 2014–15 analysis.

Taken together, these findings begin to tell a story about the validity of the SPP theory of change, a story that will be completed in 2014–15 during the final year of this evaluation. Interestingly, the findings from the Years 3 and 4 analyses indicate that the theory of change may be applicable to both SPP and ACE-only programs—that is, overall, the 2012–13 and 2013–14 analyses confirm that SPP and ACE-only programs are delivering activities that collectively are of average quality but that range from average to high quality and are roughly the same across both program types. This is an important first step in the theory of change. Students also report engagement when youth development practices are present, when the delivery is both face-to-face and computer based, and when activity leaders used a generalized learning approach rather than specific skill building. This finding was true across both types of programming. The findings also suggest a connection between quality and engagement, the first relationship posited in the theory of change. This finding was true for programs overall but was stronger in ACE-only programs. Finally, the evaluation findings show some evidence that both SPP and ACE-only programming had an impact on the mindsets and behaviors of some participants. So far these effects are small (2012–13) and inconclusive (2013–14) but show enough positive trends to warrant further study, particularly to understand better the progression from quality programming to engaged youth to outcomes related to mindsets, beliefs, and school performance.

## **Next Steps**

The findings described are important for two reasons: (1) the 2012–13 findings were used to improve on methodology and inform 2013–14 data collection, and (2) the 2013–14 findings will be used to inform planned analyses for 2014–15. Each of these data uses is described in greater detail in the following sections.

## **Methodological Changes to the Evaluation**

The 2012–13 evaluation procedures provided valuable experience, on which the evaluation team drew to improve 2013–14 data collection, including the following:

- The evaluation was conducted during a very short time in spring 2013. During 2013–14, evaluation activities spanned the full school year to allow more time for change to occur among students and to ease the burden on sites by having collection periods spread out.

- Analysis of the validity and reliability of the student survey instruments revealed that two scales on the Grade 4–12 student survey were not functioning well. The evaluation team removed those scales from the survey and replaced them with three new scales focused on a student’s *Sense of Competence as a Learner*. In addition, the Grade K–3 survey had several items for which it was too easy for staff to rate the items highly. Those items were removed from the 2013–14 survey. Finally, a new scale was added to the Grade K–3 survey focused on academic performance and intended to be completed by school-day teachers.

Likewise, findings from the 2013–14 evaluation will inform 2014–15 evaluation plans. For example, the evaluation team will use preliminary findings from 2013–14 about quality and engagement to inform planned analyses related to the SPP theory of change. In particular, using 2013–14 data, the team will continue to explore how quality influences student engagement and what the mediating effects of engagement and academic mindsets and behaviors are on key outcomes. Much of the data and information presented in this combined, two-year report are preliminary and offer a first look at the SPP program and how it compares to the ACE-only programs in terms of program delivery, quality, students, and staff. In the coming year of the evaluation, the evaluation team will explore these findings in greater detail and conclude the exploration of the SPP theory of change begun with this report in order to provide recommendations for program implementation and professional development for staff involved in the programming.