Executive Summary

Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education

Qualitative Study of Perspectives on Vision, Mission, and Goals and School Community Engagement (2023–24)

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Introduction

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program addresses the needs of students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE), funded by the federal 21st CCLC grant program, provides students with opportunities for a enrichment, tutoring, and a broad array of other services, programs, and activities. These activities are designed to enhance students' academic, social, and emotional personal well-being and cultivate skills and interests that will help them become college and career ready.

As a condition of receiving federal 21st CCLC funding for this program, the TEA is required to conduct a statewide evaluation of the Texas ACE program. TEA has contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct this evaluation, with work starting in early 2022 and continuing through summer 2026. The evaluation will comprise a series of data collection activities and attendant reports covering program characteristics, program implementation, exploration of the relationships between program characteristics and student outcomes, and program impact.

The focus of this report is on program implementation related to (a) vision, mission, and goals and (b) school community engagement. The specific content of this report derives primarily from activity leader and student focus group data collected during nine site visits in spring 2024 (seven at centers associated with Texas ACE grant Cycle 11 and two at centers associated with Texas ACE grant Cycle 12). These topics were also addressed in an earlier report produced by AIR for TEA, titled _Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Descriptive Study of Site Coordinator Perspectives on Program Goals, Recruitment, Activity Provision, School-Day Linkages, and District Support (2022–23)_ (Vinson et al., 2024). The content of the earlier report, published in June 2024, was based on a site coordinator survey conducted in spring 2023, along with 20 site coordinator interviews conducted in fall 2023. The nine sites visited by AIR in spring 2024 were selected based on findings from the fall 2023 site coordinator interviews. This report is therefore a second installment and extensio n of the first report, building on the same themes. Key findings, best practices, and recommendations from this report are presented below.

Findings Highlights

PROGRAM GOALS AND ATTAINMENT

- Activity leaders from all centers emphasized providing academic support, particularly in enhancing mathematics and literacy skills (all from nine sites), and offering enrichment activities to enhance students' academic skills and confidence (10 from six sites). In addition, they aim to provide a safe program environment and reduce school-day behavior incidents (five from three sites).

- To develop program goals, activity leaders employ data-driven strategies, including the analysis of academic data (eight from four sites) and collecting feedback from school leaders (four from three sites) and students (seven from five sites).

- Activity leaders reported achievement toward program goals is accomplished through programming flexibility (16 from four sites), fostering a positive program culture (six from three sites), and utilizing targeted support and positive reinforcement (four from two sites).

They stated that building relationships with students has yielded progress toward achieving program goals (16 from seven sites).

- Activity leaders reported space constraints (all from three sites) and ineffective onboarding for new staff (all from four sites) as the primary barriers to achieving their program goals.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

- Staff recruitment methods vary, with many recruited by site coordinators (seven from four sites) or through school meetings (five from three sites), word of mouth (three from three sites), and third-party recruiters (three from one site).

- Activity leaders (10 from five sites) emphasized their passion for working with students and making a positive impact as motivation to work at a Texas ACE.

- Activity leaders described recruiting students in need of academic support (as identified through analysis of school data) (seven from four sites) and through personal interactions with students (six from four sites).

- Students said they were recruited by school-day teachers (seven from six sites) or Texas ACE staff (three from two sites) or were encouraged to sign up by their parents or guardians, who heard about the program through the school (three from two sites).

- Activity leaders emphasized that building meaningful relationships with students (seven from four sites), fostering a safe space (two from two sites), and offering students voice and choice (five from four sites), including leadership roles and activities of interest, creates a sense of belonging within their Texas ACE community.

- Activity leaders (five from four sites) stressed the importance of staff stability as a key condition for staff-student relationship building.

ACTIVITY PLANNING AND DELIVERY

- Activity planning varied by center. Most activity leaders (all from six sites) indicated developing activities collaboratively among activity leaders and with their site coordinators. Some activity leaders (all from two sites) modify site coordinator–developed lesson plans to meet individual student needs. In one case, activity leaders (all from one site) individually develop lesson plans, lending their subject-matter expertise.

- Activity leaders reported that site coordinators support activity planning by securing materials (all from two sites), providing preplanned curricula (all from four sites), and reviewing lesson plans (all from two sites).

- Activity leaders reported that site coordinators foster relationships with school-day staff (all from four sites) and attend meetings to discuss student progress and needs (all from two sites). They bring those updates back to activity leaders to help tailor program activities.

- In some cases, students take on leadership roles in activities (five from three sites) and administrative tasks (five from four sites) to support the program. Students described assisting with preparing materials, tracking attendance, running errands, and suggesting and planning activities.

PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF SUPPORT

- Most activity leaders (eight from three sites) reported feeling valued and appreciated by the school community.

- Activity leaders appreciate recognition (one from one site) from their site coordinators and receiving feedback that they are doing a good job (three from one site).

- Activity leaders (three from three sites) who reported feeling overwhelmed due to classroom management challenges appreciated their site coordinators stepping in to help or offer suggestions to improve.

- Activity leaders expressed a need for more staff (two from one site), better onboarding (all from four sites), and increased awareness among school-day teachers about the Texas ACE program (two from two sites).

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

- Students enjoy the variety of activities offered, including sports (eight from five sites), esports (six from four sites), arts and crafts (five from four sites), and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (four from three sites). They value the autonomy to choose activities (eight from four sites) and the opportunity to work in different group sizes (pairs, small groups, whole group).

- Students (five from four sites) appreciate the opportunity to participate in hands-on activities.

- Some students expressed dissatisfaction with repetitive homework and a lack of hands-on activities (three from one sites). However, students from multiple centers (11 from five sites) reported enjoying all the activities offered, without any particular program dislikes.

- Students (six from three sites) who reported experiencing barriers to participation in Texas ACE said various personal commitments, such as sports practices, family obligations, and other activities, interfere with their ability to fully participate in the Texas ACE program. These additional responsibilities often cause students to arrive late, leave early, or miss parts of the program altogether.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF PERFORMANCE AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN TEXAS ACE

- Students spoke positively about activity leaders, citing their helpfulness (10 from seven sites), organization (one from one site), and inclusion efforts (three from three sites).

- Students (12 from eight sites) described feeling comfortable providing feedback to staff.

- Students (12 from six sites) found activities beneficial for improving their performance in subjects such as reading and mathematics.

- Students described developing new skills while attending Texas ACE, such as social and academic skills (eight from four sites) and skills learned through enrichment activities (five from three sites), such as art and cooking.

- Survey results from secondary students (n = 17) highlighted the positive effect of Texas ACE on making new friends (100% of survey respondents), learning skills relevant to school (94%) and the future (88%), and boosting confidence (88%) and self-awareness (94%).

Best Practices

PRIOR FINDING

In the first report, establishing **effective communication was identified as a foundational best practice**. Site coordinators interviewed in fall 2023 stressed the importance of establishing effective communication strategies with stakeholders, noting they include school district staff, school-day staff, students, caregivers, and community partners. They also emphasized the importance of regularly assessing the effectiveness of communication strategies relative to each stakeholder type. With effective communication, it is easier to recruit and retain students, establish linkages to the school day, obtain and interpret data, form activities relevant to student needs and interests, and establish buy-in from the school and stakeholders.

ALIGNED FINDING – CURRENT REPORT

Centers that regularly sought feedback from participants said they were better able to tailor their activities to meet the interests and needs of their communities. Activity leaders reported that this continuous feedback loop contributed to improved student retention and stronger stakeholder buy-in, as participants felt more involved in shaping the program. The findings of this report therefore support and reinforce effective communication as a foundational practice.

PRIOR FINDING

A critical finding from the first report is the importance of **aligning program goals with the broader objectives of the 21st CCLC program while also addressing the specific needs of individual students, schools, and districts**. Such alignment helps school-day staff understand how Texas ACE programming is relevant to their work and facilitates continued communication and information sharing.

ALIGNED FINDING – CURRENT REPORT

During the spring 2024 site visits, activity leaders across multiple centers emphasized a focus on academic support, particularly in mathematics and literacy, which aligns with district priorities aimed at improving student performance. At the same time, there is a need to balance academic goals with student preferences for enrichment activities, such as STEM, esports, and arts. As suggested by the activity leaders included in the site visit focus groups, this balance is critical to maintaining student engagement and retention while still fulfilling the program's academic objectives.

PRIOR FINDING

Active listening is essential for creating high-quality, engaging activities. Site coordinators need to understand and consider stakeholder interests (including those of youth participants and activity leaders) while also considering overall program goals. Discovering activity leaders' interests can help provide ideas for enrichment activities; leaders who find their activities personally interesting will more effectively convey that interest and excitement to participants.

ALIGNED FINDING – CURRENT REPORT

Program flexibility emerged as a key factor in maintaining student engagement. Activity leaders across multiple centers highlighted the importance of adjusting programming based on student feedback and needs. Programs allowing students more autonomy in choosing activities, particularly enrichment options, are likely to benefit from higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction. That said, program flexibility is often constrained by operational challenges, including staff shortages and space constraints.

PRIOR FINDING

One of the conclusions of the first report was that **site coordinators who effectively communicate with school-day staff are also more likely to obtain the data they need and discuss it with knowledgeable school-day staff**. This kind of side-by-side learning is essential for interpreting and using school-day data effectively and is a powerful tool for planning activities and establishing stakeholder buy-in.

ALIGNED FINDING– CURRENT REPORT

During the spring 2024 site visits, the use of data to guide program development was consistently reported as a key strategy. Activity leaders said they frequently use school-day performance data, such as grades and attendance records, to target academic interventions where they are most needed. This data-driven approach ensures program goals remain aligned with student needs and allows for timely adjustments to improve outcomes. Activity leaders said they also use student surveys and informal verbal feedback to shape enrichment activities. Programs that integrated both qualitative and quantitative data into their planning processes demonstrated adaptability and were equipped to address emerging challenges and changing student preferences.

Recommendations

- **Share Promising Practices with Centers.** As recommended in AIR's first report on vision, mission, goals, and engagement, it may be useful for TEA program staff to discuss the best practices identified in this report, along with those presented in the first report, with a broader audience of Texas ACE grant- or center-level staff (e.g., project directors, site coordinators, and frontline staff). Such discussion will confirm or amend these best practices and promote their implementation.

- **Strengthen Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Development.** Staffing remains a key challenge for Texas ACE programs. Through targeted training, TEA could support grantees in building recruitment pipelines with local universities and community organizations to attract qualified staff, especially in high-demand areas such as STEM and arts. Grantees may also find offering incentives such as certifications or career advancement opportunities further enhance the recruitment of staff who are invested in this work. Additionally, rigorous onboarding could ensure staff are well prepared. Setting clear role definitions and providing professional development opportunities may also improve the likelihood of retention, helping to create sustainable staffing models for long-term success.

- **Increase Student Engagement through Leadership, Choice, and Feedback Opportunities.** Student feedback highlights the importance of autonomy and choice in maintaining engagement. Increasing student leadership roles (e.g., allowing them to co-create or lead activities) gives students more control over their program experience, improving engagement and retention, particularly among older participants. Such leadership opportunities also foster skill-building, as well as a sense of agency (Larson & Angus, 2011). Additionally, regularly gathering student feedback through surveys and focus groups helps ensure activities remain relevant and responsive to student interests. To boost student engagement and generally support program quality, TEA could therefore promote expanded leadership, choice, and feedback opportunities in Texas ACE programs by establishing opportunities for peer learning so grantees can hear how others have done this successfully. This would presumably be most helpful for new grant or center coordinator staff.

- **Enhance Communication with Stakeholders. Building effective communication with key stakeholders (school administrators, adult family members, partners, etc.) is foundational to Texas ACE success.** TEA's role in building such communication would be indirect and somewhat limited, but TEA may be able to support Texas ACE programs in these efforts by providing communication guidance organized around stakeholder groups. Such guidance could include real-world examples of communication approaches, along with tips concerning how to tell program stories with qualitative and quantitative data. Given the centrality of communication as reported through interviews and subsequent focus group discussions, helping programs build capacity in this area seems like a useful training priority.