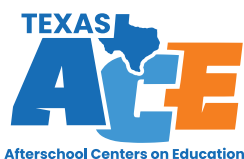# Executive Summary

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)

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- Respondents to the site coordinator survey were asked to choose their top-three program goals from a predefined list. The most selected goal was to "raise the academic performance levels of all participating students" (62%), followed by "support the social and emotional development of students" (61%).

- Site coordinators were also asked to indicate what they thought their school principal's top-three goals were for the program. Seventy-three percent said "raising the academic performance levels of all participating students" was a top goal, whereas 46% said "supporting the social and emotional development of students" was a top goal.

- Two-thirds of survey respondents said that they focused recruitment efforts "a lot" on students in need of support in mathematics or reading language arts (RLA). About the same proportion said that they focused recruitment on students in need of "a safe place to be after school" (64%), whereas 53% said that they focused "a lot" on students needing support for "developing social and emotional skills."

- In terms of how programs recruit, 62% said that they rely "a lot" on students, whereas 56% said that they rely "a lot" on school-day teachers. Activity leaders were also commonly cited (52% "a lot"), followed by parents or adult family members at 39%.

- About half of survey respondents (51%) said that half or more of their program's activities were led by a school-day teacher. Among coordinators reporting less than half of activities led by a school-day teacher, 36% said that they did not have procedures in place for program staff to meet regularly with school-day staff to review the academic progress of individual students.

- Most of the interviewed site coordinators (14) reported having access to the needed school-day data. They mentioned primarily accessing disciplinary, academic, and positive behavioral intervention and support data.

- Nearly all site coordinators responding to the survey (96%) said that feedback from students was "very important" for developing content for activities. About 95% said that program staff discussion was also "very important."

- Site coordinators associated with suburban programs were more likely than coordinators associated with other locales to say that the use of the results of a program quality assessment tool (e.g., Youth Program Quality Assessment) was "very important" for activity design (82%, compared with 69% for city, 58% for town, and 65% for rural site coordinators).

- A majority of site coordinators responding to the survey indicated that the school district supports their program through the provision of building space (81%). The next highest supports reported were staffing (62%), data analysis or analytic support (62%), and transportation (60%). The least-reported type of district-provided support was funding, with only 33% of site coordinators saying they receive this support.

- Compared with site coordinators associated with school-district grants, coordinators associated with non-school-district grants were less likely to report district supports in terms of curricula provision (30% vs. 54%), supplies (33% vs. 55%), funding (17% vs. 42%), technical assistance (TA) and professional development (36% vs. 69%), transportation (48% vs. 66%), data provision (47% vs. 56%), data analyses or analytic support (50% vs. 68%), or staffing (50% vs. 68%).

Establish Effective Communication Strategies

Site coordinators interviewed 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. This is a foundational best practice; 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.

Build a Visible School Presence

Recruitment and retention rely on effective communication but also require visibility within the school or schools served. This could involve displays, advertisements, meetings, and similar activities. Working with school counselors or athletic coaches may also help recruitment and retention.

Show School-Day Staff How Program Goals Support School Goals

As part of effective communication, it is important to convey how the program's vision and mission align with and support school and district goals. This helps school-day staff understand how Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) programming is relevant to their work and facilitates continued communication and information sharing.

Data Literacy

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.

Provide Engaging Activities

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 as leaders who find their activities personally interesting will more effectively convey that interest and excitement to participants.

Establish District Support

Site coordinators who were interviewed said that attending district meetings or setting up virtual meetings with the superintendent can be effective for building district support. As part of this communication, however, the site coordinator needs to show how the program can support overall district goals. Using data to demonstrate how Texas ACE participants are being supported can be an effective and efficient way to do this.

Recommended Next Steps

1. It may be useful for Texas Education Agency (TEA) program staff to discuss the best practices material provided in this report with a broader audience of Texas ACE grant- or center-level staff (e.g., project directors and frontline staff). Discussions may confirm, clarify, correct, or otherwise detail specific best practices, as outlined in this report, and foster the sharing of best practices among centers.

2. TEA may want to investigate the extent to which centers not associated with school-district grants have difficulty obtaining school-district support, as well as the extent to which these centers have access to alternative resources not asked about as part of the survey or interview.

3. In keeping with previous reports submitted to TEA by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR), staffing challenges emerged as a theme. TEA may want to continue exploring solutions to frontline staff-related challenges to help programs identify workable solutions.

The **Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program** addresses the needs of students who attend schools struggling in their efforts to fully support students, located largely in communities that experience poverty. Texas ACE, funded by the federal 21st CCLC Program, provides a wide array of academic enrichment and youth development activities during non-school hours and during the summer. These activities are designed to enhance students' academic, social, and emotional 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, TEA is required to conduct a statewide evaluation of Texas ACE. TEA has contracted with AIR to conduct this evaluation, with work starting in early 2022 and expected to continue 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.

This report presents survey and interview data concerning program characteristics and implementation. The surveys were collected from Cycle 10 and 11 centers during the spring of 2023. At that time, the Texas ACE program was operating at **701 centers** (350 Cycle 10 and 351 Cycle 11) that are mostly school campuses. The programs were managed by 96 subgrantees (50 Cycle 10 and 46 Cycle 11) that were awarded funding in 5-year cycles. Cycle 10 ended July 31, 2023, and Cycle 11 will end July 21, 2026, if funding remains available.[1] The interviews, which were designed as exploratory follow-up to the survey, were conducted with site coordinators in the fall of 2023. In total, 15 site coordinators from Cycle 11 were interviewed, along with five site coordinators from Cycle 12 (which began operating in the fall of 2023).

This report provides answers to three specific research questions (RQs), which follow. The first two specifically reference the Texas ACE Roadmap, a TEA guide designed to help grantees implement high-quality programming at the center level.

- **RQ2.1.** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect the quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap?

- **RQ2.2.** How does the adoption of key practices and approaches related to the quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap vary across different types of centers?[2]

- **RQ2.3.** What especially innovative or robust practices and approaches are being employed that may warrant consideration as best practices for the Texas ACE community more broadly?

Although this report is organized by theme rather than RQ, notations are included to indicate which questions each section addresses.

Program Goals

On the survey, site coordinators were asked to select their top-three program goals from a predefined list. The most selected goal was "raise the academic performance levels of all participating students" (62%), followed by "support the social and emotional development of students" (61%). Using the same list of goals, site coordinators were also asked to indicate what they thought their school principal's top three goals were for the Texas ACE program. The responses revealed discrepancies, as shown in Exhibit ES1.

1. Cycle 12 began operating in fall 2023. Cycle 12 programs will be included in future evaluation reports. The number of centers and grants active during spring 2023 is based on TX 21st system data.
2. Research questions (RQs) RQ1 and RQ2 have been adjusted from versions shown in the *2021–22 Perspectives on Staffing Report* to reflect the new emphasis of the TEA on the Texas ACE Roadmap.

Exhibit ES1. Site Coordinator Perceptions of Principal Program Goals, with Site Coordinator Goals for Comparison

Q1 Compared to Q24 (Site Coordinator Goals versus Site Coordinator Perceptions of Principal's Goals)

Goal	Site Coordinator Perceptions of Principal's Program Goals	Site Coordinator Program Goals
Raise the academic performance levels of all participating students	73%	62%
Support the social and emotional development of students	46%	61%
Provide youth with a place where students feel they belong and matter	32%	45%
Provide opportunities for students to participate in enrichment activities they otherwise would not have…	27%	42%
Provide accelerated learning opportunities (such as high-impact tutoring and access to high-quality instructional…	35%	24%
Enable lower-performing students to achieve grade-level proficiency	42%	22%
Provide opportunities for students to try new things and develop new interests	18%	20%
Help parents and adult family members develop new skills that will support their child's education	4%	11%
Prepare students for post-secondary education and/or careers	8%	7%

Source. Texas ACE Site Coordinator Survey, Spring 2023.
Note. N = 610. Texas ACE.

The interview protocol included questions about goal formation. Interviewed site coordinators tended to cite student needs (13 coordinators) or school needs (16 coordinators) as primary drivers for goals. A minority of coordinators mentioned considering district needs (four site coordinators), whereas only two mentioned considering caregiver or family needs. Fifteen of the 20 site coordinators interviewed said they included school administrators in goal setting, and half said they included school-day teachers.

Site coordinators were asked about challenges to accomplishing their program goals. About 14% of respondents said they were having difficulty finding means to meet the need for health-related resources for families, and about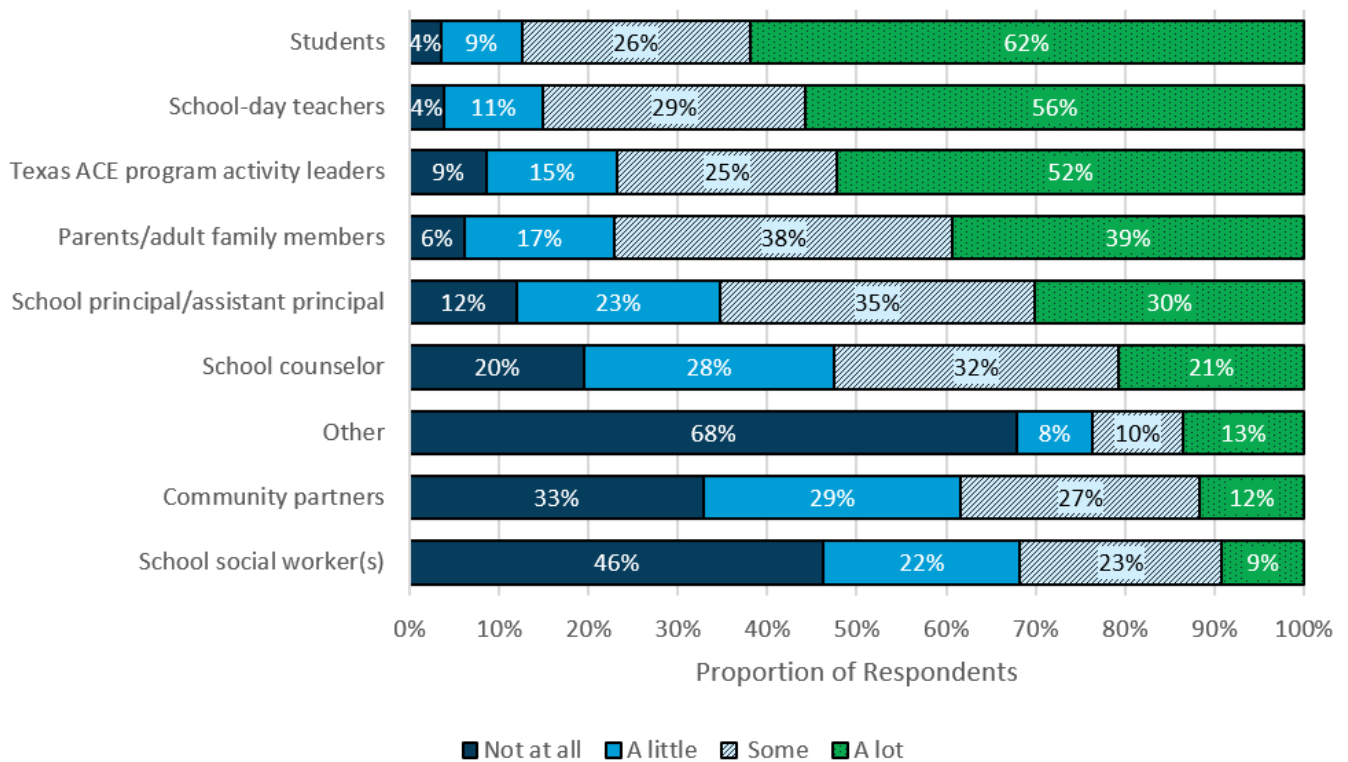 the same percentage indicated that they were having difficulty finding resources to meet the need for counseling resources for parents or adult family members. Additionally, site coordinators taking the survey provided 233 open-ended answers concerning the types of challenges they've faced in trying to meet their program goals. Of these, 78 (or about a third) said that staffing was a challenge. For example, one site coordinator said, "There has been an unprecedented turnaround for all levels of staff at this site. Establishing meaningful structure and lessons has been difficult." Another said "it's hard" to find staff and that teachers are "significantly exhausted" by the end of the day. These quotes are representative of the answers received.

Student Recruitment and Retention

Two-thirds of survey respondents said that they focused recruitment efforts "a lot" on students in need of support in mathematics or RLA. About the same proportion said that they focused recruitment on students in need of "a safe place to be after school" (64%), whereas 53% said that they focused "a lot" on students needing support in "developing social and emotional skills." In terms of how programs recruit, 62% said that they rely "a lot" on students, whereas 56% said that they rely "a lot" on school-day teachers. Activity leaders were also commonly cited (52% "a lot"), with parents/adult family members at 39%. See Exhibit ES2.

Exhibit ES2. Recruitment at Texas ACE Programs

Q5. How much did your program rely on each of the following groups to help with recruiting students for the 2022–23 school year?

	Not at all	A little	Some	A lot
Students	4%	9%	26%	62%
School-day teachers	4%	11%	29%	56%
Texas ACE program activity leaders	9%	15%	25%	52%
Parents/adult family members	6%	17%	38%	39%
School principal/assistant principal	12%	23%	35%	30%
School counselor	20%	28%	32%	21%
Other	68%	8%	10%	13%
Community partners	33%	29%	27%	12%
School social worker(s)	46%	22%	23%	9%

Source. Texas ACE Site Coordinator Survey, Spring 2023.
Note. N ranged from 621 to 626, with 409 for "Other." Texas ACE.

Additionally, site coordinators who were interviewed mentioned that they rely on stakeholders other than school staff and students. Six site coordinators reported that program staff participate in the recruitment process, whereas several site coordinators mentioned that a common mechanism for recruitment is family and community events.

Some site coordinators said that they found success working with school counselors (three site coordinators) and athletic coaches (two site coordinators) to help them recruit students for the program.

For **retention**, site coordinators who were interviewed said they work to foster a sense of

community and belonging. Specifically, they work to provide students with opportunities to make choices and give feedback on their programs using student "voice and choice" (nine site coordinators) and by offering interesting enrichment activities aligned with student interests (six site coordinators). Five site coordinators stated that providing social-emotional learning programming and support to students helped them feel more welcome in the program and created a sense of belonging. Four site coordinators mentioned actively building relationships with the students by greeting them at the door and checking in to see how they're doing, whereas four site coordinators noted that hosting family and community events helped students stay engaged and committed to the program. A majority of site coordinators (12) specifically mentioned using student feedback surveys to help increase engagement (and thereby retention), whereas eight mentioned using caregiver surveys for a similar purpose.

Linkages to the School Day

About half of survey respondents (51%) said that half or more of their program's activities were led by a school-day teacher. Respondents who indicated that less than half of their activities are led by a school-day teacher were asked follow-up questions concerning school-day linkages. Of note, **more than a third of these respondents (36%, or about 17% of all respondents) said that they do not have procedures for program staff to meet regularly with school-day staff to review the academic progress of individual students.**

Site coordinators who were interviewed described using formal and informal communication strategies to discuss student academic and social progress with school-day staff, specifically mentioning communication

with administrators, teachers, counselors, leadership teams, and front office staff. Sixteen site coordinators described formally communicating with school-day staff through **regular meetings**, although the frequency of these meetings varied from daily or weekly to monthly or bimonthly. Regardless of meeting frequency, site coordinators use these meetings to provide programming updates and schedule changes to school staff and to discuss student needs around attendance, discipline, and academic progress. Additionally, site coordinators said they use these meetings to better understand student communication preferences, engagement, and family or home life. Several site coordinators noted that these discussions provide needed context to ensure that programming is meeting student needs and to identify emerging needs.

Finally, most of the interviewed site coordinators (14) reported having access to the **school-day data** needed. They mentioned primarily accessing disciplinary data, academic data, and positive behavioral intervention and support data. Site coordinators said they gain access to these types of data through a data management system the school or district uses or by requesting specific reports run by school administrators, data clerks, or other staff who manage data at the school. Accessing data can be challenging, especially if the site coordinator must ask a school staff to pull it or run a report. On the other hand, three site coordinators mentioned that working with school staff on data requests has helped them improve their data literacy skills.

Activity Provision

Survey respondents were asked to indicate what information they consider when developing the content for activity sessions. The most selected option was "feedback from students" with 96% of site coordinators saying this was "very important." About 95% of respondents also said that program staff discussion was very important and about 89% said specific learning goals were very important. Interestingly, only 42% of respondents said that copies of lessons from the school day were very important. See Exhibit ES3.

In terms of carrying out the activities themselves, seven site coordinators who were interviewed said they make sure that academic content is reinforced in the program through a variety of activity types, providing students with academic content that is aligned with what they receive during the school day. Additionally, site coordinators said that they designed their activities to develop specific skills such as typing and leadership to address social issues such as bullying or to tackle health concerns such as smoking or vaping. Coordinators emphasized the importance of having a good pulse on the school community to better tailor program offerings to address and anticipate student needs.
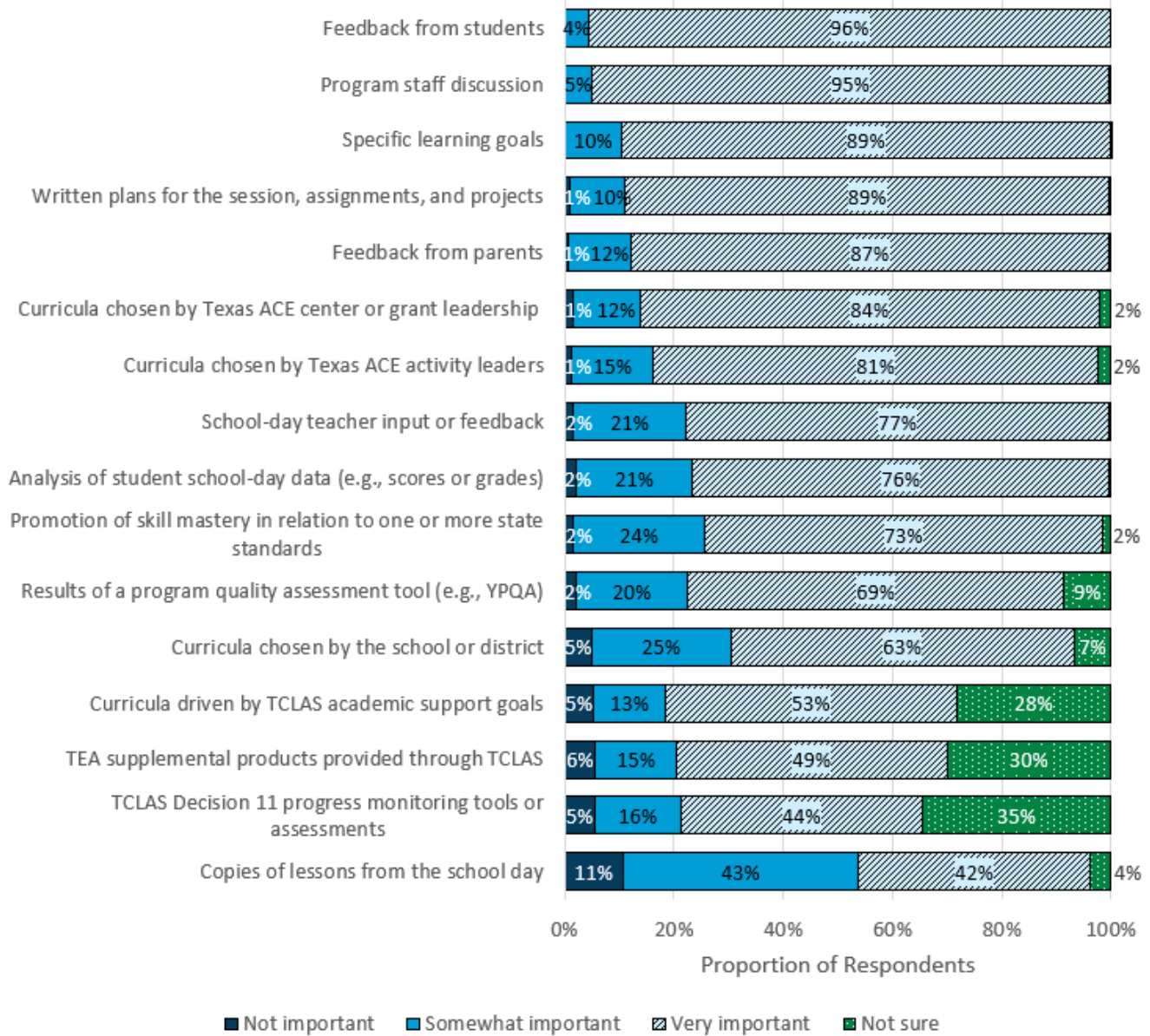
Role within the District

A vast majority of site coordinators responding to the survey indicated that the school district supports their program through building space (81%). The next highest supports reported were staffing (62%), data analysis/analytic support (62%), and transportation (60%). The least-reported type of district-provided support was funding, with only 33% of site coordinators saying they received this type of support.

There were notable support differences when looking at site coordinator responses by school-district grant status (i.e., whether the agent managing the 21st CCLC grant funds is or is not a school district). Site coordinators associated with a school district grant were more likely to report receiving district support than those not associated with a grant. This response is expected, but the consistency and extent of the disparity are worth highlighting. See Exhibit ES4.

# Exhibit ES3. Activity Development in Texas ACE Programs

Q14. Thinking generally about all the activities offered in your program, what information or approaches are used to develop the content of specific activity sessions? Please indicate how important each of the following is for activity planning:

Item	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Not sure
Feedback from students		4%	96%	
Program staff discussion		5%	95%	
Specific learning goals		10%	89%	
Written plans for the session, assignments, and projects	1%	10%	89%	
Feedback from parents	1%	12%	87%	
Curricula chosen by Texas ACE center or grant leadership	1%	12%	84%	2%
Curricula chosen by Texas ACE activity leaders	1%	15%	81%	2%
School-day teacher input or feedback	2%	21%	77%	
Analysis of student school-day data (e.g., scores or grades)	2%	21%	76%	
Promotion of skill mastery in relation to one or more state standards	2%	24%	73%	2%
Results of a program quality assessment tool (e.g., YPQA)	2%	20%	69%	9%
Curricula chosen by the school or district	5%	25%	63%	7%
Curricula driven by TCLAS academic support goals	5%	13%	53%	28%
TEA supplemental products provided through TCLAS	6%	15%	49%	30%
TCLAS Decision 11 progress monitoring tools or assessments	5%	16%	44%	35%
Copies of lessons from the school day	11%	43%	42%	4%

Proportion of Respondents

Legend: ■ Not important ■ Somewhat important ▨ Very important ▨ Not sure

Source. Texas ACE Site Coordinator Survey, Spring 2023.
Note. N ranged from 618 to 624 for this set of items. TCLAS – Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports, TEA, Texas ACE, YPQA – Youth Program Quality Assessment.

Exhibit ES4. District Support for Texas ACE Programs, by School–District Grant Status

Q21. How has the district supported your program? Please select all that apply.
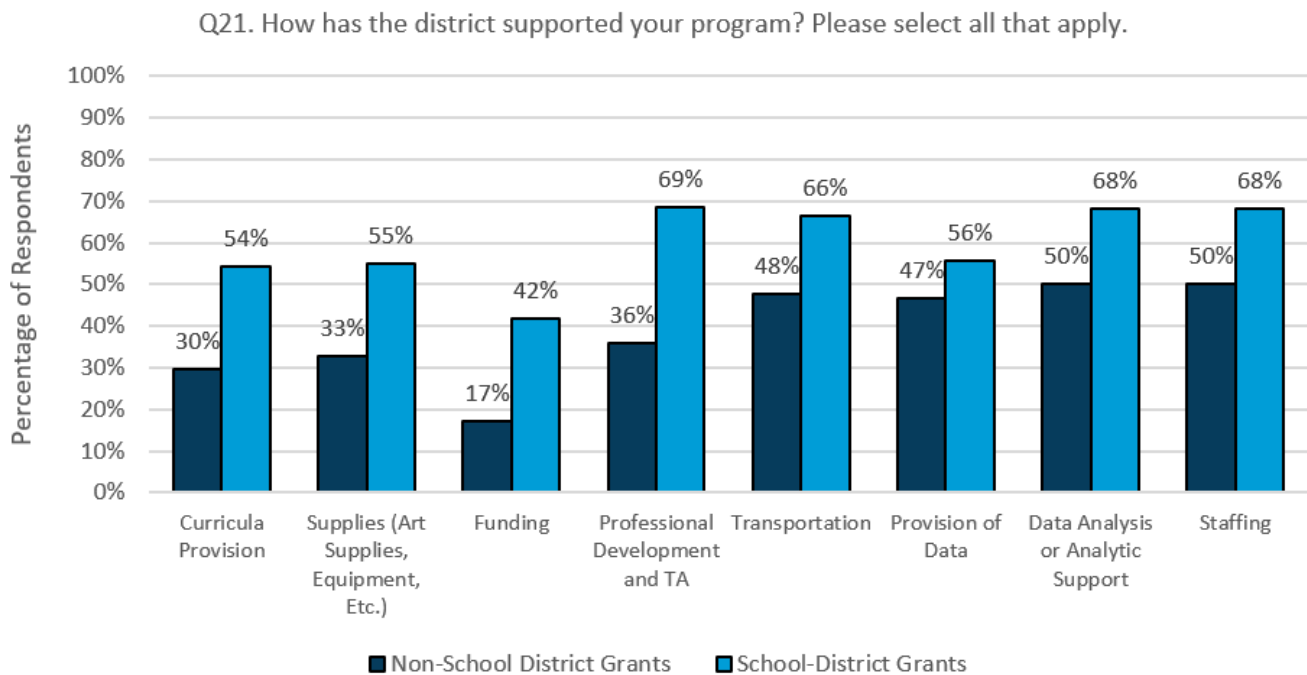
Source. Texas ACE Site Coordinator Survey, Spring 2023.
Note. N = 220 for non-school-district grants, N = 391 for school-district grants. Only statistically significant differences are shown (p ≤ .05). TA − technical assistance, Texas ACE.

Perhaps of relevance to programs not associated with school-district grants, site coordinators who were interviewed said that they worked to overcome challenges in obtaining district support by establishing a presence outside of program time. They did this by attending district meetings and/or setting up virtual meetings with the superintendent. They also said that clearly communicating program goals and showing the alignment between Texas ACE and district goals helps establish buy-in, as does periodically sharing program data and outcomes to demonstrate the benefits of the program.

Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports (TCLAS) Decision 11

Only 20% of respondents said that their program is receiving funding for TCLAS Decision 11 High-Quality Afterschool supports, but more than half of the respondents were not sure (55%). Respondents who said their program received funding from TCLAS Decision 11 were presented with two additional questions. First, they were asked whether they were using the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) provided through TCLAS Decision 11 in Texas ACE tutoring supports. The majority of respondents said that they were (80%), whereas 13% said that they were not sure.

Only 7% said "no." Second, respondents who said that they were funded by TCLAS Decision 11 were asked how effective HQIM have been in terms of accelerating learning for students. Most respondents indicated that HQIM were at least moderately effective (82%) and that tools or assessments included with HQIM designed to monitor student progress were moderately effective (72%). Respondents also indicated that professional development and training related to using HQIM was moderately effective (73%).

Discussion

Several themes emerge from these findings. First, **program alignment with stakeholder interests** is very important. Within the broader goals of 21st CCLC statewide and nationally, program goals must align with school and district goals, while program services must be aligned with individual student and community interests and needs. Aligning the program in these ways is essential to building stakeholder buy-in, which is important for ensuring material and staffing support from schools and districts, while keeping attendance numbers high. This is, of course, easier framed conceptually than practically, especially in cases where stakeholder priorities are ordered differently.[3] Additionally, alignment cannot be taken to mean the mere reflection of district or school goals over student and adult family member needs; rather, district, school, parent and family members, and student priorities should be aligned within a cohesive system of supports, of which Texas ACE programming is a part.

Strong communication is the second emergent theme that is instrumental in successful alignment. Discussing the Texas ACE program goals with school and district administrative staff—and doing so with an active listening approach—can enable Texas ACE programs to prioritize certain goals, highlight areas of overlap, and explain how all program goals support school or district primary goals. Participating in this type of communication also provides an opportunity to convey student and adult family member needs to the school or district that are connected to academic goals or logically proceed with academic learning (e.g., nutrition, positive relationships, or mindsets). This in turn helps build school and district buy-in, since it enables them to see how the Texas ACE program can help them accomplish goals that are important to them. To convey this, however, program staff must arrange for discussion time with school and district leaders—and do so regularly to keep the program visibly relevant.

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3. Note that this is suggested by the comparison of the site coordinator's top-three program goals with the site coordinator's perceptions of the principal's top-three program goals.

Communication with community stakeholders is also necessary, including with partners and parent and family members. It is essential for assessing community strengths and needs, setting student development goals, and telling stories of program success. Enabling caregivers to provide feedback on an ongoing basis is also important; such opportunities need to be designed to enable adults to provide sincere, fully articulated feedback (e.g., using anonymous suggestion boxes in addition to formal and informal information-gathering approaches). Communication with students, especially allowing them a voice and choice, is also a highlight: Students who have a say in activities (what they are or how they go about them) helps to keep them engaged.

Finally, the third theme, implicit in the previous two, is **effective data use**. Close review of school-day data is extraordinarily important for planning activities because using school-day data to identify areas of student need helps keep the program focused and relevant. Survey data can also be helpful during planning, for staff interest (what enrichment activities are possible) and participant interest (whether student or adult). Keeping track of program attendance and using indicators for potential program leavers can help with retention, and using school-day outcome data can be useful for telling the story of the Texas ACE program's impact. These practices in turn further stakeholder buy-in.

None of these emergent themes are new or unknown. Furthermore, aligning programs, establishing effective communication, and using data, requires the careful tailoring of it to local factors, without a one-size-fits-all approach. However, these broad themes can provide a high-level way for programs to reflect on overall strengths and identify areas they may need to improve. Considered alongside the material provided in the Best Practices section, these themes could be useful as frameworks for discussions about program quality.