# Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation:

## Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE)

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

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*American Institutes for Research*

**March 2025**

Submitted to the Texas Education Agency

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

# Exhibits

# Acronyms

ACE          Afterschool Centers on Education

AIR           American Institutes for Research

RQ           research question

STEM       science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

TEA          Texas Education Agency

21st CCLC   Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers

# Executive Summary

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 extension of the first report, building on the same themes. Key findings, best practices, and recommendations from this report are presented below.

**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 | |
|---|---|
| **Previous Best Practice Finding** | **Aligned Findings from This Report** |
| 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. | 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. |
| 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. | 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. |
| **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. | 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. |

| Best Practices | |
|---|---|
| **Previous Best Practice Finding** | **Aligned Findings from This Report** |
| 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. | 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 and Next Steps |
|---|

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

# Introduction

The Nita M. Lowey 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. The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE), funded by the federal 21st CCLC grant program, provides students with opportunities for academic enrichment, tutoring, and a broad array of other services, programs, and activities. 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, the Texas Education Agency (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.

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Note that this report provides answers to three specific research questions (RQs):

- **RQ 2.1.** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect the quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap?

- **RQ 2.2.** How does adoption of key practices and approaches related to the quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap vary across different types of centers?

- **RQ 2.3.** 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 topic rather than RQ, we include subheading notation throughout the findings presentation to indicate which subsections address each question.

# Overview of Data Collection

This report relies on three sources of data: activity leader focus groups, student focus groups (grades four through twelve), and student surveys (grades six through twelve). This subsection presents a short description of each data type, along with notes concerning response rates and data limitations.

## Site Visits (Spring 2024)

AIR identified nine centers for site visits. The primary goal of the site visits was to further explore the topics listed in Exhibit 1 with activity leaders and students.

**Exhibit 1. Texas ACE Site Visit Topics (Spring 2024)**

| Activity leader focus groups | Student focus groups |
|---|---|
| • Program goals and attainment<br>• Student recruitment and retention<br>• Linkages to the school day<br>• Activity provision<br>• Facilitators of and barriers to implementation | • Perceptions of program activities<br>• Skill-building experiences<br>• Perceptions of other program youth<br>• Perceptions of activity leaders<br>• Perceived benefits of participating |

*Source.* Site visit focus group protocols developed by AIR.

AIR used the data from interviews with 20 site coordinators conducted in fall 2023 to guide the site visit sample selection. Criteria for selection were based on themes related to activity planning solutions and staff support, with a specific interest in exploring best practices. In addition, members of the Texas ACE program team at TEA specified criteria they wanted to include in the sample selection process (e.g., representation of both Cycle 11 and Cycle 12 grantees, geographic location, and grade levels served).[1]

The considerations used in this sampling effort, along with notes concerning the specific sampling criteria, are included in Appendix A.[2] Copies of the focus group protocols are included in Appendix B. AIR conducted all focus groups in April 2024. Ultimately, focus groups ranged from two to six participants (34 activity leaders total; 33 students total).

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[1] The Cycle 11 grant period is from July 1, 2021 through July 31, 2026, while the Cycle 12 grant period is from August 1, 2023 through July 31, 2028, contingent on funding availability.

[2] Note that one of the originally selected site coordinators declined to participate in a site visit and was replaced with another site coordinator from the same school type and cycle.

## Student Survey (Sixth to Twelfth Grade)

During site visits, AIR collected surveys from Texas ACE students who participated in focus groups and were attending centers serving secondary schools. The purpose of the surveys was to ask secondary students about whether and to what extent they perceived the Texas ACE program as helping them make new friends, build their confidence, learn things that will help them in school, and so on. Overall, AIR invited 22 secondary students (from six centers in the sample) to take the survey and received 17 responses in return (response rate of 77%). All surveys were administered in person. Of the students, 13 (from four sites) were associated with Cycle 11 and four (from one site) with Cycle 12. See Appendix B for a copy of the student survey.

> **Role Definition for Activity Leaders**
>
> **Activity leaders:** An activity leader is responsible for delivering activities at a single site location. Activity leaders report to site coordinators although sometimes site coordinators also serve as activity leaders depending on staffing capacity at a given site.

## Limitations of the Data

The findings in this report are predicated on focus group and survey data, both of which are limited in important ways. The data are limited by respondent memory recall; more recent events are likely to figure prominently in respondents' answers, as are events that, for whatever reason, had a greater impact on the individual responding to the focus group questions or survey (regardless of impact on the program). They may also provide answers they think are socially acceptable even if the answers are not completely true (social desirability). Surveys were administered only at centers serving secondary schools and only to those who participated in focus groups, and therefore only reflect about 50% of the students who took part in the site visits.[3]

Lastly, the sites were based on a sample selected to increase the likelihood of finding best or promising practices and were therefore not intended to be representative (although the sample did include a diversity of locales and grade levels served). This intention should be kept in mind when reviewing the findings.

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[3] The survey was limited to focus group participants due to difficulty obtaining parent or guardian permission for students not participating in the focus group.

# Presentation of Findings

This section is organized by theme and presents findings from the spring 2024 activity leader focus groups, student focus groups, and secondary student surveys. Exhibit 2 shows what thematic findings are presented in this report and whose perceptions were captured for each theme.

**Exhibit 2. Texas ACE Spring 2024 Site Visit Report Themes, by Perspectives**

| Theme | Activity leaders | Students |
|---|:---:|:---:|
| Program goals and attainment | ● | — |
| Recruitment and retention | ● | ● |
| Activity planning and delivery | ● | — |
| Perceptions of staff support | ● | — |
| Program activities | — | ● |
| Student perceptions of staff performance and benefits of participating in Texas ACE | — | ● |
| Promising practices | ● | ● |

*Source.* Site visit focus group protocols developed by AIR.
*Note.* Texas ACE = Texas Afterschool Centers on Education.

Exploration of each theme includes the presentation of findings from focus groups except for the Perceived Benefits section, which also includes survey results collected from secondary school students during the site visits.

## Program Goals and Attainment

**This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

The national 21st CCLC program has a broad, overarching goal (as outlined in Title IV, Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) to "provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The program is also intended to offer

"literacy and other education services to the families of participating children." Each Texas ACE program sets its own site-specific goals based on this high-level purpose and the aligned priorities set by TEA in the Texas ACE Roadmap. To better understand site-specific goals, the activity leader focus groups included a series of questions that discussed program goals identified by activity leaders, how activity leaders achieve those goals through activity offerings, and barriers to achieving those goals. This section presents the findings learned from responses to these questions.

## Primary Goals of the Program

During focus groups, AIR staff asked activity leaders from all nine sites, "What are the goals of your Texas ACE program? (e.g., improving math scores, providing new experiences through enrichment activities, improving school day attendance)." Activity leaders from all nine sites strongly emphasized the goal of **providing academic support**, particularly in enhancing mathematics and literacy skills through initiatives such as NBA Math Hoops and Kid Lit. In

addition, 10 activity leaders from six sites emphasized **providing enrichment activities** as a central goal in their Texas ACE program, notably with the aim of enhancing students' academic skills and confidence while also providing opportunities to participate in group activities (e.g., tournaments, Pilates, karate, esports). Along these lines, one activity leader said, "Having the afterschool program with Texas ACE allows a lot of parents who are financially maybe not able to put their kids in an out-of-school time setting, but Texas ACE allows that."

> **Program Goal Priorities:**
> **Activity Leader Perspectives**
>
> Overall, the activity leaders said that the Texas ACE programs prioritize provision of academic support (nine sites), enrichment activities (six sites), and a safe environment (three sites). Activity leaders at two sites also mentioned the importance of improving student school-day attendance.

> "I think it's bringing opportunities for the students. I know here in middle school, sixth graders are not able to do sports.… So being able to provide sports … it just exposes them, and it prepares them.… It really motivates them during [the] school [day], especially in sixth grade when they are brand new, and they are nervous."
>
> —Activity leader

Five activity leaders from three sites also emphasized the importance of keeping students motivated, reducing school-day behavior incidents, and generally **providing a safe environment**. Several staff noted the program aims to offer a secure space where students can learn and stay engaged after school, noting a particular focus of the program is on students of families who may not have the financial means for other out-of-school programs. Four activity

leaders from four sites also noted the need to provide comfortable and safe learning environments (e.g., student lounges), which they perceive as helpful in improving student engagement and attendance.

Finally, four activity leaders from two sites emphasized **increasing school-day attendance** as a key objective within their Texas ACE programs. As a requirement, students cannot attend afterschool programs if they do not attend the regular school day. Activity leaders think they can increase school-day attendance by creating a fun environment with activities of interest after school that students want to attend. Each leader discussed their program's focus on improving student attendance.

> "We want to support kids, do our best to support kids academically, but we also want to do our best to increase school-day attendance. So, one way to do that is what we offer after school. Thing is, kids say, 'I want to be at school today, because I want to be at [Texas] ACE.'"
>
> —*Activity leader*

Activity leaders from all sites emphasized site goals are developed with the overarching purpose of **enhancing student experience and outcomes**. That is, supporting school-related goals (such as academic performance or positive behavior) is combined with an interest in providing rich, positive experiences for the students.

### *Goal Planning*

In response to the focus group question about how their programs develop goals and the information collected to inform this process, activity leaders indicated they employ data-driven strategies. These strategies included analysis of academic data and collecting feedback from school leadership and students to ensure program goals are relevant and effective.

In terms of review of **academic data**, eight activity leaders from four sites reported their programs use academic data to help develop goals. Specifically, activity leaders mentioned they review progress reports and standard performance metrics (e.g., grades and state test scores). This academic-focused approach was said to help reassess and adjust goals to better align with students' educational needs.

> "We rely heavily on academic performance data to set and adjust our goals, ensuring that we are addressing the specific learning needs and challenges faced by our students."
>
> —*Activity leader*

In addition, four activity leaders from three sites reported they **consulted school leaders** to help develop goals. One activity leader at one site said they meet with school leaders once a

month, and another said they engage with school leaders during professional learning community meetings with school staff. Activity leaders said they engage in a "collaborative process" in which program staff meet with school leaders to better understand student needs, including academic and social data trends. Assessing student needs alongside school leaders helps provide information that shapes and refines Texas ACE program goals.

> "We work closely with school leadership to use academic performance data in setting and adjusting our goals. This collaboration ensures that our goals are not only aligned with the broader educational objectives but also tailored to address specific learning needs and challenges faced by our students, creating a more targeted and effective educational strategy."
>
> —*Activity leader*

Lastly, seven activity leaders from five sites reported soliciting student feedback during program activities through informal conversations with students helps tailor their programs. For example, one activity leader said, "We use student input to shape our activities and ensure they meet their interests, which keeps them engaged and excited about participating."

### *Goal Achievement*

Activity leaders identified several key strategies for achieving their program goals. Notably, these strategies included **programming flexibility and adapting to student needs**, **fostering a positive program culture**, and **using targeted support and positive reinforcement**. In addition, activity leaders stated **relationship building** and **personalized assistance** are central to improving both student academic and social progress.

In terms of program **flexibility and adaptation**, 16 activity leaders at four sites explained they achieved their goals by adapting to both student progress and interests (tying into both academic data review and student feedback). Staff said this flexibility helps keep goals relevant to student needs and ensures the program remains effective (e.g., relevant and engaging) while yielding meaningful enrichment and skill development for students.

> "By continuously adjusting our goals based on the students' evolving needs and interests, we ensure that our programs stay relevant and engaging. This flexibility allows us to tailor our approach to each club's unique focus, whether it's strategic thinking or choreography, making a tangible difference in students' development."
>
> —*Activity leader*

Six activity leaders at three sites stated they achieved their goals by **fostering a positive program culture**. These activity leaders said they developed such a culture through the design of engaging activities and creating supportive environments. Activity leaders design engaging activities by

aligning them to student interests such as sports and hobbies. Activity leaders create supportive environments by encouraging teamwork and peer-to-peer connection, fostering healthy competition in sports, and intentionally pairing students with tutors. In addition, four activity leaders from two sites also said they use **targeted support and positive reinforcement** to help achieve program goals. Activity leaders described making personal connections to students, so students feel comfortable voicing their concerns. For example, one activity leader described a student expressing anxiety about an upcoming test. The activity leader was able to reassure and try to encourage the student to develop a positive mindset.

Activity leaders said the result of this type of culture building has led to positive social interactions with peers and improved academic performance. One activity leader explained that by emphasizing growth over passing test scores with their students, they actually saw increased test scores at their site. Another activity leader said students who initially struggled with social engagement have become more confident and active in their program, whereas others have shown academic progress (e.g., improved grades) through personalized support and guidance provided by the program.

> "We have one student who was very, very shy and very standoffish. And so coming to [Texas] ACE, it was a big step for them to take. And so now just being able to socialize with all the different grade levels in there, they have really come out of their shell and made so much [social and academic] improvement."
>
> *—Activity leader*

> "My students, [as] they're getting closer to the STAARs test ... they always [say to] me, 'I'm not good.' [I say,] 'Yes, you are. Just have a positive mindset, and you'll be good,' I tell my students. Well, the next day they come or the same day they come, and they look for me later, 'I passed my little test,' or whatever. I was like, 'You see? You can do it.' It makes me feel good because I helped them, not reach their goal because they do it on their own, but I just give them the positive mindset that they could do it."
>
> *—Activity leader*

As evident in the foregoing examples, activity leaders from seven sites stated they achieved program goals primarily by **building relationships** with students. By creating strong connections and offering personalized assistance, activity leaders said they can enhance students' engagement and progress both academically and socially. That is, effort to achieve social goals is intertwined with effort to achieve academic goals, with progress in one area supporting progress in the other.

> "Everybody that works for the [Texas] ACE program ... [they] build those relationships [with students] through positive reinforcements and being able to be at their level.... We're able to foster that environment that they're wanting to come back and they're wanting to be here."
>
> —*Activity leader*

### *Barriers to Goal Achievement*

During focus groups, activity leaders were asked if they knew of any challenges or obstacles their center has encountered in achieving its goals. Activity leaders from six sites reported facing challenges in achieving their program goals, citing primarily **space constraints** and **ineffective onboarding for new staff**.

Regarding space constraints, all the activity leaders from three sites explained they face challenges with their program spaces, specifically, finding spaces that fulfill their programming needs (e.g., lack of outdoor space for sports enrichment activities). Staff explained that adhering to the safety requirements required by the state can also make use of space difficult on their school campuses. For example, the district must approve spaces such as gyms or playgrounds on program campuses before the program can use them, limiting which activities can be offered. In addition, programs operating in multiple spaces within a large campus struggle to have enough support staff to escort students from room to room (which is also a requirement). Activity leaders explained that access to larger spaces would ease these challenges, as students would not have to change rooms as often during Texas ACE programming.

Concerning staff onboarding, all activity leaders from four sites reported new staff lack effective onboarding training. For example, activity leaders said new staff members often struggle with unclear guidelines about their job requirements and a lack of structured orientation, which can impact their

| **Need for Clear Onboarding for New Staff** |
| --- |
| Activity leaders expressed that more clear guidelines about their role and formalized onboarding for new staff would help them be more effective. |

effectiveness in serving students in the program. One activity leader said, "I just needed more guidelines. It was just, 'Hey, show up. You are going to be tutoring kids.' I didn't even know about the enrichment activity until literally just now." Activity leaders expressed that clearer guidelines about their role and formalized onboarding for new staff would help alleviate these challenges.

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## Recruitment and Retention

> **This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

In response to focus group questions about how their programs recruit staff members and how they are involved in recruiting and retaining students, activity leaders provided insights into their programs' recruitment and retention processes. The findings reveal Texas ACE programs recruit staff members in various ways, use direct recruitment strategies for students, and create a strong sense of belonging via strong social ties among students and staff.

### Methods for Recruiting Staff

AIR staff asked activity leaders how they were first recruited to join the Texas ACE program. In response, activity leaders said they were recruited into the Texas ACE program in various ways, including directly by the site coordinator, through school meetings, and by third-party recruiters. Exhibit 3 shows the methods by which activity leaders were recruited for their Texas ACE positions.

**Exhibit 3. Staff Recruitment Methods Reported by Texas ACE Activity Leaders (Spring 2024)**

| Method | Number of activity leaders | Number of sites |
|---|---|---|
| Site coordinator informally approached school-day staff during the school day | 7 | 4 |
| Site coordinator formally approached school-day staff during scheduled school meetings, such as staff and orientation meetings | 5 | 3 |
| Colleagues (i.e., other school-day staff and school leaders) approached school-day staff | 5 | 3 |
| Word of mouth | 3 | 3 |
| Friend or family working in the district approached community member | 3 | 2 |

*Source.* Activity leader focus group data collected by AIR.

*Note*. N = 9.

Activity leaders noted two additional recruitment strategies that bear mention. At one site, the program leveraged a relationship with a local high school to recruit some of its activity leaders. In this case, the high school's principal emailed students about a job opportunity for the Texas ACE program at their local middle school. In addition, one site hired activity leaders through an online job-posting site (e.g., Indeed).

Overall, however, and as indicated in discussion with site coordinators, programs in general **leverage school-day staff** to fill activity leader positions. Seven school-day staff members from seven sites were recruited to lead a specific activity for the Texas ACE program. Six activity leaders were recruited to lead enrichment clubs and activities such as sports, esports, and arts and crafts, and one was recruited to lead an academic mathematics club.

Perhaps more important than the recruitment methods were activity leaders' reasons for why they took a position in the program. During focus groups, 10 activity leaders from five sites explained why they applied to their Texas ACE programs. The primary motivation for activity leaders applying to the Texas ACE program was a passion for working with students and for making a positive impact in their lives. Five activity leaders from four sites stated working with students was the main reason they applied to the Texas ACE program.

> "[The site coordinator] introduced himself and he talked about the program. So I was like, 'I want to make a difference. I want to be part of the kids' lives.'… That's what encouraged me to apply."
> —*Activity leader*

In addition, two activity leaders from one site said they aspired to work in education after college and applied to Texas ACE to gain more experience in education and working with students. The least common reasons for applying to Texas ACE were interest in a part-time job and earning extra money (one activity leader) and interest in teaching enrichment activities that were different subjects from their school-day responsibilities (also one activity leader).

### *Student Recruitment Methods*

During focus groups, AIR staff asked activity leaders to what extent they participate in student recruitment for the Texas ACE program and what approaches they use for recruitment. Sixteen activity leaders from nine sites described supporting student recruitment. In terms of approach, activity leaders explained they recruit students in need of academic support (as identified through analysis of school data) and through personal interactions with students. They noted they recruit at community and school events and facilitate enrollment for students who express interest in specific activities. Exhibit 4 shows the methods by which students were recruited to join Texas ACE.

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**Exhibit 4. Student Recruitment Methods at Texas ACE Programs (Fall 2024)**

| Method | Number of activity leaders | Number of sites |
|---|---|---|
| Activity leaders and school-day staff collaboratively use data to identify students who need academic and emotional support | 7 | 4 |
| Student registration and orientation events | 5 | 3 |
| School family events | 1 | 1 |
| Student lunch periods | 1 | 1 |
| Students approach activity leaders | 5 | 4 |

*Source.* Activity leader focus group data collected by AIR.

*Note*. N = 9.

The recruitment strategies provided by activity leaders listed in Exhibit 4 align with what students said during their focus groups with AIR staff. Students said they were recruited by school-day teachers or Texas ACE staff or were encouraged to sign up by their parents or guardians, who heard about the program through the school. Seven students from six sites said they learned about the Texas ACE program from the teachers in their schools. Three students from two sites mentioned hearing about the program from Texas ACE staff. Two of those students mentioned staff provided them with information about Texas ACE during other school activities. Lastly, three students from two sites noted their parents or guardian signed them up for the program.

> "Some of the teachers from [Texas] ACE came to our elementary school and they basically got to talk a little bit of information about [Texas] ACE and how it works and what they do and stuff and the type of activities and how you participate. So when I heard about it, I was very interested and so when I got into middle school, I was able to join it."
>
> —*Middle school student*

### Staff Perceptions of Student Interest in Texas ACE

Texas ACE staff said they believe students are drawn to the program for its engaging enrichment activities, the autonomy to choose clubs, and the opportunity for social connections with peers and staff. This fits well with what staff said concerning importance of program flexibility and relationship building in relation to goal achievement.

Concerning autonomy, eight activity leaders from seven sites said they believe students attend Texas ACE because the program offers **activities that align with their interests**, especially enrichment activities such as esports and drivers ed. One activity leader emphasized that students might feel a sense of autonomy by participating in clubs and activities they choose

versus adhering to the prescribed subjects during the school day. The activity leader said, "I think it's just like they have a little freedom to … be part of choosing something they want to do."

Seven activity leaders from five sites said they think students attend Texas ACE to **foster a social connection**. Most activity leaders explained that students enjoy spending time with existing friends and developing new friendships in the program. In addition, three activity leaders explained that some students also seek a social connection with program staff and value their mentorship and support.

Lastly, an activity leader explained one less common but important reason students attend. This person stated several students attend Texas ACE to make up for school absences. Students from this school can make up attendance hours and classwork in Texas ACE to ensure they meet the district requirements for graduation.

> "If they need attendance hours … at the end of the year, I've been able to get them [students] to come because they can get hours for their attendance … that's been a big draw. Then while they're here, I'm like, 'Okay, let's work on your grades or whatever you have.'"
>
> —*Activity leader*

### Student Retention—Creating a Sense of Belonging

As discussed earlier with respect to goal achievement, activity leaders emphasized creating a sense of belonging within their Texas ACE community is accomplished through building meaningful relationships with students, creating a safe space, and offering students voice and choice, including leadership roles and activities of interest.

| **Creating a Sense of Belonging through Consistency** |
|---|
| Activity leaders stressed the importance of staff stability as a key condition for staff-student relationship building. |

Seven activity leaders from four sites explained **building relationships** with students is essential to fostering a sense of community at their Texas ACE centers. These relationships are established by having reliable and consistent staff who show interest in the students and the activities they participate in at Texas ACE. Activity leaders emphasized staff reliability and expressing interest builds trust with students and enables staff to help students navigate challenging situations when they occur. One activity leader explained, "The relationship that has been built with being so involved with the students gives me the wonderful ability to go to that student when they're feeling upset … allowing them to talk it out, which can usually settle the miscommunication or settle the issue." In addition, two activity leaders explained that growing up in the community helps them build connections and trust with the students.

Furthermore, two activity leaders from two sites specifically emphasized the importance of **creating a safe space** for Texas ACE students. One activity leader said, "[We want Texas ACE] to become their safe place. Some kids look forward to [Texas] ACE because it is a place where they either have their friends, whether it be for a specific teacher, whether it be for a specific activity."

Finally, five activity leaders from four sites explained **giving students a voice and choice** about their program experience also helps develop a sense of belonging at their sites. At one site, an activity leader explained they practice this by letting students choose activities to participate in. Two activity leaders from two sites explained they provide opportunities for student leadership positions in their enrichment club activities to support voice and choice.

> "It's all about the kids.… I have leaders [for my activities]. I have a lead person who's the assistant director. I have a lead who's over script writing. I have a lead who's over art direction. And these are all students. I give them the power to do any and everything they want."
>
> —Activity leader

## Student Perceptions of Program Environment

During focus groups, AIR staff asked students about their perceptions of the program environment to better understand if activity leaders were creating a sense of belonging as intended. Students responded to this question primarily with reference to friendships. For example, 13 students from seven sites said they enjoy the environment at their Texas ACE program because they enjoy spending time with their peers. One student said, "I feel like it's made me more social.… I met a lot of people. I think that's helped me." Another student said his peers helped him with his mathematical skills, whereas another explained that her Texas ACE friends are there to make her feel better when she's having a bad day from the bullying she encounters during the school day. In addition, a high school student noted how they appreciate how other Texas ACE students are friendly even if they've never met. They said, "It's friendly. Everybody laughs … everybody's cool, interactive. Even if they don't know you, you still can have fun with everybody."

Aside from references to supportive peers, students also noted the program staff and the activities themselves helped to create a supportive environment. Four students at three sites described their program environment as broadly friendly and welcoming, with one middle school student saying, "I feel like everyone, even if you're new, you feel welcomed and you have all these opportunities. All these opportunities to be in all these clubs. And I mean people are just generally nice here as I know of. And we're just doing our own things and we're just enjoying the program." Two students also said that the program staff make them feel supported, with one student saying that staff check in on them when they're feeling down.

> "I think it is a supportive environment.… If we're feeling down, they'll [program staff] encourage us, and they won't just let us be sad … they'll help us, and let's say we're not doing good … they'll help us get better."
>
> —*Middle school student*

Although the majority of feedback about social environments was positive, one student said she sometimes has conflicts with her peers but feels supported by the larger group. Another student said they would like their Texas ACE program to focus on enrolling more students, saying more students would help make the program more fun and help them achieve their goals.

### Student Retention—Engaging Students

Activity leaders said the most common reasons students drop out of Texas ACE are conflicting schedules and loss of interest in the program's activity offerings. Specifically, all activity leaders from three sites explained sports and other school activities are the most common reasons students leave the Texas ACE program, whereas four activity leaders from three sites said some students lose interest in the Texas ACE activities or do not want to participate in the required academic activities (e.g., tutoring).

However, two other reasons for student attrition bear mention. First, three activity leaders from two sites explained that conflicts with other students can lead to students dropping out of the Texas ACE program. One activity leader said that, in most cases, such conflicts between students get resolved, and the student will eventually return to Texas ACE; however, another site explained that sometimes they lose students permanently due to such peer-to-peer conflicts. Second, all activity leaders from one site said transportation issues cause students to drop out of the program. The activity leaders from this site believe that if they were able to provide a bus service after programming, they would lose fewer students.

When AIR staff asked activity leaders if there were ways they could assess whether a student was less engaged or at risk of no longer attending Texas ACE programming, all activity leaders from four sites explained they do so merely by **tracking student attendance**. When a student's attendance decreases, they will engage with the student directly or, in some instances, reach out to the parents to see what they can do to help. In addition, activity leaders from one site believe **engaging students during the school day** helps encourage students to keep attending the program. For example, activity leaders remind students of their planned activities and entice them with special afterschool events. One activity leader explained, "We try to remind them also what our activities are for the week … we talk about what we're doing.… So, it's just

something that we try to tell [the students] what our curriculum is so they can maybe get motivated. When we do our science activities we have a big group."

## Activity Planning and Delivery

**This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

This section delves into the processes and support structures behind activity planning within Texas ACE programs. Specifically, the section presents information concerning who primarily develops activities, what supports activity leaders have when planning activities, and what resources are available for high-quality activity implementation.

### Staff Responsible for Activity Planning

When AIR staff asked activity leaders who primarily develops lesson plans at their Texas ACE program, all activity leaders from six sites indicated activities are developed collaboratively among activity leaders and with their site coordinators. All activity leaders from two additional sites said they also collaborate when developing activity lesson plans but do so with school-day teachers who were not Texas ACE staff. For example, one activity leader said, "I've formed a relationship with one of the science teachers, and she's been very useful. Especially when it comes to missing assignments." Lastly, all activity leaders at one site explained they are primarily responsible for individually developing their Texas ACE activity lesson plans. These activity leaders explained they have subject-matter expertise and are well suited to lead lesson plan development.

### Activity Planning Resources and Support

When AIR staff asked activity leaders about the support they receive when planning activities, they described a variety of ways in which their site coordinators help them. For example, all activity leaders from two sites explained that their site coordinator secures the **materials needed** for the activities, such as equipment to play a specific sport or ingredients for an upcoming cooking class. Another activity leader from one site expressed appreciation that the site coordinator provides **preplanned curricula**, whereas all activity leaders from three other sites also said that the site coordinator provides curricula but they have the flexibility to **modify the lesson plans** the site coordinator developed. These staff further explained that such changes are typically based on individual students' needs and they value the trust their site

coordinators place in them to make these types of decisions. All activity leaders from the two sites further said they appreciated that their site coordinator **reviews lesson plans** with them (e.g., weekly). Finally, all activity leaders from three sites said they felt **general support from their site coordinators**. For example, the site coordinator checks in with them daily to ensure they have everything they need and offers any guidance as necessary. One activity leader said, "Anything that we ask, [the site coordinator asks], 'What do you need?'… Any time we have any questions, he's ready and able with an answer."

Aside from site coordinator supports, school-day curricula were also mentioned as an important resource. Six activity leaders from four sites explained that they **use school-day curricula to create the activities** that they lead. For example, one activity leader recently used the school-day science curriculum to create an activity to help students study for their upcoming state assessment. This person said, "I recently asked her [the site coordinator] if she could provide me with STAAR material … and she was able to provide a curriculum for me.… It was really useful."

In terms of enrichment activities, all activity leaders from four sites explained that they seek out their own resources to create their lessons. This may involve exploration of specific techniques or projects. For example, one activity leader mentioned looking for gardening tips online in preparation for a gardening club activity. That said, all activity leaders from the two sites said they need additional resources for coming up with ideas for specific enrichment activities and would be open to suggestions.

### Activity Implementation Support

During focus groups, activity leaders described the activity implementation support they receive from site coordinators, school-day staff, and other school staff. They also described how students themselves sometimes provide support by taking on leadership roles during programming.

**Site Coordinator Support with Implementation.** As mentioned in the previous subsection, all activity leaders from six sites emphasized that their site coordinators do an excellent job checking in with them about their daily needs. This includes needs related to activity implementation. All activity leaders from two sites described a similar protocol where site coordinators travel from one activity to the next, ensuring the activity leaders have everything they need throughout the day and seeing if the activity leader needs any help.

> "She [site coordinator] will walk around, and she'll stay at a rotation for a certain amount of time.… She [is] hands-on with … every aspect.… She goes around making sure that we have everything … she has no problem stepping in."
>
> *—Activity leader*

Of particular note, all activity leaders from one site said they appreciated the **leadership and guidance** from their site coordinator when they experienced classroom management and discipline issues. They said the students respect the site coordinator, which helps activity leaders navigate challenging situations.

In addition, all activity leaders from two sites said their site coordinators have **developed relationships with school administrators and teachers** and the site coordinator attends weekly professional learning community meetings to discuss student academic and social progress. One activity leader explained that their site coordinator uses a very "data-driven" approach during these meetings by reviewing student grades and behavior incidents to understand student progress. The site coordinator then communicates with activity leaders about which students need extra support and what types of support they need.

> "The one who goes to the meeting would be our site coordinator. She has a good relationship with those teachers, too. I know if a kid is struggling or there is something coming up, she would get that information from them at the meetings."
>
> *—Activity leader*

**School-Day Staff Support with Implementation**. Activity leaders also mentioned that school-day staff help them with activity implementation. Thirteen activity leaders at eight sites said they communicate directly with school-day staff about student academic and social progress. Communication usually occurs through informal, in-person, one-on-one conversations throughout the school day. Most activity leaders have built strong relationships with the teaching staff, and they approach each other to discuss how to help students when they are struggling.

> "I have teachers come up to me like, 'Hey, so-and-so's not doing so well,' so it's, 'Okay, let me pull them [to attend Texas ACE].'... And we set the clear expectations and follow up with the teacher like, 'Hey, we had that conversation. How's the behavior, has it improved? Or how's the academics?'"
>
> *—Activity leader*

Activity leaders from one site said their **school administrators collaborate with staff** to deliver activities. For example, administrators have coordinated parent permission for students to participate in events such as a recent solar eclipse.

**Other School Staff Support with Implementation**. All activity leaders from the four sites described various ways other school staff (e.g., school counselors, cafeteria workers, and security personnel) collaborate to implement Texas ACE programming and activities. For example, all activity leaders from two sites said they leverage the expertise of **school**

**counselors** to help students with tutoring and navigating postsecondary options. All activity leaders from one site described using **cafeteria staff** to help cook for the students and the **school security personnel** to help students navigate from one activity to the next.

> "The counselor does math tutoring and does the college career or college tours with some of the groups. Then we have the chefs as part of the cafeteria crew.... We have our security help with hall monitor … getting the kids to the cafeteria here and there."
>
> —*Activity leader*

**Student Support with Implementation**. Students participate in leadership opportunities to oversee tasks that help the program. Five students at three sites said they helped the program by **leading activities**. For example, one student explained he is the team captain of the esports enrichment club. Another student said they lead the choir group and help younger students new to the activity. Five students at four programs explained they help with activities by **performing administrative and activity coordination duties**. For example, one student said she helps activity leaders prepare materials and clean up after activities. Another student said she helps track student attendance using a computer. One student explained he runs errands to help the Texas ACE site coordinator, such as collecting Texas ACE mail and delivering paperwork to school-day staff. Lastly, one high school student did not provide a specific example but said the site coordinator and activity leaders are open to activity suggestions, planning activities, and leadership opportunities. They said, "They're actually really open about that. They're really inclusive when it comes to student participation and leadership here."

## Perceptions of Staff Support

> **This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

As outlined in the Texas ACE Roadmap, a key component of a high-quality program is ensuring a supportive environment for activity leaders. During focus groups, AIR staff asked activity leaders if they felt valued and appreciated for the work they do as part of Texas ACE. In addition, AIR staff asked activity leaders if they inform their site coordinators when they feel stressed or burned out, and, if so, how their site coordinator supports them when they feel this way. AIR also asked activity leaders what supports they would like to receive that are not currently provided. This section presents activity leader responses to these questions.

## Appreciation for Staff

Eight activity leaders at three sites said they felt appreciated by various members of the school community, including principals and site coordinators. One activity leader said they were acknowledged for the impact they made within their school, which was very important to them.

> "If they need anything done, I know that they know they can turn to me. So that makes me feel appreciated. That just means that I do my job…. And of course, the kids, my main thing is the kids, of course, at all times. But my friends here, my coworkers, my teammates, they're a big part of it."
>
> —Activity leader

In addition, three activity leaders at one site noted they received comments from the site coordinator that made them feel appreciated, such as how helpful they are to the program. Lastly, one activity leader said they feel appreciated because of the confidence their site coordinator has in them to do a good job.

In terms of stress or burnout, 14 activity leaders at eight sites said they would feel comfortable bringing up any issues or indicating times they needed a break to their site coordinator. In addition, most activity leaders said they feel supported by their site coordinators when they struggle with students or have a rough day. However, one activity leader mentioned they rarely experience burnout because they enjoy the work they do with the students. Another activity leader mentioned their site coordinator understands the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities and is supportive when activity leaders need a break to attend to those responsibilities.

> "I was like, 'I know you're relying on me, but I can't be here right now.' My kids need me, it's too much. I'm really tired. I'm just so tired.... But he [the site coordinator] was so understanding. He's like, 'I get it. We'll find someone else. It's okay.' Then, [he was] very welcoming when I came back. I said, 'I'm ready to come back.' He's like, 'Let's do it.'"
>
> —Activity leader

As a final note, three activity leaders at three sites mentioned sometimes feeling overwhelmed with leading activities due to classroom management challenges. These activity leaders said their site coordinators step in to help or offer suggestions to improve the activities to make them feel more comfortable and supported.

> "I remember last year, at the beginning of the year, me and my co-worker had a lot of trouble with the students, and sometimes we would just break down, just couldn't do it. But we would talk with our site coordinator, and she would help us a lot. She would come in [and] support us."
>
> —Activity leader

## Supports Needed

During focus groups, activity leaders mentioned various types of support they need or would like to have to keep the program running as intended. Two activity leaders at one site mentioned needing **more staff** to ensure the programs and activities can be offered appropriately. For example, one activity leader said, "I am usually with the little kids and I don't need supplies, but it would just be nice to have an extra person to help out sometimes." In addition, four activity leaders from two sites said they encounter significant challenges related to large workloads and understaffing, particularly at the end of programming. The demanding nature of their work, combined with limited opportunities for breaks, affects activity leaders' ability to manage students effectively.

Another activity leader mentioned the need for more school-day teacher involvement or more school-day teacher awareness about the Texas ACE program and how it supports students. This person said, "They [teachers] don't know what this [Texas ACE program] really is." **Two additional activity leaders also said they wished more school leaders and other teachers knew about the program within their school.**

## Program Activities

**This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

A key purpose of the spring 2024 site visits was to conduct student focus groups to find out what students like best about program activities, what they don't like, and if they experience any barriers to participating in Texas ACE programming. This section presents student perceptions in these areas.

### What Students Like about Texas ACE Programming

When asked what they like about Texas ACE programming, student responses emphasized **program variety**, including sports, esports, arts and crafts, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and field trips. As one student said, "The thing I most like about these activities is that they offer so many."

> "There's a lot of different [activities] that you might be interested in [Texas] ACE: there's esports, there's art, earlier we had cooking. The type of club I've gone to is drones and the reason why I like to come here daily is that it basically helps with communications to those, teamwork, and we learned something new because it involves a lot of things in drones."
>
> —*Middle school student*

**Adding to Variety: Sports, Home Economics**

Students said they enjoy sports and often mentioned wanting more opportunities to participate in sports and outdoor activities. Eight students across five sites said they had a strong interest in expanding sports and outdoor activities, including kickball, volleyball, and basketball. In addition, five students across three sites said they would like to participate in cooking and home economics as part of their Texas ACE program.

Concerning **sports**, eight students from five sites indicated their strong engagement and enjoyment in the sports offered by their program. For example, students said they enjoy basketball, dodgeball, soccer, and volleyball. Students said they enjoyed the physical aspect of these activities as well as the team building and social interaction that these sports involve. In addition, six students from four sites said they enjoy the **esports** offerings at their programs and feel they develop leadership skills and positive social interactions by participating.

> "I choose to go [to Texas ACE] every day because I'm the captain of one of them [esports teams], and our coach [activity leader] trusts me a lot, so I go to monitor the room."
>
> —*Middle school student*

Five students from four sites said **arts and crafts** are among their favorite activities. Students appreciate the opportunity to participate in various hands-on activities, such as making popsicles, slime, and homemade whipped cream, and using materials like popsicle sticks to create unique art projects. In addition, four students at one site said one of their favorite activities is performing arts**,** specifically dance and performance activities.

**STEM** activities were also mentioned as favorites during student focus groups. Four students from three sites expressed enthusiasm for STEM activities within their programs. Students said they enjoyed participating in activities such as robotics and mathematics and described them as "fun." In addition, three students mentioned they enjoyed STEM-themed **field trips** from their sites, such as visiting an aquarium.

In addition to activity variety, eight students from four sites indicated liking being **able to choose activities** within that variety. A number of students in the focus group noted having such choice: Nine students across four sites reported being able to choose the activities in which they participate, whereas two students from two sites said they sometimes but not always get to

choose their Texas ACE activities. However, two students from two sites said they have no choice in the activities they participate in. Note that two students at one site said they are generally willing to participate in any activities provided, so variety of activity options may not be equally meaningful to all students.

> "I don't really care what we're supposed to do and all that, but as long as it's fun, and for example, in soccer, they told us for me to be a goalie and I'm not that good at it, but I am like, 'Okay, I'll give it a try,' and all that."
>
> —*Middle school student*

Students also talked about their preferences concerning small groups, pairs, or working individually. Three students from one site said their preference for activity size varies based on the nature of the activity, appreciating the benefits of working alone, in pairs, or small groups. One student said, "I would say groups, and pairs, and by yourself. By myself, it's fun because you can do anything by yourself. With a pair, you can work with a friend, and with the group, you can work with everybody." Two students from two sites did indicate a preference for working in pairs, but only for certain activities. Other students find that working in pairs offers a more manageable and enjoyable experience than working alone; as one student said, "[I like] pairs.… Sometimes it's hard to do everything by yourself." However, all students from two sites indicated a preference for small-group activities, finding them more manageable, less overwhelming, and more intimate than larger groups, whereas two students from two sites said they prefer participating in activities within larger, "normal-sized" groups, because they find those more enjoyable and beneficial.

> "I'd say I like just normal-sized groups because it's better to do something with a normal-sized group than just doing with a small group."
>
> —*Middle school student*

Feedback from students revealed **no one advocated for working independently all the time**. Some students preferred working individually at times, but they also valued group and pair activities. Overall, most students were open minded about activity group sizes and seemed to "go with the flow" based on the specific activity.

### What Students Don't Like about Texas ACE

Three students from one site explained they **dislike doing homework** during Texas ACE programming. These students said they would rather participate in enrichment activities such as sports. One student said, "I don't like doing homework.… I like to be athletic and not sit in a spot because you've been sitting in a spot all day already." Some students said they understood the importance of having homework hours, but they felt that it was too much after a long

school day, and they would prefer more hands-on activities. Another student explained that their site had decreased hands-on activities compared to the previous year, leading to a less engaging experience in their opinion.

> "We always do the same exact things every week, so I wish they could advertise something else since we have other activities that we could do."
>
> —*Middle school student*

**Although most students expressed enthusiasm for sports and outdoor activities, some students dislike them**. Seven students from three sites indicated a general dislike for certain outdoor or sports-related activities for various reasons, including disinterest in the activity, environmental discomfort, and lack of social interaction. For example, one student explained they don't want to participate in outdoor activities during seasons when mosquitoes are active. Another student explained that open gym activities are often used toward the end of their programming while students wait for parent and guardian pick-up. However, this unstructured activity leaves them feeling bored and lonely. One student said, "For me, I don't like staying after six because it gets really boring in the gym and there's barely any people left so I don't really have anyone to talk to."

Though these examples of student dislikes should be considered, it bears noting that most students still shared many examples of activities they liked. In addition, 11 students from five sites indicated they enjoy all the activities offered in their programs and do not have any activities they dislike. One student said, "I love everything. Everything is pretty much fun to have memories of and to just reflect on."

### Barriers to Participating in Texas ACE

During focus groups, six students from three sites said that various personal commitments such as sports practices, family obligations, and other activities frequently interfere with their ability to fully participate in the Texas ACE program. These commitments often cause students to arrive late, leave early, or miss parts of the program altogether. For example, one student said, "I usually either show up late for [Texas] ACE ... because I have athletics and it's my last period, and sometimes we have to stay late." In addition, one student said transportation issues sometimes hinder their full participation in the Texas ACE program. Specifically, the need to leave early due to family scheduling conflicts affects the student's ability to stay for the entire duration of activities, particularly when socializing with friends. These barriers generally fit with activity leaders' comments on the same topic, as described previously.

> "Sometimes when I'm with my friends in esports I have to leave at six and it annoys me because my friends get to stay for longer, and I want to hang out with them. And I can't stay for longer because my mom doesn't want to make two trips to school since she wants to pick up my brother."
> —*Middle school student*

In contrast, feedback from seven students from four sites indicates transportation and other logistical issues are generally not a concern for them when participating in the Texas ACE program. These students reported no difficulties with attending or engaging in program activities. Students with significant barriers to participation may have been less likely to join the focus group in the first place.

## Student Perceptions of Staff Performance and the Benefits of Participating in Texas ACE

**This section addresses RQs 2.1 and 2.2:** How are Texas ACE centers approaching the adoption of practices and approaches that reflect quality components detailed in the Texas ACE Roadmap? 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?

During focus groups, AIR staff asked students about activity leaders at their Texas ACE programs. Specifically, they were asked if the activity leaders do a good job running the activities, what they like about their interactions with staff, and if they have opportunities to provide feedback to staff about program experiences. This section provides student answers to these questions.

### *Activity Leader Support during Programming*

Students generally spoke positively about the activity leaders. Ten students at seven sites described staff as "**nice**" and "**helpful,**" but one student described staff as **organized**: "Yes, organization, and if something were to go wrong, they always are the problem solvers if we can't figure that out ourselves." Students also talked about how they have fun and **enjoy spending time with the activity leaders** during activities, with one student saying, "I think the teachers [activity leaders] here are pretty cool … I mean I also give respect to them because I mean they are fun and stuff, but they also **keep us safe** and they also make sure that we're in order. So far, they are fun and they help encourage us on whatever club we're doing." Students highlighted how staff are patient with them and support them with tutoring and homework help.

Three students at three sites also noted how activity leaders tried to make all students **feel included** and **engaged** in the Texas ACE program. The activity leaders do this by making the activities interesting, by ensuring that students work together during activities, and by meeting students "at their level." One student said, "I feel like they're very inclusive. If they see someone there quietly, they'll talk to them and stuff like that." Five students from three sites also said they appreciated it when activity leaders **participated** in sports activities and **encouraged everyone**.

Lastly, one student noted that because Texas ACE is a voluntary program, student participation is a positive reflection of the program staff and activity leaders.

> "I think the staff does a really good job because they help kids with their homework and stuff if they're confused on a question. And they help them whenever they're feeling sad or something and they just help them if they have problems or anything."
>
> —*Middle school student*

### Comfort Providing Feedback to Staff

Twelve students from eight sites noted they felt comfortable giving feedback about the Texas ACE program to the activity leaders and teachers involved in the program. Students said they mostly have the opportunity to provide this feedback in person. In addition, two students at one site said their site collects feedback using student surveys. Nine students said they felt comfortable talking to activity leaders about program-related topics such as activity offerings. However, they also reach out to activity leaders if they are having a bad day and need someone to talk to.

### Benefits of Participating in Texas ACE

Students discussed the benefits of participating in Texas ACE programming in terms of school-day performance and skill acquisition (including social skills and workforce readiness). In terms of school-day performance, most students reported that Texas ACE activities helped improve their performance in subjects such as reading and mathematics and more broadly helped them in terms of general academics. Twelve students across six sites also said that Texas ACE activities had helped them with their school-day classes, with some saying that attending Texas ACE helps them keep up on their homework. For example, one student said, "It [Texas ACE activities] helps academically because if you have homework, they'll help you with the homework, and you could get it done by the next day." Other students noted that Texas ACE activities improve their academic vocabulary, which helps them with their school-day STEM courses: "When we do STEM activities in [Texas] ACE, it helps in science because if they have certain vocabulary words, I might know them from when we do STEM." Finally, one student mentioned that his high school Texas ACE program provides academic and Texas ACE recovery

activities to help students who have fallen behind on their coursework due to absences. Students can make up school-day hours and coursework by attending Texas ACE.

> "If we have attendance recovery that's needed and we have missing work or anything, then they ask us to go into there, find any missing work or anything that we need help on and go through it and they'll help us if needed."
>
> —*High school student*

Not all students reported positive school-day effects as a result of participation in Texas ACE, with eight students across three sites (a mix of elementary and middle grades) reporting only occasional impact on their school-day performance and four students across three sites (secondary grades) reporting no impact. Students who noted occasional impact described reading or mathematics tutoring or homework help during Texas ACE related to their school-day classes. Students who noted no impact on their school performance mostly described enrichment activities such as sports or games as not related to their school- day classes.

> "Sometimes, because in the school time, reading helps me for my reading STARR test and helps me learn new words."
>
> —*Middle school student*

### *Acquiring New Skills*

During focus groups, AIR staff asked students if they had learned any new skills while attending Texas ACE, if they found those skills useful, and if they thought they might use them in the future. Seven students from four sites said that they felt they had developed new **social skills** from attending Texas ACE. Specifically, these students mentioned becoming more outgoing and social, as well as developing good competitive etiquette when playing sports. Students at one site explained that attending Texas ACE has given them the confidence to socialize with other students. For example, one student said, "I feel like joining the [Texas ACE] program, it kind of helped me socialize more, even though I'm not very social, but in the group I socialize more." Another student added that, in addition to socializing more since attending Texas ACE, they have also improved their communication skills. This student said, "My socializing skills have gotten way better. I can communicate with people very well [now]." Lastly, six students from four sites mentioned learning **practical or sports-related skills** during enrichment activities, such as cooking and playing tennis. Students value these skills, and some students mentioned using them at home.

> "For me, I'd have to go with cooking [skills] too because you learn how to make the foods, they teach you how to do it…. They tell you everything that you need to do so you don't miss anything…. Sometimes my mom's really busy and I don't really like interrupting what she does. Sometimes I just get my experience from cooking [at Texas ACE] and I just start making whatever's there [at home]."
>
> —*Middle school student*

In terms of **academic skills**, eight students from four sites said they developed new skills by attending Texas ACE. Students mentioned STEM skills and developing code for robotics. One student said their site coordinator introduced them to new mathematics skills and made the subject fun. This student said, "Our [site coordinator] introduced me [to] Math Hoops. I started playing and made the game fun and learn more about math facts."
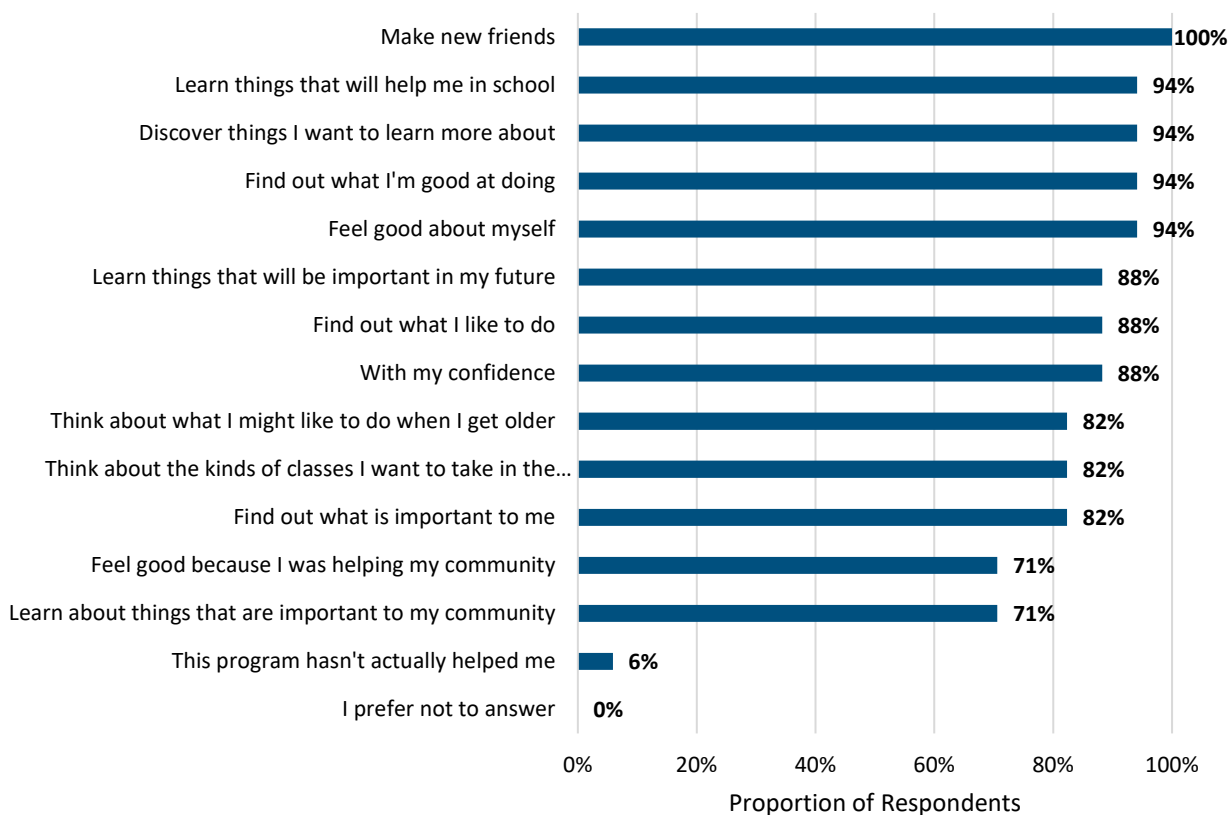
When AIR staff asked students if they would use any of these skills in the future, three students from one site said they felt the social skills they are developing at Texas ACE will help them later in life when they are navigating the workforce. One student said the communication skills they gained at Texas ACE will help them during job interviews. This student said, "Communication skills [will] help me too when I go to job interviews and stuff like that. Being able to talk to somebody just if they [are] a person I've been knowing, that helped too as well." In addition, students from three sites mentioned that knowledge they gained in Texas ACE, such as how to cook, sew, or navigate social media, could translate into helping them in the workforce.

### Survey Results

In addition to student focus groups, AIR staff administered a student survey to focus group participants at the six centers serving secondary schools visited in spring 2024. The survey simply asked respondents to indicate all the ways in which they believe the Texas ACE program has helped them (using check boxes). Seventeen students completed the survey. Students were given 15 statements to choose from. See Exhibit 5.

**Exhibit 5. Secondary Student Survey Results from Six Sites, Spring 2024**

## How has this Texas ACE program helped you specifically?

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Make new friends | 100% |
| Learn things that will help me in school | 94% |
| Discover things I want to learn more about | 94% |
| Find out what I'm good at doing | 94% |
| Feel good about myself | 94% |
| Learn things that will be important in my future | 88% |
| Find out what I like to do | 88% |
| With my confidence | 88% |
| Think about what I might like to do when I get older | 82% |
| Think about the kinds of classes I want to take in the… | 82% |
| Find out what is important to me | 82% |
| Feel good because I was helping my community | 71% |
| Learn about things that are important to my community | 71% |
| This program hasn't actually helped me | 6% |
| I prefer not to answer | 0% |

Proportion of Respondents

*Source.* Student focus group surveys collected by AIR.
*Note. N* = 17.

Of particular note, all 17 respondents said the program had helped them "make new friends" (100%). This survey result aligns with previously discussed findings from the student focus groups, where many students mentioned they had developed new social skills from attending Texas ACE. Almost all respondents also selected benefits of "learn things that will help me in school," "discover things I want to learn about," "find out what I'm good at doing," and "feel good about myself" (all 94%). Only one student selected the statement "This program hasn't actually helped me" (6%), and no students selected the statement "I prefer not to answer."[4] Although only suggestive (especially considering focus group participants may be different from other program participants), these results indicate participation in Texas ACE programs can have a positive impact in a wide variety of ways.

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[4] The student who selected "This program hasn't actually helped me" still endorsed the "make new friends" box.

## Promising Practices

> **This section addresses 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?

This section presents several promising practices identified through the student and activity leader focus groups. These promising practices address ways activity leaders can better develop or adjust program goals, improve student recruitment and retention strategies, and provide engaging activities for Texas ACE student participants. In addition, these promising practices focus on ways site coordinators can support activity leaders with activity planning and delivery and with overall support.

Note that the promising practices presented here may not be suited for all centers. Each practice will have to be considered in light of program-specific contextual factors. These practices are therefore presented to TEA and Texas ACE centers merely as promising strategies or approaches that may warrant program-specific consideration and adaptation.

### Promising Practices: Goals

As discussed in the focus group findings in this report, goal-setting practices of particular note included use of academic data to identify areas of academic need and collecting feedback from school leadership and students to ensure goals are relevant. Key strategies for achieving program goals also include programming flexibility, adapting to student needs (more broadly defined), fostering a positive program culture, and utilizing targeted support and positive reinforcement. In addition, relationship building and personalized assistance are crucial for improving both student academic and social progress.

**Exhibit 6. Texas ACE Promising Practices Related to Goals**

| Goal-related key takeaways to consider | |
| --- | --- |
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Employ data-driven strategies by assessing academic data and collecting feedback from school leadership and students to ensure program goals are relevant. | Review academic data to identify areas of common struggle; talk with school-day teachers to identify areas of challenge in completing homework; review curricula teachers are using for instruction during the school day. |
| Reassess and adjust goals to better align with students' educational needs. | Similar to preceding row, but this practice stresses flexibility in goal adjustment. Review data on a regular basis and consider whether program goals fit, given the trends in student data. |

| Goal-related key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Exercise programming flexibility and adapt to student needs. | Run different types of activities concurrently based on student feedback such as interest surveys; if staffing is limited, ask students to prioritize interest areas; embed academic content in enrichment activities, focusing on areas of student need (e.g., mathematical concepts in cooking activities). |
| Foster a positive program culture. | Collectively, with program staff and students, determine program values and ways to uphold those values in practice. Site coordinators and activity leaders should model and acknowledge good examples. |
| Focus on relationship building and provide personalized assistance to improve both student academic and social progress. | Relationship building is a key lever for success that takes time, attention, and continuous growth. This can take look like making personal connections with students by calling them by name and checking in to follow up on accomplishments (e.g., passing a test, reconciling with a friend) and challenges (e.g., anxiety about an academic or social issue). |

*Source.* Activity leader and student focus group data collected by AIR in spring 2024.

## Promising Practices: Student Recruitment and Retention

Activity leaders shared that they think students are drawn to the program for its engaging enrichment activities, the autonomy to choose clubs, and the opportunity for social connections with peers and staff. Building relationships with students is essential to fostering a sense of community at Texas ACE centers, achieved by having reliable and consistent staff who show interest in the students and their activities. In addition, giving students a voice and choice about their program experience helps develop a sense of belonging, which might include providing opportunities for student leadership positions in their enrichment club activities.

**Exhibit 7. Texas ACE Promising Practices Related to Student Recruitment and Retention**

| Recruitment and retention key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Foster social connections with peers and staff. | Encourage staff to participate in activities such as sports; use a mix of grouping strategies (individual work, pairs, small groups, large groups). |
| Raise awareness about the Texas ACE program with school-day staff. | Work with school leaders to determine how to share program information (e.g., goals, alignment to the school day and community needs, benefits to participating) and methods to recruit staff and students. |

| Recruitment and retention key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Build relationships with students through reliable and consistent staff who show interest in their activities.[5] | Survey activity leaders to find out what excites them and use those ideas to develop enrichment activities; pursue sufficient staff, especially school-day teachers, so that no individual staff gets burnt out; regularly survey students about their interests and get feedback on activities. |
| Give students a voice and choice in their program experience. | Practice multiple approaches to garnering feedback and student input—surveys, focus groups, thumbs-up/thumbs-down reactions, etc.; be as responsive as you can to student interests by providing choices of activity content, approach to activities, or activity type (this will be limited by staffing, program goals, and program resources). |
| Offer opportunities for student leadership positions. | Think of age-appropriate ways to involve students in leading, whether acting as a small-group leader, helping with day-to-day administrative tasks, or working alongside the adult activity leader(s). |

*Source.* Activity leader and student focus group data collected by AIR in spring 2024.

## Promising Practices: Program Activities

Students appreciated it when Texas ACE offered a wide range of activity options. Students reported varying preferences for activity group sizes, depending on the nature of the activity, and valued the benefits of working alone, in pairs, or in small groups. Note that these practices overlap considerably with the engagement and retention strategies outlined earlier.

### Exhibit 8. Texas ACE Promising Practices Related to Program Activities

| Program activities key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Ask students about their likes, dislikes, group-size preferences, and barriers to participation to inform programming. | This can be done with surveys, ad hoc conversations, focus groups, and so forth; consider monitoring attendance and talking with students whose attendance drops to identify barriers to participation, dislikes, or preferences. |

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[5] Building a reliable and consistent staff can be a daunting challenge. AIR has published two reports generally covering the topic of staffing, which contain information about staffing challenges: *Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Descriptive Study of Project Director and Site Coordinator Perspectives on Staffing (2021-22)* and *Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Descriptive Results of the Frontline Staff Survey (Spring 2023).* Both reports can be accessed at https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/program-evaluations/out-of-school-learning-opportunities.

| Program activities key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Offer a variety of activities, such as arts and crafts, sports, esports, STEM, and field trips, to cater to diverse interests. | Offering students a possible "menu" of options and asking for feedback could help identify general interests; if staffing is limited (i.e., multiple concurrent activities are not possible), provide activities one at a time but vary them based on student feedback. Let students know that you heard their feedback by sharing how activities align to academic needs and enrichment interests. |

*Source.* Activity leader and student focus group data collected by AIR in spring 2024.
*Note.* STEM refers to activities incorporating science, technology, engineering, and/or mathematics.

## Promising Practices: Activity Planning and Delivery

Activity leaders appreciated the flexibility to modify lesson plans developed by their site coordinators to better serve individual students' needs. They reported feeling supported and trusted by their site coordinators, who check in daily and offer guidance as needed. In addition, activity leaders collaborate with school-day staff to discuss students' academic and social progress, often through informal, in-person conversations.

### Exhibit 9. Texas ACE Promising Practices Related to Activity Planning and Delivery

| Activity planning and delivery key takeaways to consider | |
|---|---|
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Allow activity leaders to modify lesson plans to meet individual students' needs. | A site coordinator might provide a lesson plan that includes embedded mathematics instruction; this might be adapted to cover specific areas students are struggling with. |
| Ensure site coordinators provide daily check-ins and guidance to activity leaders. | The site coordinator can make "rounds" while activities are ongoing to take a pulse check—see if staff need specific help or simply need a break; briefly meet with activity leaders before the program to provide any updates to programming for the day and any student specific needs and to ensure everyone has what they need. |
| Encourage collaboration between activity leaders and school-day staff to discuss students' academic and social progress.[6] | Site coordinators can spearhead this type of collaboration by building relationships with school administrators and school-day teachers; site coordinators can encourage communication between activity leaders and school-day teachers by brokering connections, setting up meetings, etc. |

*Source.* Activity leader and student focus group data collected by AIR in spring 2024.

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[6] AIR's recent report 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)* provides additional information and strategies for building school-day linkages. The full report can be found on TEA's website, located here: https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/program-evaluations/out-of-school-learning-opportunities.

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## Promising Practices: Staff Support

Most activity leaders reported feeling supported by their site coordinators, colleagues, and students and felt appreciated by various members of the school community, including principals and site coordinators. They highlighted the importance of being acknowledged for their impact and receiving positive comments from site coordinators.

**Exhibit 10. Texas ACE Promising Practices Related to Supporting Staff**

| Staff support key takeaways to consider | |
| --- | --- |
| **Strategy/practice** | **Examples** |
| Regularly assess whether activity leaders feel valued and appreciated for their work. | Be proactive about regularly recognizing activity leader contributions; monitor stress levels and burnout via regular, intentional check-ins; assess staff morale via surveys (what's working, what isn't), feedback forms, or anonymous suggestion boxes. Connect with activity leaders to understand how they like to be recognized for their work. |
| Recognize and acknowledge the impact activity leaders make within the school community. | Use data to show the reach of the program in terms of attendance or target student groups; promote student survey data or feedback that shows positive impact. |
| Ensure activity leaders have the training, support, and materials they need to feel confident in their roles. | Ask activity leaders what training they would find most helpful; regularly check in with activity leaders to find out if they need support with curricula, activity ideas, or student challenges; establish contingency plans for staff absences. |

*Source.* Activity leader and student focus group data collected by AIR in spring 2024.

# Discussion

This report examines several key areas of Texas ACE program implementation, focusing on vision, mission, and goals and school community engagement. As noted in the introduction and as indicated in the call-out box on this page, this report is the second in a two-part series exploring these topics, with the first report (based on survey and interview data) published during June 2024. The findings of this report are therefore helpfully understood alongside the best-practices findings from the first report, since the findings shown here augment and generally confirm initial findings.

## *Importance of Communication*

In the first report, effective communication between Texas ACE staff, school leadership, and community stakeholders was identified as critical for aligning program goals with school priorities and ensuring smooth program operations. Collaboration between activity leaders and school administrators, particularly in using academic performance data to inform programming, was highlighted as a best practice.

Equally important is open communication with students and families. As discussed in this report, sites that regularly sought feedback from participants said they were better able to tailor their activities to meet the interests and needs of their communities. 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.

> **Previous Report Covering Vision, Mission, Goals, and Engagement**
>
> This report constitutes a "part 2" in AIR's investigation into the topics of program vision, mission, goals, and engagement. The first report on these topics, based on a site coordinator survey (spring 2023) and 20 site coordinator interviews (fall 2023), can be found on TEA's website: *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)*.

## Goal Alignment with Stakeholder Needs and Interests

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**. This alignment is essential for ensuring the Texas ACE program remains relevant and continues to garner support from key stakeholders, including school administrators, staff, students, and families. During the spring 2024 site visits, activity leaders across multiple sites 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.

## Flexibility and Responsiveness to Student Needs

Program flexibility emerged as a key factor in maintaining student engagement. Activity leaders across multiple sites 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.

**Aligned Findings from the Previous Report: 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; leaders who find their activities personally interesting will more effectively convey that interest and excitement to participants.

However, program flexibility is often constrained by operational challenges. **Staffing shortages** were often reported as a barrier to effective program delivery, with activity leaders at several sites highlighting difficulties in recruiting and onboarding new staff. In particular, focus group participants emphasized that unclear role expectations and insufficient training negatively affected program quality. In addition, **space constraint** was cited as another barrier to program flexibility, particularly in schools where access to appropriate indoor and outdoor space was limited. The lack of available gyms, classrooms, and recreational areas restricted the range of activities that could be offered, especially those that require more physical space or specialized equipment.

### *Data-Driven Program Improvement*

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 were most needed. This data-driven approach ensures program goals remain aligned with student needs and allows for timely adjustments to improve outcomes.

In addition to academic data, 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.

**Aligned Findings from the Previous Report: Data Literacy**

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.

## Recommended Next Steps

Based on the findings of this report as understood within the context of the first report, the following recommendations are provided for TEA's consideration:

1.  **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 and frontline staff). Such discussion will confirm or amend these best practices and promote their implementation.

2.  **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.

3.  **Increase Student Engagement through Expanded 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 cocreate 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.

4.  **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.

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# Appendix A. Sampling for Site Visits

The purpose of this appendix is to outline the criteria utilized to select a sample of Texas ACE grantees represented in Cycles 11 and 12 for inclusion in site visits conducted during spring 2024 related to vision, mission, and goals and school community engagement. The primary goal of the spring 2024 site visits was to explore how centers plan student activities, engage the school community, develop program goals, and support staff. Ultimately, the sample selection process was meant to result in the identification of nine Texas ACE programs to conduct targeted follow-ups in the spring 2024 site visits.

The data used to guide sample selection were obtained from the findings from 20 fall 2023 site coordinator interviews. Criteria were primarily based on activity planning solutions and staff support.

**Exhibit A1. Criteria Used to Rank Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE) Site Coordinator Interviews for Determining Site Visits**

| Concept | Data from interview | Points assigned |
|---|---|---|
| **Activity planning solutions** | | **Maximum of 2 points** |
| Demonstrates a capacity to find activity planning solutions to emergent student needs | 1. Description of clear planning process<br>2. Planning adaptable to student needs | One point assigned if either of these responses were found in interview data |
| **Staff support** | | **Maximum of 2 points** |
| Reports employing multiple strategies to support staff | 1. Collaborates with staff on planning activities<br>2. Development of interpersonal relationship/emotional support | One point assigned if either of these responses were found in interview data |

Ultimately, the final selection of interview sample candidates was based on the following utilization of the criteria outlined in Exhibit A1.

1. From the criteria outlined in Exhibit A1, the program was found to have 3 or more points based on the criteria used to assess programs adopting promising approaches (12 of 20 sites met these criteria).

2. AIR also strongly considered sites where the site coordinator expressed enthusiasm about learning from the evaluation and excitement about a potential visit (13 of 20 sites met these criteria).

3. The first nine programs were selected for inclusion in the sample.

## Final Selection of Sites

TEA reviewed the list of nine sites. Characteristics of the nine-program sample are shown in Exhibits A2 and A3.

**Exhibit A2. Recommended Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE) Sample Programs for Interview, by Locale**

| Recommended sample by locale (duplicated) | |
|---|---|
| City | 4 |
| Suburban | 4 |
| Rural | 1 |

**Exhibit A3. Recommended Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE) Sample Programs for Interview, by Grade Levels Served**

| Recommended sample by grade levels served (duplicated) | |
|---|---|
| Elementary school | 3 |
| Middle school | 3 |
| High school | 2 |
| K–8 | 1 |

After confirmation of the nine programs for inclusion in the site visits, AIR contacted the site coordinators at each program to coordinate the visit. The team held brief 20-minute calls with each site coordinator to explain the site visit procedures and logistics. Each site coordinator was asked to provide AIR with up to six activity leaders and six students whom they recommended to participate in focus groups.

# Appendix B. Data Collection Instruments

## Activity Leader Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to join us for today's focus group. TEA has contracted with AIR to study Texas ACE programs to explore program implementation, identify approaches and practices that appear to support effective programs, and document program outcomes and impact.

This 60-minute focus group aims to understand your thoughts and perceptions of how the Texas ACE program is being implemented at your site, with a particular focus on planning student activities, school community engagement, program goals, and how you are supported at your Texas ACE program.

We've learned through a previous conversation with your site coordinator that your site has successful practices that can be helpful to other Texas ACE programs. When responding to today's questions, please keep this in mind, as you all have valuable information that will contribute to the Texas ACE program's success across the state.

Your responses in this discussion will only be used to help inform our understanding of sites like yours and will not be used to evaluate your program specifically. We want to learn from you and share insights related to possible promising practices you've implemented and any challenges you've experienced.

Your participation in the focus group is completely voluntary, and you have the right to pass on answering any questions or to withdraw from the discussion at any time.

Information from this focus group and other data we collect from your Texas ACE program will be included in a written report. That said, your responses to my questions will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. In our reports, none of the respondents will be identified by name.

Lastly, we would like to record this conversation so we can be sure that we have an accurate record of our discussion. We will not share this recording with anyone outside the research team, and we will delete the recording after the study is complete.

**Do I have your permission to record this interview?**

I am going to begin the recording now. [TURN ON THE RECORDING.] Today is [STATE FULL DATE, E.G., FRIDAY, March 11th, 2024].

Please state your name, title, role, how many years you've worked at your site, and if you feel comfortable sharing, what aspect of afterschool programming you're most passionate about.

*To start, I am going to ask you a few questions about your site's goals.*

**Program Goals and Attainment**

1. What are the goals of your Texas ACE program? (e.g., improving math scores, providing new experiences through enrichment activities, improving school day attendance)

2. How do you achieve those goals through the activities that your program offers? (e.g., provides math tutoring)

3. Do you know how your program develops goals and what information is collected to inform them? If so, please tell me about that process.

4. Can you share an example of a recent achievement that has shown success in reaching the goals you mentioned? (e.g., students have shown improvement in grades or state assessment scores, students are learning new skills through enrichment activities, school day attendance has improved)

5. Are you aware of any challenges or obstacles your site has encountered in achieving its goals?
   i. Has your site addressed or overcome them?

*Next, I'd like to discuss recruitment and retention.*

**Recruitment and Retention**

*Recruitment*

6. How were you recruited to join Texas ACE? What aspects of Texas ACE encouraged you to apply?
   i. Was there a specific activity you wanted to lead?

7. Are you involved in recruiting students into the Texas ACE program? What does that involvement look like?

8. What do you think is the most likely reason students attend Texas ACE?

*Retention*

9. How does your site foster a sense of community and belonging among students?
   i. How do you encourage students to stay engaged in and committed to the program?

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10. Are there ways you can assess whether a student is less engaged or is at risk of no longer attending Texas ACE?

    i. What are the most common reasons students drop out of the program?

    ii. Are there strategies Texas ACE staff use to help retain students? Please describe.

*Next, I'd like to discuss student activity planning.*

**Activity Planning and Delivery**

11. Who primarily develops the activity lesson plans for your Texas ACE program?

**If activity leaders help with developing and planning activities, ask questions i and ii. If the site coordinator develops and plans the activities, ask question iii.**

*If activity leader primarily develops lessons plans:*

    i. What support do you receive from the site coordinator or other site staff in activity planning?

    ii. Do activity leaders collaborate with each other when developing activities? What does that look like? (e.g., how often do you meet, what topics do you usually address)

*If site coordinator or other staff member primarily develops lesson plans:*

    iii. What do you know about how activity lessons are developed?

        a. Does the site coordinator review activity lesson plans with you?

        b. To what extent do you feel you can tweak lessons? What's an example of when you might tweak a lesson plan?

12. What resources are used to create activities you lead? (e.g., school day curriculums, TEA-provided curriculums, online academic programs, other resources) and are there any resources you prefer?

13. Can you provide any examples of how your site collaborates with other school-day staff to deliver student activities? (e.g., school counselors, school administrators, school support staff—janitorial, cafeteria, etc.)

14. To what extent does your site coordinator support you during activity delivery? (e.g., help with class management/discipline issues, checking in, providing materials)

*Next, I'd like to discuss communication strategies at your Texas ACE program.*

**Communication**

15. Do you communicate with school-day staff about student academic and social progress?

    i. If so, how does the communication happen? (e.g., email, one-on-one interactions, during staff meetings)

16. How do you prefer to receive information about the Texas ACE program from your site coordinator? (e.g., email, team meetings, texts) Please explain your preferences.

*Next, I'd like to discuss more about how you are supported in your Texas ACE program.*

**Staff Support**

17. Do you feel valued and appreciated for the work you do for Texas ACE? Why or why not?

18. Do you inform your site coordinator when you feel stressed or burned out?

    i. How does your site coordinator support you when you feel this way?

    ii. Is there anything you think site coordinators or other Texas ACE staff could do to help you feel more supported?

**Wrap-Up**

19. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your site that we have not discussed today?

## Student Focus Group Assent and Protocol (4th and 5th grade)

My name is [_____]. I work at the American Institutes for Research (AIR). We are trying to get a better idea of how students, like yourselves, experience Texas ACE/local program name activities. I am inviting you to participate in a research study about your experience in this program with Mr. or Ms. X [interviewer, use the name of the site coordinator] and how it may have helped you.

Your parent/caregiver knows about this study and gave permission for you to be involved. In the next 45 minutes, I will ask you to listen to some statements and tell me what you think. Then I will ask why you think that. I will then read the next statement. If it is okay with you, I will also audio record this so my team at AIR can go back and listen to what you said. No one else will listen to the recording. If you do not want to be recorded, however, I will only take detailed notes.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to do this study. Even if you start the study, you can stop later if you want. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the discussion, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study, to the extent permitted by law.

Signing here means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.


Name of the Participant (Write your name in the line):


_____


Signature of the Participant (Put your signature in the line):


_____


Date: _____

# Texas ACE Student Focus Group Protocol

## For Elementary School Sites

I will be taking notes as we talk and would also like to record our conversation. The recording will only be shared with other members of the AIR research team. Do I have your permission to record this conversation?

[Depending on the response to this question, either start the recording at this point or indicate that only notes will be taken.]

**Directions.** I am going to give you three emotions cards and 12 statements. I am going to read you the 12 statements. You will have your own copy. After you think about the statement, show the card that describes what you think. After you respond, I will ask why you think that. We will start with an easy one.

The three cards you have in front of you are: smiley face if you agree; flat line face if you are unsure; and frowny face if you disagree.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. I like pizza. | 2. I like the activities I participate in at this program. | 3. I get to be in charge of doing something to help my program. |
| 4. I get to choose what activities I participate in. | 5. I learn new things or have new experiences in this program. | 6. I can use the things I learn in this program during my school day classes. |
| 7. I get along with other students at this program. | 8. I like working with other students during activities. | 9. I feel like the adults and other students listen to me at this program. |
| 10. I enjoy being around the adults who work at this program. | 11. I can talk to adults who work at this program when I'm upset or have a problem. | 12. I look forward to coming to this program every day. |

## High School and Middle School Assent and Focus Group Protocol

My name is [_____]. I work at the American Institutes for Research (AIR). We are trying to get a better idea of how students, like yourselves, experience Texas ACE activities/local program name. I am inviting you to participate in a research study about your experience in your program and how it may have helped you. Our discussion today will help us understand how we can make programing even better. We want to hear your opinions and feedback about what you like, don't like, would like to see more of, etc. There are no right or wrong answers. This is a safe space to share about your experiences at this program and preferences you might have. Please feel free to ask me questions at any time.

Your parent/caregiver knows about this study and gave permission for you to be involved. Please know that participation in this discussion is voluntary. Voluntary means that you can choose to participate or to stop participating at any time. You can also choose not to answer or skip any of the questions I ask today. This discussion is confidential, meaning we will not identify you by name in our reports. We ask that you not repeat other peoples' comments to anyone outside of our conversation today. This is so that everyone can feel comfortable saying what they think.

If you decide to be in the discussion, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study. What you say or do in the discussion will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law.

Signing here means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.


Name of the Participant: _____


Signature of the Participant: _____


Date: _____

# Texas ACE Student Focus Group Protocol

## For Middle and High School Sites

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this discussion today. I will be taking notes as we talk and would also like to record our conversation to make sure we capture all you have to say about the program. The recording will only be shared with other members of the AIR research team. Do I have your permission to record this conversation?

[If all participants agree state the following]

> Since I will be relying on our audio recording to create my notes, please say your first name each time you answer a question. If you want to use a pseudonym, or made-up name, instead of your real name, that's totally fine. Just remember to use the same made-up name every time. During this discussion I will ask a question, and then anyone who wants to answer first can go ahead and answer. No need to raise your hands but try not to interrupt each other. I will also make sure everyone has a chance to answer every question. If I ask you if you want to answer or have anything to add, please go ahead and either share or tell me you want to pass.

[If any participant declines to be recorded, state the following]

> During this discussion I will ask a question, and then anyone who wants to answer first can go ahead and answer. No need to raise your hands, but because I will be relying on detailed notes try not to interrupt each other. I will also make sure everyone has a chance to answer every question. If I ask you if you want to answer or have anything to add, please go ahead and either share or tell me you want to pass.

Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

Thank you all again for helping me today. I'm excited to hear about what you have to share.

Please remember when answering the questions to think about your experiences in this Texas ACE program/local program name with Mr. or Ms. X [Interviewer, use the name of the site coordinator].

Let's start with some introductions, and then we will move into talking about this program.

[If recording, start recording]

Please tell me:

1. Your name (or the name you will be using today)

2. What grade you're in

3. How long you have been attending this program [summer, morning, afterschool sessions]

4. What your favorite subject in school is

*[Remind the participants to state their names each time they share their comments]*

1. How did you find out/learn about this program before joining? For example, did a teacher tell you about it, you read about it on a flyer, or some other way?

2. What do you like best about this program's activities?
   a. Are there any activities that you don't like? Why don't you like them?
   b. Do you prefer activities in small groups, pairs, or on your own? Why?
   c. Do you ever have difficulty participating in the program? For example, because of needing a ride, other commitments, cost, or the time of a program?

3. Do any of your Texas ACE/local program name activities help you with your school day classes? For example, is there a reading or math activity that has helped you improve in those subjects? *(examples might include feeling more confident about their math skills, improving their reading level)*

4. If you could give staff advice to get more kids to come to this program, what would you tell them?

5. Have the staff at this program generally done a good job with running the activities?
   a. What do staff do to make activities fun? Interesting?
   b. Think about the staff you like interacting with most, what are the things you like most about them? *(examples if needed: they listen, share similar interests, are supportive)*

6. Do you have opportunities to provide feedback (positive or negative) to staff, either about the activities or about your experience at the program? If so, please tell me more.

7. Do you get to be in charge of doing something to help the program (suggesting ideas for activities, planning activities, or leading an activity)? If so, please provide an example of when you've helped. *(examples might include handing out materials, modeling an activity, tutoring other students, helping students with homework)*

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8. Have you learned any new skills or had new experiences by participating in this program? Can you tell me about that?

    a. Have you found the new skills or experiences useful? Do you think you might use them in the future?

9. How do you feel about the social atmosphere or environment of this program? For example, are your peers friendly, respectful, supportive?

    a. Are there ways in which you'd like the atmosphere/environment to improve?

10. What kinds of activities would you like this program to offer in the future?

11. Is there anything else about your experience with this program that you wanted to mention?

### *Conclusion*

It's been wonderful to hear about your experiences and this information will be useful for the future. Before you go back to your activities, could you please fill out this very short survey about how this program might be helpful you? Once you finish, please hand me your survey and you can go back to your activities. Let me know if you have any questions. Thanks again and have a great rest of your day!

## Student Survey

## Secondary Students

**1. How has this Texas ACE program helped you specifically?**

| This program has helped me… | *Check all that apply* |
|---|---|
| Feel good about myself. | |
| With my confidence. | |
| Make new friends. | |
| Find out what is important to me. | |
| Find out what I'm good at doing. | |
| Find out what I like to do. | |
| Discover things I want to learn more about. | |
| Learn things that will help me in school. | |
| Learn things that will be important for my future. | |
| Think about the kinds of classes I want to take in the future. | |
| Think about what I might like to do when I get older. | |
| Learn about things that are important to my community. | |
| Feel good because I was helping my community. | |
| This program hasn't actually helped me. | |
| I prefer not to answer. | |

**2. Do you have any additional comments about your experience at this program that we didn't get to talk about, or you didn't have a chance to share?**

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