

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

Qualitative Study of Perspectives on Strategic Planning, Partnerships, and Engagement (2024–25)

Keisha Bailey, Kenya Roy, Ashley Darang, and Matt Vinson
American Institutes for Research

April 2026

Submitted to the Texas Education Agency



Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Contents

- Executive Summary..... v
- Introduction 1
- Insights from Parents and Guardians: Engagement, Access, and Impact in the Texas ACE Program..... 3
 - Program Entry: Awareness and Enrollment 4
 - Program Engagement: Participation and Value 7
 - Community Connections 9
- Insights from Community Partners: Engagement, Collaboration, and Impact in the Texas ACE Program 12
 - Partnership Establishment and General Contributions..... 13
 - Partner Involvement in Academic Support 15
 - Community Partner Engagement and Communication with Texas ACE..... 16
 - Community Needs and Perceived Program Impact 19
- School/District Administrators’ Experiences with 21st CCLC TX ACE Programs..... 23
 - Leadership and Purpose 24
 - Impact and Engagement..... 25
 - Alignment and Improvement..... 25
- Steering Committee Perspectives on Program Oversight and Collaboration 27
 - Membership and Composition 28
 - Meeting Operations..... 29
 - Roles and Responsibilities..... 30
 - Strategic Input and Feedback Use 31
 - Decision Matrix: Steering Committee Structure and Operations 32
- Discussion..... 41
 - Recommendations 43
- Appendix A. Site Visit Sampling 45
- Appendix B. Focus Group and Interview Protocols 47

Exhibits

Exhibit ES.1. Stakeholder Motivations and Perceived Value of the Texas ACE Program	vii
Exhibit ES.2. Needs Met by Texas ACE According to Parents, Administrators, Partners, and Steering Committee Members	viii
Exhibit ES.3. Stakeholder-Identified Challenges and Their Perceived Impacts on Participation and Sustainability	x
Exhibit ES.4. Stakeholder Aspirations for the Texas ACE Program	xii
Exhibit ES.5. Stakeholder Recommendations for Strengthening the Texas ACE Program	xiv
Exhibit 1. How Families Experienced Support Through Texas ACE	8
Exhibit 2. Modes of Family Connection Described by Parents	11
Exhibit 3. Previous and Current Findings on Parent and Guardian Engagement	12
Exhibit 4. Examples of Community Partner Contributions to Texas ACE	14
Exhibit 5. How Community Partners Described Academic Collaboration in Texas ACE	15
Exhibit 6. Current and Previous Findings on Community Partnerships	18
Exhibit 7. How Community Partners Described Local Needs and Perceived Program Impact	20
Exhibit 8. Dimensions of Program Effectiveness as Described by Community Partners	22
Exhibit 9. Current and Previous Findings on School/District Administrative Leadership and Alignment	27
Exhibit 10. Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of Steering Committees	30
Exhibit 11. Steering Committee Membership and Composition Considerations Emerging from Steering Committee Focus Group Discussions	33
Exhibit 12. Steering Committee Meeting Frequency Consideration Emerging from Steering Committee Focus Group Discussions	34
Exhibit 13. Effective Steering Committee Meeting Practices as Perceived by Steering Committee Focus Group Participants	35
Exhibit 14. Considerations for Steering Committee Member Roles and Responsibilities	36
Exhibit 15. Steering Committee Use of Feedback	36
Exhibit 16. Decision Matrix: Steering Committee Structure and Operations	38
Exhibit 17. Steering Committee Structure, Operations, and Use Across Data Sources	39
Exhibit A1. Site Sample Characteristics for Visits Conducted by AIR During Spring 2025	46
Exhibit A2. Total Site Visit Focus Groups Conducted by AIR, by Group and Data Collection Approach (Spring 2025)	46

Copyright Notice

Copyright © 2026. Texas Education Agency. All rights reserved.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the right to reproduce the copyrighted work is granted to Texas public school districts, Texas charter schools, and Texas education service centers for non-commercial, non-profit educational use within the state of Texas, and to residents of the state of Texas for their own personal, non-commercial, non-profit educational use, and provided further that no dollar amount is charged for such reproduced materials other than to cover the out-of-pocket cost of reproduction and distribution. No other rights, express or implied, are granted hereby.

For more information, please contact copyrights@tea.texas.gov.

Acronyms

ACE	Afterschool Centers on Education
AIR	American Institutes for Research
CAN	certified nursing assistant
CRLA	College Reading and Learning Association
EKG	electrocardiogram
OST	out of school time
PCT	patient care technician
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
TEA	Texas Education Agency
UTSA	University of Texas at San Antonio
21st CCLC	Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Executive Summary

The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE) is funded by the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant program. Texas ACE provides a wide array of academic enrichment and youth development activities during non-school hours, with the primary goals of enhancing students' academic achievement, supporting character development, and cultivating 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 Texas ACE. In 2022, TEA contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct this evaluation. This report, which is the second of two reports covering the topics of **strategic planning, partnerships, and engagement**, is part of AIR's evaluation work. The first report, [*Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Descriptive Study of Site Coordinator Perspectives on Strategic Planning, Partnerships, and Engagement \(2023–24\)*](#), presented results from a program-wide site coordinator survey and 19 follow-up site coordinator interviews. This second report is based on seven site visits conducted at a subset of the interview sites during spring 2025. Sites were chosen for visits based on both survey response and interview data, along with consideration of grant characteristics such as locale and grade levels served. The goal of the site visits was to explore the topics of the first report more deeply, with particular focus on best practices, solutions to challenges, and helpful insights.

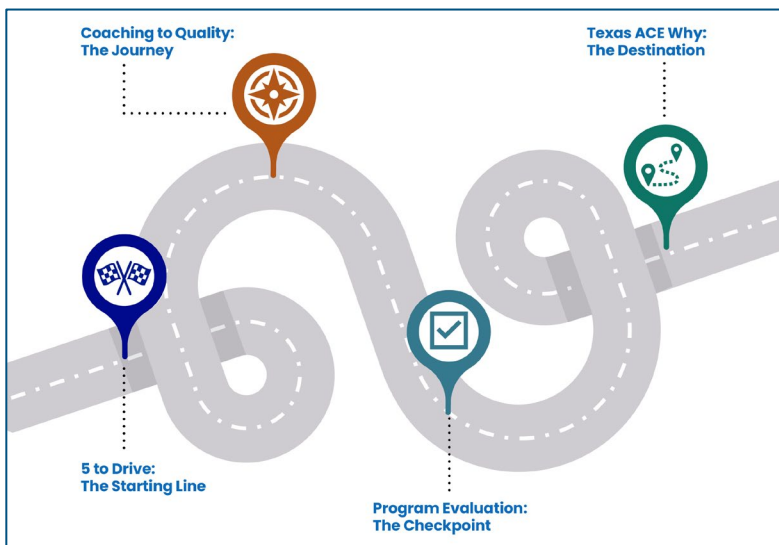
Data in this Report

The findings in this report are based on **seven Texas ACE site visits** conducted in spring 2025. The site visits included **interviews or focus group discussions** with four stakeholder groups, though not all groups were included at each site because of availability: parent/guardians (n=7), partner staff (n=4), school administrators (n=4), and steering committee members (n=4). A total of 19 interviews/focus groups were completed, with an average of 2.7 per site.

Evaluation and the Texas ACE Roadmap

The [*Texas ACE Roadmap to High-Quality Out-of-School Time*](#) (Texas ACE Roadmap) presents TEA’s comprehensive framework for ensuring program quality. The findings in this report align with the Texas ACE Roadmap’s “**Three Key Strategies**,” which together make up the third component of the 5 to Drive:

- **Strong program operations** that ensure a safe, supportive, and educationally enriching environment for all students, staff, and families
- **Alignment with the school day** through ongoing collaboration with school-day staff, attendance at professional development sessions, and connections to school-day systems
- **Community involvement** through partnerships and engagement opportunities that support local needs, grant requirements, and program sustainability¹



As shown in the subsections that follow, the findings in this report are organized around six subtopics that align with the interview protocols: **stakeholder motivations, perceptions of program value, needs that the program addresses, challenges that affect participation and delivery, program growth and sustainability, and practical suggestions for improvement.** However, it may be useful to keep the Three Key Strategies in mind when reviewing the findings.

Stakeholder Perceptions: Motivations and Program Value

The first subtopic addressed stakeholder motivations for involvement in Texas ACE, along with perceptions of the program’s value. As reported by focus group and interview participants, motivations for involvement focused on **goal alignment, relationships, and safety**, while stakeholders emphasized that the program’s general value stems from its **dependability** and the balance it creates among **safety, learning, and enrichment**. (See Exhibit ES.1.) Note that some motivations and perceptions of value were specific to given stakeholder groups, such as parents’ and guardians’ perceived value that Texas ACE helped to reduce household stress through homework and tutoring support.

¹ *Texas ACE Roadmap to High-Quality Out-of-School Time*, page 5.

Exhibit ES.1. Stakeholder Motivations and Perceived Value of the Texas ACE Program

Stakeholder Group	Motivations	N	Cross-Stakeholder Group Mentions	Perception of Value
Parents	Safe, structured supervision during afterschool hours	6/7 (86%)	Administrators referred to Texas ACE as a “safe space.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced household stress through homework and tutoring support Improved evening routines and parent–child communication Development of confidence, leadership, and friendships Sense of belonging and connection to school
	Limited childcare options, especially in rural communities	3/7 (43%)	Implicitly echoed by administrators and community partners (need for accessible programming)	
	Desire for reliable, trusted adult presence	7/7 (100%)	Mentioned by all other groups in terms of trust, consistency, and relationships	
Community partners	Extension of organizational missions through collaboration with schools	4/4 (100%)	Also stressed by steering committees (alignment) and administrators (shared goals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded access to family and community resources (food, health, workforce) Strengthened family engagement and community visibility
	Opportunities for trust-based partnerships	4/4 (100%)	Parallels parents (trust) and administrators (reliability)	
Administrators	Alignment with school priorities for academic improvement	4/4 (100%)	Echoed by steering committees (alignment, accountability)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literacy and math remediation; enrichment in STEM, arts, and leadership Improved attendance and persistence College and career readiness through certifications and dual-credit opportunities
	Help improve engagement and attendance	3/4 (75%)	Mentioned by parents (belonging) and community partners (participation)	
	Need for remediation and enrichment beyond the school day	4/4 (100%)	Shared by parents (homework help) and community partners (career readiness activities)	
Steering committee members	Commitment to accountability and sustainability structures	4/4 (100%)	Echoed by administrators (alignment and progress tracking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole-child and whole-family focus combining academic, social, and behavioral support Infrastructure linking schools, families, and community organizations
	Interest in program infrastructure supporting long-term collaboration	4/4 (100%)	Shared by community partners (sustained relationships) and parents (trust and stability)	

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

“I would say that it addresses helping students to stay in school. It addresses helping them to graduate. Also for them, it’s a place for struggling students to get that extra help that they need. It’s a program that provides a safe place for kids that maybe they don’t have another place to turn to, and that’s kind of like a little home base for them.” – High school community partner focus group

Stakeholder Perceptions: Needs Addressed by the Texas ACE Program

The second subtopic concerns the needs addressed by Texas ACE programming. Stakeholders described how Texas ACE addressed needs relating to both students’ learning and family life, emphasizing that the program provides dependable afterschool structure that combines safety, tutoring, and enrichment, giving students a consistent space for learning and connection. Importantly, stakeholders generally described **Texas ACE as a coordinated framework of support that responds to local conditions and addresses the overlapping needs of students, families, and communities** (e.g., family

workshops, food distribution, or behavioral supports connecting schools with community resources). (See Exhibit ES.2.)

Exhibit ES.2. Needs Met by Texas ACE According to Parents, Administrators, Partners, and Steering Committee Members

Stakeholder Group	Identified Needs	Source Count	Cross-Stakeholder Group Mentions	How Texas ACE Addresses These Needs
Parents	Limited access to safe, supervised environments after school	5/7 (71%)	Also cited by administrators (“safe space for students”) and community partners (“structured support for families”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided structured supervision that reduced safety risks and afterschool isolation • Offered dependable childcare that eased family stress • Facilitated clubs and activities that fostered leadership and belonging
	Few affordable childcare options in rural areas	1/7 (14%)	Mentioned by administrators and community partners as a need for accessible programming	
	Need for opportunities that build social confidence	6/7 (86%)	Shared by administrators and community partners through focus on engagement and leadership	
Community partners	Families lacking access to community or health resources	3/4 (75%)	Also raised by parents (need for support beyond school) and steering committees (behavioral and social supports)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized family workshops, food distribution, and community events • Connected families to health and workforce services through partnerships
	Limited collaboration between schools and service providers	2/4 (50%)	Shared by administrators (alignment with school priorities) and steering committees (coordinated infrastructure)	

Table Continues

Exhibit ES.2 (Continued). Needs Met by Texas ACE According to Parents, Administrators, Partners, and Steering Committee Members

Stakeholder Group	Identified Needs	Source Count	Cross-Stakeholder Group Mentions	How Texas ACE Addresses These Needs
Administrators	Insufficient academic support for struggling students	2/4 (50%)	Also cited by parents (homework help) and steering committees (academic accountability)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivered targeted tutoring and hands-on enrichment Expanded access to electives, STEM, and arts programming Offered certifications and dual-credit pathways
	Lack of enrichment beyond core instruction	3/4 (75%)	Shared by parents (seeking social enrichment) and community partners (opportunities for exploration)	
	Gaps in college and career readiness opportunities	2/4 (50%)	Aligned with community partners (postsecondary exposure) and steering committees (sustainability and alignment)	
Steering committee members	Inconsistent behavioral and mental health supports	2/4 (50%)	Also noted by community partners (well-being services) and parents (need for social-emotional support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated behavioral and social supports into programming Facilitated collaboration and accountability structures between schools and partners
	Fragmented coordination among schools, families, and community groups	2/4 (50%)	Shared by community partners (collaboration gaps) and administrators (alignment and communication needs)	

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Stakeholder Perceptions: Challenges

The third subtopic addressed ongoing challenges that limit participation in Texas ACE. Across groups, **stakeholders identified transportation, staffing, communication, and facilities as the conditions that most directly influenced access and reliability**, noting that challenges in these domains often reflected broader funding constraints. Parents and coordinators explained that limited transportation options restricted which students could attend regularly, whereas administrators and partners shared how staffing shortages, turnover, and material costs reduced program variety and created strain on existing staff. Families and staff also recalled that communication systems did not always keep pace with program changes, which sometimes led to confusion about schedules and events. In addition, several stakeholders pointed to limited space and supplies for enrichment as restricting the range of clubs that sites could offer. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that **participation in Texas ACE depends at**

least partially on the stability of local resources, as well as the financial and logistical coordination that supports program operations. See Exhibit ES.3, noting that the exhibit is arranged by challenge domain rather than stakeholder group given the consistency of these challenges across groups.

Note that stakeholders also said, however, that it is important for Texas ACE staff **not to frame these challenges as temporary or merely site-specific**, because this artificially minimizes the challenges and can limit proposed solutions (e.g., transportation and staffing challenges may affect more than a single Texas ACE program). Stakeholders also indicated that **it may be more feasible for site staff to focus on planning within the constraints posed by these challenges (and seek incremental improvement) rather than trying to eliminate challenges completely**. Stakeholders also said that **problem-solving efforts should be shared across stakeholder groups**, with coordination across districts, service centers, and community partners. This once again points toward establishing effective communication as a foundational best practice, as emphasized in the first report.

“We really need transportation to take kids home in the evenings . . . We’ve lost a lot of students because they don’t have a way to stay after school for the programs.” – Middle school administrator interview

Exhibit ES.3. Stakeholder-Identified Challenges and Their Perceived Impacts on Participation and Sustainability

Challenge Domain	Number of Sources Mentioning Theme	Nature of the Challenge	Illustrative Impacts on Participation and Sustainability [Aggregated]
Transportation	5 focus groups/4 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afterschool bus routes ended at dismissal in several communities, leaving families dependent on personal vehicles for student pick-up. Rural and suburban areas reported limited alternatives for students whose caregivers worked evenings. Limited funding and fuel costs were also cited as constraining afterschool route availability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students missed activities or could not attend regularly when transportation was unavailable. Enrollment and attendance were lower at sites without consistent transportation options.

Table Continues

Exhibit ES.3 (Continued). Stakeholder-Identified Challenges and Their Perceived Impacts on Participation and Sustainability

Challenge Domain	Number of Sources Mentioning Theme	Nature of the Challenge	Illustrative Impacts on Participation and Sustainability [Aggregated]
Staffing	6 focus groups/2 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Districts described persistent difficulty hiring and retaining qualified instructors, particularly in rural areas with small labor pools. • Site coordinators often carried multiple responsibilities to sustain programming when vacancies occurred. • Limited budgets and stipends contributed to turnover and constrained program expansion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The range of clubs and enrichment activities narrowed when staffing fluctuated. • Existing staff experienced fatigue and turnover, which reduced program stability.
Communication and scheduling	5 focus groups/3 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families and coordinators reported inconsistent or delayed updates about schedule changes and events. • Communication methods varied across participating sites, limiting how quickly information reached families. • Stakeholders noted that resource constraints occasionally delayed the printing, translation, or distribution of materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents occasionally missed activities or received notice too late to participate. • Families balancing work and school commitments shared confusion and occasional disengagement.
Facilities and access	6 focus groups/2 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some campuses lacked sufficient or dedicated space for clubs and enrichment. • Shared or multipurpose rooms restricted options for performing arts and larger group activities. • Sites with limited supply budgets or shared storage had difficulty maintaining equipment for specialized clubs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had fewer club choices when space or equipment was limited. • Program variety differed across campuses, resulting in inconsistent participation opportunities.

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Stakeholder Perceptions: Aspirations and Vision

The fourth subtopic relates to stakeholder longer term vision for the Texas ACE program, notably concerning ways that Texas ACE might sustain and expand its impact. Across groups, **stakeholders viewed future growth as dependent on breadth and stability**. Specifically, stakeholders want to see expanded enrichment opportunities to engage students, stronger integration between programming and classroom learning, and strengthened partnerships that link schools with families and community organizations. Parents and administrators emphasized enrichment and access (especially salient noting the challenges just described), whereas community partners focused on deeper collaboration and expanded family resources (e.g., food, clothing, job certifications, counseling). Steering committee members connected these aspirations to long-term sustainability, emphasizing that consistent funding, staffing, and coordination are essential for continued success (again linking to the challenges presented above). Note that the steering committee itself may be ideally positioned to help programs improve in these ways, especially if the site coordinator is an active member of the committee and strong communication practices are in place. Also note that, once again, these stakeholder perspectives represent a vision of Texas ACE as part of a system of supports, not an isolated program. See Exhibit ES.4, noting that cross-stakeholder group mentions are not included because aspirations tended to be more group specific.

“One thing that I’d like for the steering committee to serve as is as ambassadors to the program. Because I think that sometimes we don’t necessarily, you know, we do the work and we get things done, but then we don’t necessarily talk about it maybe outside of our particular realm.”

– High school steering committee member

Exhibit ES.4. Stakeholder Aspirations for the Texas ACE Program

Stakeholder Group	Core Aspirations	Source Count	Illustrative Focus and Intended Effect [Aggregated]
Parents	Expand enrichment opportunities that reach more students and reflect diverse interests.	6/7 (86%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add more arts, STEM, and sports options, especially in rural and suburban settings where choices are limited. • Design clubs and activities that help students build belonging, confidence, and motivation to attend.
	Offer a broader range of activities that promote inclusion and sustained engagement.	4/7 (57%)	
Community partners	Deepen family engagement and expand access to nonacademic support(s).	4/4 (100%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use ACE sites as hubs for family, health, and workforce services that extend learning beyond academics. • Reinforce Texas ACE’s role as a bridge connecting schools, families, and community partners.
	Maintain collaboration between schools and local organizations.	4/4 (100%)	

Table Continues

Exhibit ES.4 (Continued). Stakeholder Aspirations for the Texas ACE Program

Stakeholder Group	Core Aspirations	Source Count	Illustrative Focus and Intended Effect [Aggregated]
Administrators	Strengthen the alignment between Texas ACE programming and school-day instruction.	3/4 (75%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate tutoring and enrichment with classroom goals to reinforce academic priorities. Collaborate with higher education and workforce organizations to expand postsecondary opportunities.
	Build partnerships that extend academic learning into college and career pathways.	3/4 (75%)	
Steering committee members	Establish sustainable structures that preserve program benefits over time.	3/4 (75%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create durable funding and staffing frameworks that stabilize program delivery. Build partnerships across districts to sustain programming and strengthen community alignment.
	Develop systems that turn local ideas into coordinated, long-term action	4/4 (100%)	

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Stakeholder Advice and Recommendations

The fifth and final subtopic concerns stakeholder advice and recommendations. Consistent with their aspirations for Texas ACE, and further supporting previously identified themes from the first report, parents, administrators, community partners, and steering committee members all emphasized that **the program’s success depends on consistent information flow, strong relationships, and dependable systems that connect schools and families. Stakeholders viewed clear communication as essential for building trust and increasing participation, and collaboration among coordinators, teachers, and community partners was seen as key to ensuring that programming reflects student and family needs.** Stakeholders also stressed that retaining well-matched coordinators (i.e., coordinators who are passionate about the program and have strong, trusting relationships with stakeholders), maintaining transportation access, and securing stable funding were all fundamental to sustaining program quality and participant access. See Exhibit ES.5 for stakeholder recommendations to strengthen the Texas ACE program, noting that, as with aspirations, cross-stakeholder group mentions are not included here due to lower levels of overlap across groups.

“Don’t limit yourself. I think that’s what makes it such a beautiful thing is when you can go beyond what you’ve seen before and just follow your passion and follow what you know about what you’re passionate about. Because there’s kids somewhere around that school that’s passionate about it too.”

– Middle school community partner focus group

Exhibit ES.5. Stakeholder Recommendations for Strengthening the Texas ACE Program

Stakeholder Group	Core Recommendations	Source Count	Illustrative Examples and Intended Effects
Parents	Strengthen communication with families.	6/7 (86%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide regular updates about schedules and events through text, email, and flyers so families can plan effectively. • Invite current families to share positive experiences and encourage others to join, increasing awareness and trust. • Make volunteering and meeting attendance easier by simplifying requirements, which builds connection between families and staff.
	Encourage enrollment through family-to-family outreach.	4/7 (57%)	
	Simplify ways for parents to participate in ACE activities.	5/7 (71%)	
Community partners	Increase public awareness and outreach about ACE programming.	2/4 (50%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote Texas ACE through school newsletters, social media, and community events to highlight available resources. • Provide concise reports to community partners and families on participation, outcomes, and upcoming initiatives to sustain collaboration.
	Strengthen coordination and shared communication with schools.	2/4 (50%)	
Administrators	Maintain consistent, well-matched site coordinators.	3/4 (75%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain coordinators who understand the school community and can collaborate with teachers. • Align tutoring, clubs, and enrichment with academic and attendance priorities. • Regularly communicate what actions were taken based on family and student input so participants see their feedback reflected.
	Integrate ACE planning with school goals	4/4 (100%)	
	Establish ongoing feedback systems with families and staff.	3/4 (75%)	
Steering committee members	Secure sustainable funding, transportation, and staffing.	3/4 (75%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop multiyear funding strategies that reduce interruptions in service. • Ensure transportation is available so participation is consistent across campuses. • Support professional development and retention efforts that maintain reliable programming and minimize disruptions.
	Plan for retention and long-term program stability.	4/4 (100%)	

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Discussion and Overall Recommendations

The first report on strategic planning, partnerships, and engagement identified three major themes concerning best practices: (1) Steering committees and site coordinators should be intentionally involved in ongoing needs assessment; (2) establishing clear and regular communication channels, including aspects of program visibility, is a foundational best practice;

and (3) high levels of trust are required for successful needs assessment, steering committee functioning, parent engagement, data collection, and partnership. Findings from the spring 2025 site visits confirm and expand on these themes, with many of the foregoing highlights overlapping and reinforcing previous findings while also being relevant to the three key strategies presented in the Texas ACE Roadmap.

In particular, however, all four stakeholder groups described the **value of Texas ACE as rooted in trust, reliability, and alignment with school and community priorities**. Along these lines, stakeholders who participated in the focus groups and interviews specifically recommended the following:

- **Reinforce the role of site coordinators as relational anchors.** Across sites and discussions, trust and consistency were closely associated with coordinator presence and continuity. Supporting coordinator stability, onboarding, and role clarity may help preserve the relational foundations that stakeholders identified as central to program value. Note that this recommendation overlaps with the prior report’s recommendation to intentionally involve site coordinators in steering committee work, and to present steering committee roles clearly.
- **Ensure that the program’s purpose, including its role within a system of supports, is clearly and consistently communicated.** Stakeholders participating in the spring 2025 focus groups and interviews valued Texas ACE not for isolated activities but for its role as a dependable extension of the school community. Sites may benefit from articulating a shared program narrative that emphasizes safety, enrichment, and connection across families, educators, and community partners.
- **Maintain visible alignment with school priorities.** Administrators emphasized that Texas ACE was most valued when it reinforced attendance, engagement, and instructional goals. It may be helpful to ensure that all site coordinators are able to document and communicate how afterschool activities connect to school-day priorities.

Overall, focus group and interview stakeholders recommended taking steps to **strengthen coordination among site coordinators, teachers, and community partners**, notably by means of regular information sharing and shared expectations. As suggested in the previous report, this requires strong communication practices and intentional involvement of the site coordinator in steering committee work. This leads to an emergent fourth and final recommendation:

- **Encourage Texas ACE programs to intentionally design their steering committee membership, structure, meeting frequency, roles, and communication practices in light of contextual needs and limitations.** There may not be a single right way to organize a

steering committee, but choices regarding each of these should be made with intentionality, adjusting as necessary to accomplish overall program goals.

This final recommendation encompasses and organizes the other three recommendations while supporting the Texas ACE Roadmap's three key strategies. Site staff seeking program improvement may therefore find it beneficial to focus on this last recommendation first.

Introduction

The Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program addresses the needs of students who attend schools struggling in their efforts to fully support students, located largely in communities that experience poverty. Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE), funded by the federal 21st CCLC grant program, provide a wide array of academic enrichment and youth development activities during non-school hours, primarily after school, and during the summer. These activities are designed to enhance students' academic, social, and emotional well-being and cultivate skills and interests that will help them become college and career ready.

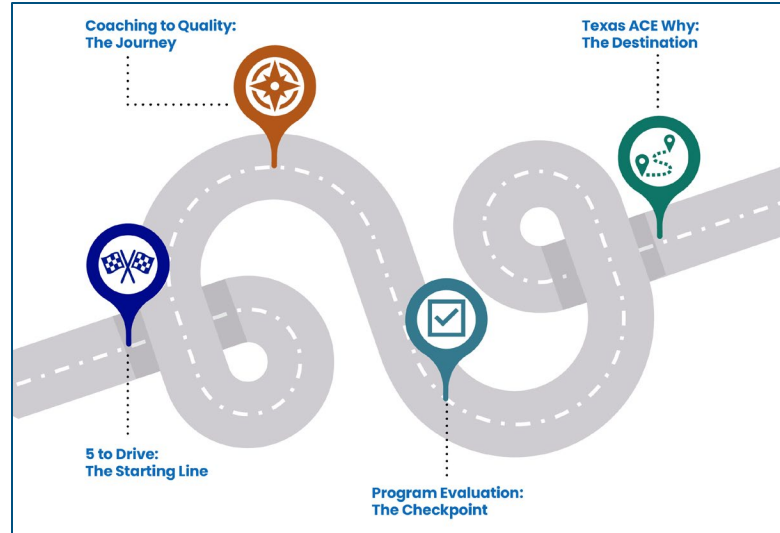
As a condition of receiving federal 21st CCLC funding for this program, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is required to conduct a statewide evaluation of Texas ACE. In early 2022 TEA contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct this evaluation, with work continuing through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

This report is the second of two reports covering the topics of **strategic planning, partnerships, and engagement**. The first report, [*Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant Evaluation: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Descriptive Study of Site Coordinator Perspectives on Strategic Planning, Partnerships, and Engagement \(2023–24\)*](#), presented results from a program-wide site coordinator survey and 19 follow-up site coordinator interviews. This second report is based on seven site visits conducted during spring 2025 at a subset of the interview sites. Sites were chosen for visits based on both survey response and interview data, along with consideration of grant characteristics such as locale and grade levels served. The site visits included interview or focus group discussions with four stakeholder groups: parent/guardians, school administrators, community partner staff, and steering committee members. The goal of the site visits was to more deeply explore the topics of the first report, with a particular focus on best practices, solutions to challenges, and helpful insights.

Evaluation and the Texas ACE Roadmap

The [*Texas ACE Roadmap to High-Quality Out-of-School Time*](#) (Texas ACE Roadmap) presents TEA's comprehensive framework for ensuring program quality. The findings in this report align with the Texas ACE Roadmap's "**Three Key Strategies**," which together make up the third component of the 5 to Drive:

- **Strong program operations** that ensure a safe, supportive, and educationally enriching environment for all students, staff, and families
- **Alignment with the school day** through ongoing collaboration with school-day staff, attendance at professional development sessions, and connections to school-day systems



- **Community involvement** through partnerships and engagement opportunities that support local needs, grant requirements, and program sustainability²

As demonstrated in the following pages, the findings in this report underscore the importance of these three strategies while also providing considerations for program staff as they seek to implement them in their programs. However, because the findings often relate to two or all three of these strategy areas, and because the identities of the stakeholder groups themselves relate to the strategy areas (e.g., community partner staff can speak about operations while embodying community involvement), the findings in this report are organized around six subtopics that align with the interview protocols: **stakeholder motivations, perceptions of program value, needs that the program addresses, challenges that affect participation and delivery, program growth and sustainability, and practical suggestions for improvement.** That said, the three strategies provide a useful frame for interpreting this report’s findings.

Overview of Data Collection

This report draws on qualitative data collected from site visits conducted at seven Texas ACE sites. As noted above, the purpose of the site visits was to gather in-depth perspectives on program implementation related to strategic planning, partnerships, and engagement, with a particular focus on identifying best practices, solutions to challenges, and helpful insights. The site visits took place between April and July 2025 and included interviews and focus groups with parents/guardians (n=7), school and district administrators (n=4), community partners (n=4), and steering committee members (n=4). In all, AIR conducted a total of 19 focus groups and interviews across the participating sites, with an average of 2.7 focus groups or interviews per site.

² Texas ACE Roadmap to High-Quality Out-of-School Time, page 5.

The sites selected for a visit were purposely chosen to reflect variation across program cycles, grade levels served, and geographic contexts, and to highlight sites demonstrating promising or innovative practices. Initially, nine sites were selected from among the 19 sites with interview data from fall 2024. Sampling was based on

- an indication during the interviews that the site was engaged in promising or best practices from which other sites might benefit;
- cycle, grade levels served, and locale, with an interest in ensuring representation across these variables so that any identified best practices would apply to as many sites as possible across Texas; and
- site coordinator interest in a site visit.

Participation was voluntary, however. Of the initial nine sites, two declined to participate, and one site subsequently canceled after initially agreeing. AIR identified five alternates, but of these only one ultimately yielded focus group and interview data. The findings in this report therefore reflect stakeholder perspectives from selected sites that agreed to participate, and do not represent all Texas ACE centers. Therefore, **findings in this report should be understood as illustrative and instructive rather than generalizable**. Additional information on the sample is provided in Appendix A.

Organization of the Report

The findings in this report are organized by stakeholder respondent group. The findings therefore begin with insights from parents/guardians, and then proceed with responses from administrators, partner staff, and steering committee members. Within each group, findings are organized around the subtopics included in the focus group or interview protocols, which vary somewhat depending on the stakeholder group in question. The report concludes with a discussion of overarching themes, including recommendations. Sampling procedures and protocols are provided in the appendices.

Insights from Parents and Guardians: Engagement, Access, and Impact in the Texas ACE Program

Parents and guardians are critical stakeholders in Texas ACE. Not only do parents and guardians oversee the enrollment of their children in Texas ACE programming, but they are often involved in Texas ACE activities themselves, serve as volunteer staff, provide feedback concerning program interests and priorities, and can even be members of Texas ACE steering committees. However, communicating with and engaging parents or guardians can be challenging; parents

and guardians often work during school and afterschool hours and can have numerous obligations that compete for their attention and time. As such, gaining insight into how parents perceive Texas ACE—and why they might or might not engage in Texas ACE-related activities—can provide valuable information for Texas ACE programs across the state. This section therefore examines parents’ and guardians’ perspectives on the Texas ACE program, focusing on how families first learned about and enrolled their children in the program; how they engaged in activities once enrolled; and how participation shaped a child’s learning, family routines, and community connections.

Note that parent or guardian focus groups or interviews were conducted at all seven sites included in the site visit sample. The format was not the same at all sites, however, due to variation in stakeholder availability: Focus groups were conducted at three sites, and interviews at four.

Program Entry: Awareness and Enrollment

Parents and guardians shared how they first encountered the Texas ACE program and how they went through the enrollment process. Their accounts show that awareness and entry were not uniform but were shaped by grade levels served by the school, community context, and family needs.

Sources of Awareness

Awareness of Texas ACE came from a variety of sources. In two rural focus groups at elementary and middle schools, parents said teachers or coordinators had recommended the Texas ACE program, often when children needed extra academic support. Families described this as an appealing, no-cost alternative to stand-alone tutoring. At the high school level, two parent focus groups indicated that awareness often came through letters and informational meetings where administrators and community partner organizations highlighted certifications and career pathways.

“Right away he brought home a letter and he was excited about it. He was like mom, this is gonna be really good. I’m gonna have all these opportunities to get certified. . . . We went and they had someone from [local community college] there. They had somebody from the workforce there and they were talking about it and I mean it was just a great opportunity. We couldn’t pass up.”

– High school parent focus group/interview

Suburban and city parents pointed to yet another pathway. In three focus groups, they emphasized newsletters, flyers, and social media updates as essential for learning about clubs and events. By contrast, in two rural focus groups, parents recalled lower baseline awareness and said district-wide outreach was more limited, leaving families more reliant on word-of-mouth.

Motivations for Enrollment

Although awareness of Texas ACE is clearly important for enrollment, mere awareness does not necessarily lead to enrollment. Enrollment reason, however, seemed to vary by program locale. According to the parents and guardians included in the focus groups, a consistent motivator for enrollment was safety, although this was described differently depending on program locale. In urban and suburban settings, parents emphasized wanting to avoid situations where children would walk home alone or remain unsupervised, whereas in rural settings safety was framed more as reliable childcare coverage in communities with fewer afterschool options.

Beyond safety considerations, parents in two focus groups and one interview said they had enrolled their child after hearing positive accounts of the Texas ACE program from friends or relatives. Peer recommendations reassured families that the program was worthwhile and strengthened their confidence that their children would benefit. Families at one suburban and one high school site explained that the Texas ACE program became visible when it replaced a prior afterschool initiative, or when a Texas ACE activity was introduced as a new pilot program, both of which generated early attention. This highlights the importance of strong communication practices, notably including aspects of program visibility within the school community.

Enrollment Process

Once families had decided they wanted their child to participate in Texas ACE, the enrollment process itself shaped their impressions of the program. In all three focus groups and two interviews, parents and guardians noted that enrollment was clear and well supported by site staff. In one rural focus group, parents emphasized that paperwork was concise, and expectations such as attendance and pickup were explained thoroughly; they described the process as both quick and—critically—trust-building. Parents emphasized that site coordinators played a central role during enrollment, often walking them through the paperwork step by step. **For many families, this initial contact with the coordinator established a personal relationship that, in turn, shaped their initial opinion of the program as a whole.**

Annual reenrollment also came up during parent/guardian focus groups and interviews as an important opportunity for communication and trust-building. In two suburban interviews, families noted that annual reenrollment confirmed continued participation while allowing flexibility for children to adjust their club choices. Parents explained that the opportunity to select new or different enrollment activities gave them and their child a sense of agency in shaping their experience, which made participation more meaningful. Taken together, parents' descriptions indicate that enrollment and reenrollment were formative moments that shaped how families understood what Texas ACE offered and how to participate.

One of the parents also praised the clarity of program flyers and reminders around enrollment and reenrollment, explaining that communication left “no room for questions.”

“She comes, her messages are straight, her flyers are to the point, time, date, everything. So it’s kind of like she doesn’t leave any room for questions.”

– K–12 parent interview

Similarly, across three focus groups and two interviews, parents described these enrollment moments as opportunities to receive clear guidance from site coordinators, learn about available activities and family events, and understand how afterschool programming connected to broader school and community opportunities. This shows that even basic procedures like enrollment can provide opportunities for establishing communication, garnering feedback, and building trust. For example, in one rural focus group, families added that enrollment sessions not only covered paperwork but also introduced them to family nights and library visits, reinforcing the idea that the Texas ACE program connected academic participation with broader opportunities for family and community engagement.

Challenges to Participation

Even if parents or guardians want to enroll their child in Texas ACE programming, they may be unable to, or may find continued participation difficult. Of particular note, parents in one interview said that some clubs had been canceled due to staffing shortages, which not only meant their child could not participate in those activities but also created parent/guardian hesitancy about reenrolling their child. That is, parents/guardians value not only the activities themselves, but the reliability and dependability that such activities provide when offered consistently. This highlights the importance of finding ways to navigate challenges created by staffing shortages or staffing inconsistency. This also provides a lens for understanding the value parents and guardians perceive in Texas ACE.

Also note that parents and guardians (two focus groups and one interview) said that scheduling conflicts or transportation issues sometimes limited engagement (noting further that both of these were brought up during site coordinator interviews conducted during the fall of 2024). This type of challenge can affect both student and adult participation. For students, a common challenge to participation can be competing activities or lack of transportation caused by lack of

What Families Valued About Texas ACE Programs

Structure: Parents explained that ACE provided dependable routines that anchored family schedules.

Affordability: Families highlighted enrichment and tutoring that would otherwise have been out of reach.

Agency: Annual reenrollment gave children ownership by letting them choose activities.

Connection: Family nights and events created opportunities for bonding and reinforced a sense of belonging at school.

bus routes, while for parents/guardians, work obligations or midweek meetings can prevent participation in family-oriented events.

Program Engagement: Participation and Value

Parents/guardians in four focus groups and two interviews shared how their families participated in the Texas ACE program, as well as the value they placed on it. In terms of participation, these parents/guardians consistently emphasized that their children were active in a range of Texas ACE clubs, tutoring sessions, and events, and that participation often became part of weekly routines. In two rural focus groups, parents said their children looked forward to Texas ACE program activities and were disappointed when scheduling conflicts kept them from attending. Participation was described not only as enjoyable but also as something children relied on as part of their week.

“Quite honestly, she like[s] ACE better than she does school.”

– Elementary parent focus group

Some parents also recalled how children who were initially reluctant or anxious about participating often became engaged once they attended activities.

“Sometimes maybe, I guess, he has anxiety and sometimes he doesn’t want to do things. . . . But once he goes, he comes [home] happy and it’s a different thing.”

– Elementary parent interview

Parents further discussed their own participation in the Texas ACE program. In one suburban interview and one focus group, families explained that volunteering, such as helping with decorations, donating supplies, or assisting staff, became a way to support the program. A few parents described moving from occasional help to becoming consistent volunteers, often framing this involvement as a way to feel more connected with the school community.

“Well, I started when we came back from COVID . . . afterwards I just decided to stay home and I’m like, I have free time, what do I do with it? And then my daughter’s like, go to my school. And slowly but surely that’s where I’ve been. I’ve been helping ever since.”

– K–12 parent Interview

In addition to describing how they participated, families emphasized the overall value of the Texas ACE program. In all four focus groups and two interviews, parents said the program provided **structure and opportunity**. They highlighted enrichment and tutoring that would otherwise have been unaffordable and explained that reenrollment options gave children a

sense of ownership of their choices. Parents also noted that family nights and special events added value by creating opportunities for bonding and giving parents a chance to engage with their child’s school community in positive ways.

Most of all, however, parents/guardians in three focus groups and two interviews emphasized that the Texas ACE program’s **academic supports were among its most valuable features**. Families described how homework help, tutoring, and enrichment activities supported students academically while also shaping family routines and reducing stress at home. Parents explained that help with homework reduced conflict by ensuring that assignments were completed before children returned home, allowing evenings to shift from struggling over schoolwork to shared family time. They also noted that children were often more receptive to academic support from program staff, who took time to meet students where they were, support transitions to higher grade levels, and encourage confidence and independence. For many families, particularly in rural communities, tutoring was valued less for improving grades alone and more for relieving pressure on parents who felt unable to provide consistent academic help. Across sites, parents also emphasized that these academic and enrichment opportunities would otherwise have been unavailable to their children. Parents/guardians said that free tutoring, help with homework, and enrichment clubs reduced financial barriers and created greater access to supports that many could not afford otherwise. Related to this, parents and guardians also described program staff as role models who encouraged independence by motivating students to complete assignments on their own and take pride in their progress.

Taken together, parents’ accounts about the value of Texas ACE indicate that academic supports were most valuable when they fit naturally into family routines and reduced stress at home rather than operating as stand-alone services. As summarized in Exhibit 1, parents described homework help, tutoring, ongoing academic support, and enrichment activities as interconnected supports that shaped students’ confidence, preparedness, and daily experiences both at school and at home.

Exhibit 1. How Families Experienced Support Through Texas ACE

Perceived Support	Parent Perspective	Parent Voice
Homework help	Reduced household stress by ensuring assignments were completed before children returned home, allowing evenings for family time	<i>“She’s like, okay, I can do my homework here before I’m attending the program. And by the time she’s home, all she has to do is relax, have dinner, and enjoy the rest of the evening.” – K–12 parent interview</i>

Table Continues

Exhibit 1 (Continued). How Families Experienced Support Through Texas ACE

Perceived Support	Parent Perspective	Parent Voice
Tutoring	Built children’s confidence and helped them feel academically prepared, especially during transitions to higher grade levels	<i>“We saw actual differences, she went from not being even average in reading to getting excellent, E. . . . What it’s really done for her, it’s changed. She’ll tell you I’m smart and before that, she didn’t feel that way.” – Rural family focus group</i>
Ongoing academic support	Relieved parents of pressure to provide academic help at home, especially in rural areas with limited resources	<i>“He does his studying for his test and his homework at that program. . . . That helps me a lot because with him, it hard to . . . when I try to sit down and teach home something or help him with something, I cannot . . . I can teach other kids, but my kid doesn’t want me”. – K–12 parent interview</i>
Enrichment clubs	Gave students access to extracurricular and academic enrichment activities that families otherwise could not afford	<i>“What really helped him was the medical program . . . when they came out with this program, they told us he gonna be certified in CNA, PCT, and the EKG. . . . When he showed me this [medical program], I was like absolutely. Take advantage of this. You’re not jumping into your financial aid, and I think that’s a huge benefit.” – K–12 parent interview</i>

Note. CNA = certified nursing assistant; PCT = patient care technician; EKG = electrocardiogram.

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Community Connections

Building on parents’ descriptions of participation, and once again highlighting the importance of strong communication as a foundational best practice, three focus groups and two interviews highlighted how Texas ACE created regular points of connection among families, school staff, and community organizations. Parents described family nights, special events, and community partner-led sessions as the primary ways these connections formed, often noting that relationships with libraries, colleges, and workforce agencies extended beyond the afterschool program into family routines. Through these experiences, parents emphasized that the program supported family bonding, strengthened their sense of belonging at school, and expanded access to community-based resources. In two rural focus groups, parents highlighted that the Texas ACE program offered monthly family nights and seasonal events where children and parents could come together. These gatherings were described as both enjoyable for children and meaningful for the entire family, offering opportunities to spend time together in safe and structured settings. Families noted that some events sparked new routines beyond the program, such as increased use of local libraries.

“Honestly, getting to go to those events once a month are some of my kids’ favorite things to do . . . it gives us something to do as well. The kids absolutely loved the library one . . . ever since that visit we are almost at that library at least once a week.”

– Elementary parent focus group

In two suburban interviews, parents/guardians emphasized how the Texas ACE program served as a bridge between parents and school staff. Site coordinators not only provided logistical updates but also actively invited parent input, helping families feel recognized and reinforcing that their perspectives mattered. **Parents pointed to consistent, two-way communication through texts, apps, calls, and in-person conversations as the mechanism that made these connections possible.**

“Well, I think they cover all the bases. All the types. They usually have the app [Remind], but they also, if I want to communicate with them, I know I can talk to them in person. I can talk to them on the phone . . . So if I need to communicate with them, there’s always a way.

– K–12 parent interview

Parents also described how the program connected them to external organizations and resources. In two suburban focus groups and one high school interview, **parents/guardians said the Texas ACE program introduced them to colleges, libraries, and workforce agencies they might not have otherwise accessed.** For some, these opportunities extended beyond the afterschool program to become part of their family routines.

“They had somebody from the workforce there and they were talking about it and I mean it was just a great opportunity. We couldn’t pass up.”

– High school parent interview

Overall, **parents described communication as central to sustaining connections among families, schools, and community partners.** Whereas suburban and city parents emphasized frequent digital updates through apps and social media, rural parents highlighted the importance of personal outreach through calls, texts, and in-person conversations, particularly when internet or phone access was inconsistent. Together, these accounts illustrate how families engaged with Texas ACE through multiple, reinforcing modes of connection, summarized in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Modes of Family Connection Described by Parents

Mode of Engagement	Examples from Parent Focus Group Accounts
Program participation	Attending family nights, seasonal events, and student showcases
Volunteer support	Assisting staff with logistics, decorations, or supplies
Communication with site coordinators	Receiving reminders through texts, calls, or flyers; two-way communication during enrollment and reenrollment
At-home reinforcement	Discussing activities at home, encouraging attendance, and sharing program successes with others
Community involvement	Connecting with community partner organizations such as libraries, colleges, and workforce agencies through program events

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Touchpoint: Previous Findings on Parent and Guardian Engagement

When the findings in this section are considered alongside site coordinator viewpoints from the previous report, they help clarify that engagement patterns are shaped at least in part by structural challenges. Site coordinators who were interviewed in fall 2024 and parents participating in spring 2025 focus groups or interviews highlighted that adult participation in the Texas ACE program was shaped less by lack of interest and more by access-related challenges. These challenges included work schedules, limited availability, inconsistent communication, short notice for events, and transportation barriers; six site coordinators and multiple parent focus groups described such factors as persistent obstacles to engagement.

Note, however, that site coordinators and parents/guardians understood “engagement” somewhat differently. Site coordinators discussed parent engagement in terms of formal parent roles such as event planning or advisory participation, while the parents/guardians themselves discussed trust in staff, presence at events, and sharing program successes at home as meaningful indicators of family connection. Together, these findings suggest that sustained family engagement depends on structured opportunities and intentional outreach, notably including consistent communication and reliable scheduling. Note, however, that removal of logistical barriers such as transportation challenges is also important and remains a critical consideration as well.

Exhibit 3. Previous and Current Findings on Parent and Guardian Engagement

Construct	Site Coordinators (2024 Survey)	Parents and Guardians (2025 Focus Groups/Interviews)	Triangulated Interpretation
Engagement opportunities	Coordinators described family nights, volunteer opportunities, and advisory activities as primary forms of engagement.	Parents described participation in family events, volunteering, and informal support such as attending showcases and assisting with school activities.	Both sources indicated that multiple avenues for engagement existed, combining formal and informal participation.
Challenges to participation	Coordinators identified work schedules, transportation, and short notice as recurring challenges.	Parents cited similar obstacles, emphasizing scheduling conflicts and limited communication as the main barriers to attendance.	Both data sources associated participation limits with structural and logistical factors rather than lack of interest.
Communication practices	Coordinators described using flyers, emails, and school announcements to share information about activities.	Parents described receiving updates through flyers, texts, and direct outreach from coordinators, often emphasizing personal communication as most effective.	Both perspectives highlighted communication clarity and consistency as essential to engagement.
Definitions of engagement	Coordinators focused on formal participation such as volunteering or advisory involvement.	Parents described engagement as including informal connections such as trust, encouragement, and conversation about student experiences.	Both perspectives recognized that engagement takes multiple forms beyond formal roles.
Role of site coordinators	Coordinators viewed themselves as facilitators of communication and event organization.	Parents described coordinators as the central link connecting families, schools, and program staff.	Both sources identified coordinators as the primary agents enabling family participation and trust.

Source. Texas ACE site coordinator survey collected by AIR spring 2024, site coordinator interview data collected by AIR fall 2024, and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Insights from Community Partners: Engagement, Collaboration, and Impact in the Texas ACE Program

The second stakeholder group consisted of staff from community partners. Community partners—which can be local businesses, nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, government entities, colleges, and so on—can play a variety of roles in Texas ACE, from providing volunteer staffing to in-kind contributions and support services. Community partners are therefore an extremely important stakeholder group for Texas ACE, as their involvement

not only helps to enhance and expand program offerings, but also to tie the program to the surrounding community.

Community partners at four sites (three focus groups and one interview) were therefore asked to share perspectives on their roles in the Texas ACE program, their communication with schools, and the impacts they perceived for students and families. These stakeholders represented a variety of organizations, including youth development nonprofits, colleges, libraries, health providers, and recreation groups. Across this range, community partners described contributions tailored to local contexts; collaboration that supported both academic and nonacademic goals; and a program structure they perceived as trusted by schools, families, and communities.

Partnership Establishment and General Contributions

Community partners in three focus groups and one interview described how their organizations had become involved in the Texas ACE program and what had contributed to its operations. In keeping with the major themes outlined previously, their accounts showed that partnerships were grounded in trust, prior collaboration with schools (i.e., existing relationships), and the ability to meet clearly identified community needs.

These three pillars of partnership are interrelated. Trust, of course, is built over time, but it is also aided by overlap of mission and purpose. Along these lines, several community partners explained that their engagement was rooted in a history of collaboration with districts or in their capacity to address service gaps. Some organizations had worked with campuses before the Texas ACE program began, whereas others were invited because of their missions such as youth development, literacy, and family services aligned with program goals.

“One of the things that contributes to the success is the recognition of what organizations can fill some of those gaps . . . their ability to recognize that and then reach out gives us an ability to provide things that we’re doing anyway, things that come naturally to our organization and probably other organizations as well.”

– Elementary community partner focus group

Community partner contributions were not limited to direct student programming. Community partners described providing staff for enrichment, opening access to facilities, and sharing curriculum or technology. They emphasized that contributions were flexible, changing from year to year as student interests and family needs shifted. Community partners added that their involvement often began with a narrow focus such as tutoring or homework help but expanded over time to include broader enrichment opportunities and family engagement activities as relationships with schools deepened.

As partnerships matured, several community partners described their roles as extending beyond student activities to include more direct engagement with families (noted by three of the four community partner focus groups). These contributions included family workshops, health and counseling referrals, and participation in family nights and roundtables where community partners interacted directly with parents and adjusted services based on family-identified needs.

“It’s very important for us to be involved in those family activities. It helps our circulation, and it helps us know what the families need. Parents are able to come talk to me and say, you know, I want my child to read chapter books, but I’m not sure which ones. And so we’re able to talk with them, talk with the child, and explore.”

– Elementary community partner focus group

Note that community partners provided contributions in keeping with their organizational character. For instance, libraries provided both print and digital literacy resources, health providers organized wellness events, colleges offered tutoring and test preparation, and food banks addressed family food security needs. Exhibit 4 summarizes these types of contributions as described by the community partners in the focus groups.

Exhibit 4. Examples of Community Partner Contributions to Texas ACE

Community Partner Type	Contribution Examples
Libraries	Print and digital literacy resources, family reading support
Colleges	Tutoring, test preparation, dual-credit readiness
Health providers	Wellness events, health services
Food banks	Food security support for families
Youth development nonprofits	Enrichment clubs, homework help, family workshops
Recreation providers	Sports, arts, and team activities

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Overall, the involvement of varying types of community partners meant that each Texas ACE program could offer families a broad array of resources within a single program structure. Community partners described their contributions as part of a shared system rather than stand-alone services. Their accounts therefore indicate once again that Texas ACE functions as a convening structure that allows schools to coordinate community resources within a single, trusted program.

Partner Involvement in Academic Support

Although community partner agencies provided a variety of contributions to Texas ACE as just described, their involvement in academic support warrants particular focus. In all four discussions, community partners described collaboration with schools as central to the Texas ACE program’s approach to supporting student learning. They perceived that afterschool activities were intentionally coordinated with classroom instruction to extend academic time, reinforce key skills, and connect students with broader opportunities for growth. While collaboration reflected local priorities, community partners consistently described Texas ACE as enhancing schools’ ability to provide consistent academic and enrichment support.

At the high school level, community partners reported that collaboration often focused on tutoring, test preparation, and credentialing aligned with benchmarks such as the Texas Success Initiative and industry certifications. At the middle and elementary levels, community partners perceived that enrichment activities such as e-sports, STEM, and literacy programs mirrored the focus of classroom instruction while allowing students to practice teamwork, communication, and problem-solving in more interactive formats.

Across these varied approaches, community partners perceived academic collaboration as an adaptive process that integrated instructional alignment, communication, and enrichment to support student engagement and learning across grade levels. Illustrative examples of these collaborative practices appear in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. How Community Partners Described Academic Collaboration in Texas ACE

Form of Collaboration	Community Partner Perspective	Community Partner Voice
Tutoring and academic reinforcement	Community partners described tutoring and test preparation as extensions of classroom learning, reinforcing core skills and readiness benchmarks.	<i>“I would say that it addresses helping students to stay in school. It addresses helping them to graduate. Also for them, it’s a place for struggling students to get that extra help that they need.” – High school community partner focus group</i>
Integration of enrichment with academic goals	Enrichment activities such as e-sports, STEM, and art were viewed as complementary to classroom priorities, promoting teamwork, communication, and persistence.	<i>“One of the most successful things was our e-sports program, because it tied directly into what they were doing with technology and teamwork at the school. It kept them engaged and also supported what teachers wanted to see.” – Middle school community partner focus group</i>

Table Continues

Exhibit 5 (Continued). How Community Partners Described Academic Collaboration in Texas ACE

Form of Collaboration	Community Partner Perspective	Community Partner Voice
College and career readiness partnerships	High school community partners emphasized collaborations with colleges and workforce programs that gave students concrete progress toward postsecondary goals.	<i>“They’ve started partnering with the university so students can earn certifications in welding, nursing, and other tracks that give them a head start for college or work.” – High school community partner focus group</i>
Shared monitoring of student progress	Community partners coordinated with site staff to support individual students’ academic and social adjustment, ensuring continuity between school and afterschool settings.	<i>“Last year, me and the ACE coordinator, we would collaborate on a student in particular . . . She had just come from her home country and was adjusting. Grandma put her into my program and immediately after into the afterschool program. We would check in with each other about how she was doing socially and academically, and that collaboration made a difference.” – EL/Middle community partner interview</i>

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Community Partner Engagement and Communication with Texas ACE

Community partners in three focus groups and one interview described how they engaged with the Texas ACE program and the ways communication supported collaboration. Their reflections emphasized **steady contact with site coordinators, openness to feedback, and the importance of adapting programming in response to student and family needs.**

Community partners explained that regular communication with site coordinators created opportunities to reflect on what was working and to make adjustments. They noted that this openness made them feel like collaborators rather than outside service providers.

“So when I was given the opportunity to [take part in parent events], I did so and I jumped on it like I was one of—I volunteered for it. I was like, yes, please put me in front of the parents. Let me do that. . . . The parent roundtables were also a very big help about what parents needed to hear, what students were saying about the ACE program.”

– High school community partner focus group

In two focus groups, community partners also described using surveys, check-ins, and informal conversations as mechanisms for gathering information and making changes in real time. They emphasized the consistency of program staff as well, explaining that if one coordinator was unavailable, another stepped in to ensure continuity.

“The whole team is great at communicating and if you need something, if one person doesn’t catch it, somebody else will. And so [the site director] and I, and I’ve needed something, she’s right there when I wasn’t sure about that, the summer program, [community partner] was right there and things like that. Everybody is part of this team.”

– Middle school community partner focus group

More broadly, community partners described communication efforts extending beyond staff to families and the school community. Community partners reported being invited to family nights and community events where they could share information about their organizations, meet parents directly, and hear firsthand what families wanted for their children. They emphasized that these interactions, along with family and student surveys, informed decisions about which clubs and activities were prioritized.

Across sites, **community partners underscored that communication was professional and respectful. They described site coordinators as inviting input, treating community partners as equals, and consistently following through on agreed changes.** Community partners explained that these communication practices enabled collaboration to function in practice by allowing programs to adjust, respond to feedback, and maintain shared expectations over time.

Finally, community partners described communication as a key factor shaping how well the afterschool activities they provide align with school-day learning. In sites where teachers regularly shared lesson topics or skill areas, community partners said they could also adjust tutoring and enrichment activities to reinforce classroom goals. They noted that this exchange helped them stay aware of student progress and provide support that felt relevant to teachers’ expectations. In other locations, community partners said that most information flowed through the Texas ACE site coordinator, who acted as the primary bridge between community program staff and teachers. Although this indirect structure still allowed for coordination, note that community partners perceived that **direct teacher contact made collaboration more responsive and immediate**, particularly when addressing specific academic or behavioral needs.

Touchpoint: Previous Findings on Community Partnerships

During fall 2024 interviews, site coordinators described engaging a range of community partners to support program implementation. These included recurring club providers, guest speakers, college and workforce organizations, and health- and arts-based nonprofits. Coordinators emphasized that the strength of these relationships often depended on logistics such as scheduling, space availability, and clarity of roles. Whereas some described well-integrated, ongoing partnerships, others noted more transactional or limited collaboration. Early planning and consistent communication were frequently cited as central to sustaining community partner engagement.

The spring 2025 community partner focus groups and interview reinforced the importance of clear expectations and open communication. They also emphasized the role of site coordinators in initiating, maintaining, and troubleshooting the relationship. Several noted that site coordinator continuity directly influenced how deeply they were able to engage over time. The focus groups and interview highlighted that relationship building, especially coordinator initiative and follow-through, often plays a central role in determining partnership strength. These insights suggest that sustaining high-quality partnerships may depend as much on staffing continuity and mutual clarity as on organizational fit.

Exhibit 6. Current and Previous Findings on Community Partnerships

Construct	Site Coordinator Interviews (Fall 2024)	Community Partner Focus Groups and Interview (Spring 2025)	Triangulated Interpretation
Community partner roles	Site coordinators described community partners as providers of enrichment activities, guest speakers, and specialized services supporting student engagement.	Community partners described their roles as collaborators contributing academic, recreational, and family-oriented programming aligned with campus needs.	Both groups viewed partnerships as extending the program’s reach through complementary expertise and resources.
Basis of engagement	Partnerships were often built on prior relationships or logistical availability rather than formal agreements.	Community partners emphasized alignment with shared goals, community trust, and mutual understanding as the basis for engagement.	Both sources associated successful collaboration with clarity of purpose and relationship continuity.

Table Continues

Exhibit 6 (Continued). Current and Previous Findings on Community Partnerships

Construct	Site Coordinator Interviews (Fall 2024)	Community Partner Focus Groups and Interview (Spring 2025)	Triangulated Interpretation
Construct	Site Coordinator Interviews	Community Partner Focus Groups and Interview	Triangulated Interpretation
Communication practices	Coordinators highlighted scheduling, space coordination, and clarity of roles as the main factors affecting collaboration.	Community partners emphasized open, ongoing communication with site coordinators and responsiveness to feedback from families and students.	Communication was consistently identified as central to maintaining trust and adapting programming.
Continuity and staffing	Coordinators noted that turnover sometimes disrupted collaboration and reduced community partner engagement.	Community partners reported that continuity of site coordinator relationships directly affected the depth of their involvement.	Both groups connected stable staffing with sustained collaboration and mutual accountability.
Perceived value	Coordinators described community partners as expanding access to enrichment opportunities beyond school capacity.	Community partners described the program as a trusted platform that amplified their community impact and visibility.	Both perspectives recognized partnerships as mutually beneficial within the Texas ACE structure.

Source. Texas ACE site coordinator survey collected by AIR spring 2024, site coordinator interview data collected by AIR fall 2024, and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Community Needs and Perceived Program Impact

Although community needs can be inferred from the community partner contributions described above, community partners were asked their opinion about community needs and how the Texas ACE program does or does not address those needs. Community partners in three focus groups and one interview said that the program met pressing community priorities such as access to academic support and safe supervision during non-school hours, particularly in rural and high-need settings where few alternatives exist. Community partners in these areas in particular perceived Texas ACE as a dependable structure that extends the school day’s benefits into the hours when families need it most. They emphasized that parents valued

Why Community Partners See Texas ACE as Essential

TX ACE fills critical gaps in academic support and safe supervision, especially in rural and high-need communities.

Partners view the program as a **“home base”** where students not only get tutoring or enrichment but also build confidence and belonging.

The program **strengthens the broader community** by connecting schools, families, and local organizations in ways that extend beyond the school day.

the program not only for academics but also as a trusted environment that provided safety, consistency, and belonging for children—a finding consistent with the parents’ or guardians’ own perspective, as already described.

Across urban and suburban contexts, community partners described the program as an environment that supported social confidence, leadership, and engagement. They perceived that enrichment activities such as e-sports, STEM, and arts clubs connected academic goals with opportunities for teamwork and identity building. These settings often allowed students who were quiet or hesitant in class to take on visible roles, which community partners associated with increased confidence and participation. High school community partners further linked these experiences to readiness for postsecondary education and careers, observing that certification programs and test preparation made future pathways more tangible for students. In this sense, they viewed Texas ACE as a bridge between school day learning and long-term motivation.

Community partners also identified community-level benefits that extended beyond direct student outcomes. Families relied on the Texas ACE program as part of their daily routines, especially in areas where work schedules and childcare needs were major concerns. Local organizations described increased visibility and deeper connections with schools, explaining that shared events, resource fairs, and family nights allowed them to reach broader audiences. They perceived the program as strengthening community cohesion by linking institutions that might otherwise operate separately. Across all contexts, community partners emphasized that these connections positioned Texas ACE as both a community asset and an integrative structure that supported educational and social stability.

Community partners’ descriptions of community need and perceived impact consistently framed Texas ACE as a stabilizing presence within local ecosystems. Rather than viewing the program as a discrete intervention, community partners again emphasized its role in supporting family routines, extending school-day benefits, and linking institutions that might otherwise operate independently. These perceptions position Texas ACE as both a community asset and an integrative structure for educational and social support. Illustrative examples of perceived needs and aligned Texas ACE impact appear in Exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7. How Community Partners Described Local Needs and Perceived Program Impact

Perceived Community Need	Perceived Program Impact	Illustrative Community Partner Voice
Limited literacy and childcare options; few structured afterschool opportunities	Texas ACE filled gaps by providing academic support and a safe, reliable setting for children.	<i>“It’s a program that provides a safe place for kids that maybe they don’t have another place to turn to . . . kind of like a little home base for them.” – High school community partner focus group</i>

Table Continues

Exhibit 7 (Continued). How Community Partners Described Local Needs and Perceived Program Impact

Perceived Community Need	Perceived Program Impact	Illustrative Community Partner Voice
High-need students requiring academic engagement and positive social environments	Afterschool spaces fostered confidence, teamwork, and leadership; students became more willing to participate and take initiative.	<i>“The kids at our school in particular . . . this is a very high-need school, and a lot of our students are high risk. I think just giving them the opportunity to join an afterschool program is essential—not just for development, but for social skills and being part of something bigger than what home or their neighborhood may offer. ACE is an amazing program for some of these kids. It keeps them out of trouble and gives them something they can’t always get at home—like cooking, soccer, or exercise. It helps them be part of something.” – EL/Middle school community partner interview</i>
Need for postsecondary readiness and structured academic motivation	Tutoring, test preparation, and certification programs encouraged commitment to schoolwork and created pathways to college or workforce credentials.	<i>“They’re partnering with the university so students can earn certifications in welding, nursing . . . they can now begin their careers.” – High school community partner focus group</i>
Family time constraints and need for safe supervision	Program schedules supported household routines; staff built trust and reinforced positive behavior; partnerships expanded organizations’ visibility and community reach.	<i>“It’s nice to have an after school program where the kids feel safe... and just have like a safe space to be.” – Sixth-grade community partner focus group</i>

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Finally, community partners in three focus groups and one interview reflected on the overall effectiveness of the Texas ACE program in terms of achieving program goals. They reported that effectiveness was not about a single benchmark but what they saw in daily practice. Partners pointed to how students responded, how feedback was received, and how activities were refined over time. They explained that these markers of success were visible in the day-to-day rhythms of participation and interaction. **What mattered most was whether students wanted to attend, whether families’ voices shaped programming, and whether the program’s design evolved in ways that reflected community needs.** In this sense, effectiveness was perceived through ongoing and observable evidence of engagement.

Similarly, community partners most often described effectiveness as perceived through students’ enthusiasm. When students anticipated activities, asked about upcoming events, or sought out staff between sessions, partners saw that as evidence of belonging. **They called this**

enthusiasm an informal but reliable indicator of impact since enjoyment and consistency of participation often went hand in hand. This perspective framed student excitement as both a signal of short-term engagement and a foundation for sustained connection to school, as perceived by partners who observed it daily.

Community partners also defined effectiveness as perceived through responsiveness and collaboration. They explained that surveys and feedback sessions with families and students led to tangible adjustments to program activities, which built credibility and trust. High school community partners described roundtables as a form of responsiveness, where students and parents could share experiences directly with staff and see their ideas reflected in programming. Across sites, family events were viewed as essential spaces of collaboration where parents offered feedback, asked questions, and reinforced their relationship with the school. These everyday exchanges made partnerships visible and signaled that community input was genuinely valued. The examples in Exhibit 8 illustrate how community partners described and recognized these perceived dimensions of effectiveness in practice.

Exhibit 8. Dimensions of Program Effectiveness as Described by Community Partners

Dimension of Effectiveness	Observed Practice or Mechanism	Illustrative Quote
Student enthusiasm as a sign of belonging	Students’ anticipation and consistent participation signaled that programming was enjoyable and motivating, reinforcing the link between fun and school engagement.	<i>“The kids have just been coming to school and they’re just a little bit . . . happier because . . . they have things to look forward to. So like I know with me, with my lunch groups, my kids always look forward to my lunch groups. They’re stopping me in the hallway . . .it is just like little things . . .that just make them look forward to wanting to be here.” – Sixth-grade community partner focus group</i>
Responsiveness to community and family input	Surveys and ongoing communication with families led to visible program changes. Community partners viewed this follow-through as a marker of accountability and respect.	<i>“I know they do family surveys like parent surveys. They do student surveys, so the organization is very good at getting that feedback and fixing it. So like if there is something that a parent says that they may be lacking in or whatever the case may be, they’re always good at, OK. How do we fix this? What’s the correction? And how are we able to maybe help this family more? – Sixth-grade community partner focus group</i>
Collaborative inclusion through feedback forums	Parent and student roundtables provided structured spaces for open dialogue, allowing staff to act on what they heard and reinforcing trust with families.	<i>“The parent roundtables were also a very big help about what parents needed to hear, what students were saying about the ACE program. So and then I know that the site coordinators also give a lot of feedback and they feel heard a lot of the time when they get their feedback or when they give feedback or ask for something they really do respond well to it.” – High school community partner focus group</i>

Table Continues

Exhibit 8 (Continued). Dimensions of Program Effectiveness as Described by Community Partners

Dimension of Effectiveness	Observed Practice or Mechanism	Illustrative Quote
Community presence and visible partnership	Family events created public opportunities for connection and input, demonstrating responsiveness and reinforcing shared ownership.	<i>“It is important for us to be there at those family events. That is where parents come up and ask questions, or even just tell us what they think their kids need. It opens doors for us and for them.” – Elementary community partner focus group</i>
Sustained collaboration as mutually beneficial practice	Community partners described how continued coordination with schools created reciprocal benefits, allowing community organizations to expand outreach while helping ACE adapt to community need.	<i>“Our library is not large enough to host the 150 or so people that come to the performances that we bring to the community. But the school is and the school has a stage and an auditorium and things like that. So ACE has allowed us to incorporate those performances in every summer for the last three ACE directors that I know of. . . . We’re able to bring those programs to the ACE kids who may not have the opportunity to see some of these performing artists, but they’re bringing us an added audience. So it’s great to be able to fill that auditorium with families that want to see the shows in the summer. We try to make reading fun and ACE helps us be able to do that in the summer.” – Elementary community partner focus group</i>
Alignment between college readiness and family realities	At the secondary level, partners emphasized preparing families for practical postsecondary choices, connecting effectiveness to long-term readiness.	<i>“We were really meeting with both the students and the parents to bring home the emphasis on the importance of college prep itself. . . . That was where we were bridging the topic in OST, where parents were like, well, my daughter already got accepted to UTSA. . . . Maybe you need to start at a community college and then transfer to save some money.” – High school community partner focus group</i>

Note. OST = out of school time; UTSA = University of Texas at San Antonio.

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

School/District Administrators’ Experiences with 21st CCLC TX ACE Programs

The third stakeholder group is school and district administrators. School and district administrators are extremely important stakeholders due to their leadership positions and comprehensive understanding of the school or district as a whole. Buy-in and support from a school administrator or from district-level staff can translate to greater program visibility, greater access to resources (including physical space, transportation, and data), and better alignment with the school day.

Administrators from four sites participated in individual interviews, representing rural, suburban, and city contexts as well as both school- and district-level leadership. Their reflections offer insight into how the Texas ACE program was understood and managed at the leadership level. Administrators described their experiences in terms of leadership and purpose, program impact and engagement, and alignment and improvement.

Leadership and Purpose

Administrators across rural, suburban, and city settings emphasized that their leadership role in Texas ACE was to set vision and remove barriers while allowing site coordinators to manage daily operations. They described this balance as deliberate: Administrators provided the framework and resources, while site coordinators handled the daily detail that keeps the program moving.

“The principal’s role is to oversee, but the site coordinator runs it. That’s their baby, and we just make sure it aligns with what the campus needs.”

– School administrator interview

Perceptions of the administrator role, as well as the overall purpose of Texas ACE, did vary somewhat by program locale. In rural districts leaders described Texas ACE as an essential extension of limited district capacity, explaining that the program provided staffing and structure they could not supply alone. In suburban and city contexts, administrators stressed that their role was less about direct oversight and more about ensuring alignment with school and district priorities. They noted that the program functioned best when coordinators had ownership, while principals and administrators offered support and resolved systemic issues such as space, staffing, or scheduling. For these leaders, Texas ACE was valuable not only because it expanded services but also because it reinforced broader institutional priorities. For example, at one high school site this meant promoting a college-going culture by linking tutoring, dual credit, and certifications to students’ long-term pathways. In suburban contexts, it reflected access and opportunity, with leaders emphasizing that enrichment opportunities such as robotics, dance, and tutoring were free for families who could not otherwise afford them.

What Administrators Emphasized About the ACE Program

Administrators set vision and removed barriers while coordinators managed daily operations.

They described ACE as more than afterschool, a bridge connecting school and community needs.

The program filled gaps in childcare, literacy, and supervision, and supported college and career readiness.

It expanded parent involvement and strengthened partnerships with local organizations.

Alignment with instruction and clear feedback loops kept the program responsive and trusted.

“We are trying to build a college-going culture . . . ACE helps bridge that by giving them tutoring, dual credit, even certifications. It keeps them focused on that path.”

– High school administrator interview

Impact and Engagement

Administrators connected their understanding of Texas ACE’s purpose to a range of impacts on students, families, and communities. For students, they emphasized that the program filled critical gaps, although precisely what was meant by this varied somewhat by program context. In rural districts, leaders pointed to childcare coverage and literacy support as essential contributions, explaining that Texas ACE provided both safety and academic continuity in settings with limited resources. In city schools, administrators highlighted the program’s role in engagement and supervision, noting that unstructured afterschool hours posed risks. They saw Texas ACE as a protective structure that kept students connected to school and engaged in positive activities. At the high school level, leaders tied these impacts directly to postsecondary readiness, describing certifications and dual-credit opportunities as tangible evidence of success.

Beyond student outcomes, administrators also described Texas ACE as a catalyst for strengthening family and community connections. They explained that family nights and workshops drew in parents who had rarely participated in school activities before, creating stronger relationships that carried into the school day. **Administrators further emphasized that Texas ACE opened new entry points for community organizations, enabling partnerships that schools could not have developed on their own.** Taken together, administrators viewed this combination of student outcomes and community connections as central to the program’s value.

“Parents need somewhere safe, and we need to keep kids engaged. [Texas] ACE filled that gap.”

– School administrator interview

Alignment and Improvement

Administrators also emphasized the importance of connecting Texas ACE activities with instructional goals. They described how tutoring, dual credit, and certification programs were intentionally aligned with classroom expectations, while enrichment activities helped support school-day learning through embedded content while providing opportunities not otherwise available. In rural contexts, alignment often came through literacy-focused initiatives such as library partnerships that extended reading practice into afterschool hours. In all contexts, administrators noted that alignment works best when teachers proactively share information with Texas ACE staff.

To sustain alignment and responsiveness, administrators highlighted feedback loops. They described hearing regularly from parents, students, and teachers, and emphasized that Texas ACE staff have acted quickly to adjust programming based on this feedback. Suggestions were revisited at steering committee meetings providing continuity and accountability. Even when changes turned out to not be possible, site coordinators explained their decisions at these meetings, which administrators viewed as critical for sustaining trust. They stressed that this transparency kept families engaged and prevented the steering committee from being seen as symbolic.

Touchpoint: Previous Findings on School/District Administrative Leadership and Alignment

Site coordinators who were interviewed during fall 2024 described principals as visible supporters who legitimized programs within the school community and removed logistical barriers such as scheduling or space constraints. Leadership was described as relational and facilitative, with its influence varying based on how actively principals engaged or communicated with coordinators. Alignment with school goals occurred when administrators promoted collaboration between teachers and Texas ACE staff, but coordination was often described as relying on informal communication and individual initiative.

Administrator interviews from spring 2025 provide a broader and more structured account of similar dynamics. Leaders across rural, suburban, and city contexts described their role as setting vision and removing barriers while granting coordinators ownership of daily operations. Rural administrators emphasized Texas ACE as a vital extension of district capacity, while suburban and city leaders framed it as an alignment strategy that extended core instructional goals through tutoring, enrichment, and credentialing. Across all contexts, administrators reported using structured feedback loops among teachers, families, and students to sustain responsiveness and coherence between afterschool and classroom priorities.

Together, the site coordinator and administrator perspectives illustrate a shared but distributed leadership model. Coordinators depict leadership as situational support that enables implementation, while administrators portray it as system-level stewardship that integrates Texas ACE into broader educational structures. Triangulated across both sources, administrative leadership provides strategic direction and accountability structures, complemented by site coordinators who operationalize those systems in practice.

Exhibit 9. Current and Previous Findings on School/District Administrative Leadership and Alignment

Domain	Site Coordinator Interviews (Fall 2024)	Administrator Interviews (Spring 2025)	Triangulated Interpretation
Leadership role	Principals are viewed as supportive or enabling figures; leadership varies by personality or context.	Administrators view themselves as system-level leaders who set direction and remove barriers.	Leadership is shared but stratified: site coordinators manage implementation, administrators institutionalize support.
Alignment with instructional goals	Coordinators emphasize communication with teachers and principals as essential but inconsistent.	Administrators describe intentional alignment of ACE with school and district academic priorities.	The two perspectives reflect a range from interpersonal coordination to systemic integration of ACE with school-day priorities.
Communication structures	Informal check-ins and relationship-based collaboration	Formalized feedback loops involving parents, teachers, and students	The two sources reflect a spectrum of communication, ranging from ad hoc coordination to structured, multistakeholder feedback.

Source. Texas ACE site coordinator survey collected by AIR spring 2024, site coordinator interview data collected by AIR fall 2024, and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Steering Committee Perspectives on Program Oversight and Collaboration

The fourth and final stakeholder group is the Texas ACE steering committee. The steering committee is unique among stakeholder groups in that it comprises representatives from a variety of other stakeholder groups, but has as its explicit purpose the support and guidance of the Texas ACE program. Members of the committee can provide feedback and advice about upcoming program decisions, review data (including feedback from other stakeholders), establish community connections, help make decisions concerning program offerings, and so forth. The perspective of steering committee members is therefore of strategic importance.

Steering committee members from four participating sites, including a rural elementary school, a large-city middle school, a midsize-city high school, and a large-city high school, described how their committees were structured, how they operated, and how they influenced the Texas ACE program. Although contexts differed, members consistently highlighted four areas: membership and representation, meeting operations, roles and responsibilities, and how

feedback was used in decision making. The findings that follow are therefore organized by these themes.

Membership and Composition

Steering committees represented in the focus groups varied in size and composition across rural, suburban, and city settings, reflecting the resources available in each community and the goals emphasized at each site. At the rural elementary level, the steering committee relied heavily on service center staff who described their role as providing external support rather than being embedded on campus.

“Our role is more to provide that guidance and support . . . we’re not there every day, but we’re making sure the site has what it needs.”

– Elementary steering committee focus group

These steering committee members explained that the service center was often the most consistent presence, whereas other steering committee members, such as parents or local staff, participated as they were able. This gave the committee stability in a small district where local staff had limited capacity but also highlighted its role as external oversight rather than on-the-ground management.

In contrast, at a large-city high school the steering committee members reported that their steering committee was small but represented a variety of stakeholders, generally including about six people: a principal, program staff, parents, and a regional Texas ACE coordinator. They emphasized that, although the group was compact, it was composed of individuals directly responsible for day-to-day program oversight and decision making. This lean structure balanced compliance with grant requirements while also leaving room for creative enrichment ideas.

At the midsize high school, steering committee members described broad representation as a strength that linked the program to long-term academic and workforce pathways. They explained that the inclusion of students ensured direct feedback on program relevance, while representatives of higher education contributed substantively by helping plan tutoring and certification supports. This mix of voices was viewed as essential not only for alignment with district priorities but also for building pathways that extend beyond high school.

“We try to have faculty, we’ve got admin, parents, and some students too . . . and then we’ve brought in the college so that higher ed is part of the conversation.”

– High school steering committee interview

Meeting Operations

Meeting operations varied across participating sites in terms of frequency, participants, and focus, but steering committee members consistently stressed that these gatherings shaped how the program stayed accountable, creative, and connected to larger goals.

At the rural elementary site, meetings were heavily guided by service center staff and focused more on accountability than innovation. Members recalled how service center leaders walked them through data, set expectations, and helped the local site stay aligned with state requirements. They emphasized that this outside guidance gave structure and credibility to their work, particularly in smaller communities where local staff wore many hats.

By contrast, in large city high schools, meetings emphasized collaboration and creativity. Steering committee members described their meetings as spaces where compliance requirements were covered but quickly moved into brainstorming. Staff, parents, and administrators worked together to design enrichment ideas, sometimes leading to concrete changes such as inviting outside groups or creating new tutorials. Participants explained that this process gave the meetings energy and a sense of ownership, moving them beyond routine paperwork.

“We meet regularly, about six people. The principal, the regional [Texas] ACE coordinator, some of the parents . . . It’s not just paperwork. We get creative with it, like planning tutorials for AP calculus and bringing in outside groups.”

– High school steering committee focus group

In a high school, midsize-city setting, participants emphasized the structured nature of their quarterly meetings. They explained that agendas went beyond compliance to include systematic planning tied to tutoring, certification pathways, and proposals such as dual-credit initiatives. Members highlighted the presence of higher education partners, describing these sessions as touchpoints where K–12 staff and college representatives coordinated around student readiness. Reviewing participation data alongside these proposals reinforced accountability and helped make sure that decisions were grounded in evidence of student outcomes.

“We do it quarterly, and it’s very structured . . . It’s not just ideas, it’s reports, it’s proposals, like the CRLA [College Reading and Learning Association] tutoring certification. We go through each point and decide what moves forward.”

– High school steering committee member interview

Roles and Responsibilities

In terms of how steering committee members view their own roles and responsibilities, members described their roles as extending beyond oversight to shaping how programs operate and evolve. Members emphasized that responsibilities included guiding site staff, aligning activities with community and student needs, and ensuring accountability to both families and funders. Across sites, the degree of involvement reflected local context and capacity. In smaller or more remote districts, committees often served as stabilizing partners that provided guidance and external accountability rather than daily management. In larger systems, members described more active engagement in shaping programming, allocating resources, and coordinating across partners.

Committee members also described how these responsibilities evolved through ongoing communication and collaboration. **At several sites, discussions extended beyond academics to address practical supports such as transportation, meals, and hygiene items. At others, committees integrated higher education and workforce partners to align school activities with postsecondary goals.** Members added that responsibilities did not stop at quarterly meetings. **Informal communication by text, phone, and direct check-ins with coordinators ensured that concerns were addressed quickly.** They stressed that this fluid communication helped maintain momentum between formal sessions and reinforced the sense that no single hierarchy controlled the process.

See Exhibit 10 for a summary of role perceptions provided by focus group members.

Exhibit 10. Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of Steering Committees

Salient Site Characteristic	Description of Responsibilities	Representative Quote
Rural distant	Service center staff emphasized providing guidance and external accountability rather than daily management, describing their stabilizing role as especially valuable in small districts with limited staff capacity.	<i>“Our role is more to provide that guidance and support . . . we’re not there every day, but we’re making sure the site has what it needs.” – Elementary steering committee focus group</i>
Large city	Members described responsibilities extending into decision making on enrichment and support. They gathered teacher and student input, refined ideas collectively, and took joint action to address identified needs.	<i>“Take input from the teachers, the students . . . and then as a committee, we come together and decide, OK, this is how we’re going to implement it.” – High school steering committee focus group</i>

Table Continues

Exhibit 10 (Continued). Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of Steering Committees

Salient Site Characteristic	Description of Responsibilities	Representative Quote
Large city	Members described their role as coordinating across school, community, and Texas ACE partners to ensure all participants have program access and enrichment variety.	<i>“One of the things is the opportunity that it provides . . . [the Site Coordinator] is really one of those people that try to get different things and different exposure. For instance, one day we were just in the hallway talking and be like, no, it’d be really cool. And he was like, let’s make that happen.”</i>
Midsize city	Steering committee members emphasized aligning programming with postsecondary pathways. Their work with higher education partners included tutoring, dual credit, and certification coordination, expanding from a focus on test preparation to broader readiness.	<i>“We try to have faculty, we’ve got admin, parents, and some students too . . . and then we’ve brought in the college so that higher ed is part of the conversation.” – High school steering committee interview</i>
Across participating sites	Members stressed that informal communication between meetings sustained momentum and reinforced collective accountability.	[N/A]

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Strategic Input and Feedback Use

Steering committee members across sites described how their input was solicited and used to shape Texas ACE programming. Their accounts showed that committees gathered input through structured meetings, surveys, and informal conversations, and that staff used feedback to inform enrichment offerings, family engagement activities, and alignment with school-day priorities.

In an elementary, rural, distant setting, steering committee members explained that community- and school-level feedback is gathered through surveys and informal conversations facilitated by the local site coordinator. The site coordinator serves as a conduit, bringing input from families, students, school staff, and community partners to the steering committee, which reviews the information and provides guidance back to the site for incorporation into program implementation. Committee members emphasized that this process allowed smaller districts to participate meaningfully without requiring every parent or teacher to be present, since surveys and service center reports ensured their voices were represented.

In a large-city high school context, steering committee members described more immediate use of their feedback. They explained that meetings were used to identify needs and then translate them into new program components, such as additional tutorials or enrichment clubs. They

also recalled suggesting family nights with wellness and community partners, and seeing these events implemented, which reinforced that their feedback extended beyond academics.

In a midsize-city high school setting, participants stressed that their input was connected to longer term planning rather than immediate adjustments. Feedback on tutoring and certification proposals, for example, was reviewed alongside participation data and higher education pathways. **Members noted that their suggestions were recorded as “action items” and revisited in later meetings, creating continuity and ensuring accountability across quarters.**

“We’ll bring things up, and within a month you’ll see something change. Like when we said we needed more help with math, the next meeting there was a plan for tutorials.”

– High school steering committee focus group

Decision Matrix: Steering Committee Structure and Operations

Emergent from the foregoing material are sketches of different approaches to steering committees. The findings present a variety of contexts and illustrate the range of structures, meeting approaches, roles, and feedback processes described by focus group participants. To support the use of these descriptions as practical references for steering committee planning, the following section synthesizes site visit data into decision matrices that highlight common decision points discussed by steering committee members, along with the operational considerations they associated with the different approaches. Rather than pointing to a single preferred model, the matrices summarize multiple ways committees were organized and operated across participating sites. Note that the entries reflect practices explicitly described by focus group members, and they describe the visited sites without assuming effectiveness or promoting one approach over another. These matrices are presented with the intention of clarifying potential “downstream” effects of steering committee design and function.

Decision Point 1: Steering Committee Membership and Composition

A first and ongoing decision point around steering committees concerns their composition: Who should be part of the steering committee? How many members should it have? Exhibit 11 summarizes how steering committee members at participating focus group sites described committee membership and representation, what that structure helped make easier, and what that structure required or constrained.

>> Decision Point 1: “Who should be included or represented on the steering committee? How many members should the committee have?”

Exhibit 11. Steering Committee Membership and Composition Considerations Emerging from Steering Committee Focus Group Discussions

Membership Configuration Described	Evidence from Steering Committee Accounts	What This Configuration Made Easier	What This Configuration Required or Constrained
Small core committee with school leadership, program staff, and ACE coordinator	Large city high school members described a committee of approximately six people including the principal, program staff, parents, and a regional ACE coordinator.	Scheduling meetings consistently; making decisions with individuals directly responsible for implementation	Reliance on members holding multiple roles; limited breadth of perspectives unless additional voices were consulted outside meetings
Broad representation including parents, students, and higher education partners	Midsize city high school members described including students and college representatives to support tutoring, certification, and postsecondary planning.	Incorporating direct student feedback; aligning programming with longer term academic and workforce pathways	More coordination to convene members; need to manage varied priorities within meetings
Service center–led or externally supported committee	Rural elementary members described service center staff as the most consistent committee presence, providing guidance and accountability.	Maintaining continuity and compliance in settings with limited local capacity	Less on-campus presence; reliance on external staff to relay local context

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Note in particular that steering committee composition involves consideration of group size, group representation, and member availability. These three aspects of steering committee composition are interrelated and will affect steering committee dynamics and function. There is no single correct approach to steering committee composition, but Texas ACE staff should consider these aspects carefully when establishing or rebalancing steering committee membership.

Decision Point 2: Meeting Cadence

Decisions about steering committee composition and size will have an impact on the frequency of steering committee meetings given the availability of members. Likewise, steering committee meeting frequency can have an effect on the roles that the steering committee plays, and how it operates in general. Exhibit 12 presents steering committee members’ reflections about meeting frequency and how that frequency affected steering committee function, focusing on quarterly meetings versus meeting more often.

>> Decision Point 2: “How often should our steering committee meet?”

Exhibit 12. Steering Committee Meeting Frequency Consideration Emerging from Steering Committee Focus Group Discussions

Meeting Cadence Described	Evidence from Steering Committee Accounts	What This Cadence Supported	What This Cadence Limited or Required
Quarterly meetings	Midsized city high school members described quarterly meetings with structured agendas reviewing reports and proposals.	Formal review of data, proposals, and planning tied to tutoring and certification pathways	Fewer formal touchpoints for addressing emerging issues between meetings
More frequent than quarterly, or regular convenings	Large city high school members described meeting regularly with a small group.	Timely planning, brainstorming, and adjustment of enrichment or academic supports	Ongoing coordination demands; need for clear agendas to avoid meeting fatigue
Meetings supplemented by informal communication	Members across sites referenced communication between meetings via calls, texts, or check-ins.	Continuity between formal meetings; addressing issues without waiting for the next convening	Dependence on staff stability and shared understanding of responsibilities

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Exhibit 12 shows that less frequent meetings (quarterly) may be more conducive to strategic, long-term vision setting and planning, while more frequent meetings (e.g., monthly) can yield a steering committee that is more involved in day-to-day problem solving. However, quarterly meetings can mean that the steering committee is less involved in day-to-day brainstorming, problem solving, and planning, whereas a more frequent meeting schedule can lead to meeting burnout (and may be impossible for stakeholders who otherwise could participate). In either case, however, careful meeting preparation (e.g., clear agendas with identified questions and decision points) and established protocols for between-meeting communication will generally bolster and strengthen either approach.

Decision Point 3: Meeting Structure and Documentation

Once decisions about steering committee composition and meeting cadence have been resolved (Decision Points 1 and 2), site staff should consider meeting best-practices and think through how to structure the meetings themselves. Exhibit 13 shows how steering committee members described meeting organization and decision tracking at participating sites. Note that Exhibit 13 is somewhat different from Exhibits 11 and 12 in that Exhibit 13 does not present neutral options, but rather shows three generally effective meeting practices that may warrant emulation by Texas ACE programs. Note in particular, however, the last column of the table showing what the meeting structure in question required: The decision point here is less about a choice between options and more about adapting these types of structures to local contexts

in a realistic, useful way (including consideration for steering committee composition and meeting frequency).

>> Decision Point 3: “How can we intentionally incorporate effective meeting practices into our steering committee meetings?”

Exhibit 13. Effective Steering Committee Meeting Practices as Perceived by Steering Committee Focus Group Participants

	Evidence from Steering Committee Accounts	Benefits	Decision Considerations
Practice 1: Highly structured agendas with reports and proposals	Midsize city high school members described reviewing participation data, tutoring certifications, and dual-credit proposals.	Clear decision making; documented accountability; continuity across quarters	What should be included in agendas? What data reports or documents should be reviewed? How should meetings be facilitated?
Practice 2: Meetings that moved quickly from compliance to planning	Large city high school members described covering requirements and then shifting to brainstorming.	Creativity and shared ownership; responsiveness to site needs	How can meetings be structured to cover both compliance and planning while leaving room for brainstorming and problem solving?
Practice 3: Action items revisited across meetings	Members described recording suggestions and returning to them in later meetings.	Tracking follow through; visibility of how feedback was used	How will meeting notes and action items be recorded and distributed? How will continuity across meetings be ensured?

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Decision Point 4: Roles and Responsibilities

Considering all the material presented for Decision Points 1–3, Exhibit 14 summarizes how steering committee members at the visited sites described their roles in relation to Texas ACE programming. This Decision Point is intended to drive careful consideration for steering committee role descriptions and responsibilities in light of the decisions made around points 1–3. Steering committee member roles should be carefully but succinctly defined; as highlighted in the previous report, clearly defined steering committee member roles and responsibilities focus steering committee function, facilitate committee recruitment, and ensure that there are no negative surprises for new steering committees in terms of time commitments and expectations. Note that the roles here are not meant to be exhaustive, but are emergent highlights from the focus group discussions.

>> **Decision Point 4: “What roles and responsibilities should the steering committee have?”**

Exhibit 14. Considerations for Steering Committee Member Roles and Responsibilities

Role Emphasis Described	Evidence from Steering Committee Accounts	What This Emphasis Supported	What This Emphasis Did Not Replace
External guidance and accountability	Rural elementary members described service center staff providing oversight and alignment.	Stability and compliance support in small or remote districts	Daily program management
Active planning and coordination	Large- and midsize-city members described shaping enrichment, tutoring, and partnerships.	Integration across school, community, and postsecondary partners	Direct service delivery
Informal coordination between meetings	Members described texting or checking in with coordinators.	Momentum between meetings; addressing time sensitive concerns	Formal committee processes

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Decision Point 5: Strategic Input and Feedback Use

Finally, Exhibit 15 presents how steering committee members described gathering input from other stakeholders, and how that input was handled at participating sites.

>> **Decision Point 5: “What kinds of stakeholder feedback (or other program data) should the steering committee consider, and what should they do with it?”**

Exhibit 15. Steering Committee Use of Feedback

Feedback Pathway Described	Evidence from Steering Committee Accounts	How Feedback Was Used	What Supported Follow Through
Surveys and aggregated input	Rural elementary members described surveys relayed through service center staff.	Representing parent and community perspectives without requiring attendance	Clear reporting back to committees
Immediate translation of feedback into changes	Large city high school members described suggesting tutorials or family events that were implemented.	Visible responsiveness to identified needs	Regular meetings and coordinator follow-up
Feedback tied to longer term planning	Midsize city high school members described reviewing feedback alongside data and pathways.	Continuity across planning cycles	Documentation and revisiting decisions

Source. Texas ACE interview and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Note that Decision Point 5 is, in essence, an entry point for discussing how the steering committee should review and use program-related data. Input is a critical data source, and highly relevant for steering committee function. It may be useful for Texas ACE programs to consider data more holistically, however, thinking through the ways in which program goals relate to the populations served, activities and services offered, program quality, and both short-term and longer term outcomes. This requires creativity, data literacy, time, and strategic thinking, all of which may be helpful for Texas ACE staff to consider when thinking about steering committee member recruitment or partnerships with school-day staff.

Exhibit 16 presents a summary of all five decision points for ease of reference. Note that the exhibit is intended as an **interpretive aid for understanding the decision points**, and does not present a model or recommended approach. Instead, it synthesizes patterns described by steering committee members across participating sites.

Exhibit 16. Decision Matrix: Steering Committee Structure and Operations

	Membership and Composition	Meeting Cadence	Meeting Structure and Documentation	Roles and Responsibilities	Strategic Input and Feedback Use
<p>Cross-cutting operational considerations associated with each decision dimension</p> <p>These reflect tradeoffs and tensions described by participants rather than choices to be optimized or resolved. The paired concepts are not evaluative and should not be read as opposing “good” or “bad” options.</p>	<p>Breadth of representation versus ease of convening</p> <p>Broader participation supported diverse perspectives, while smaller committees made scheduling and decision making more manageable given local capacity.</p>	<p>Regularity of meetings versus coordination burden</p> <p>More frequent meetings supported responsiveness and collaboration, while less frequent convenings reduced demands on staff time.</p>	<p>Structure and documentation versus flexibility and creativity</p> <p>Highly structured agendas supported accountability and continuity, while less formal structures allowed adaptation and brainstorming.</p>	<p>External accountability versus on-campus embeddedness</p> <p>Externally supported roles emphasized guidance and compliance, while embedded roles supported day-to-day coordination and program shaping.</p>	<p>Immediate adjustments versus longer term planning cycles</p> <p>Some feedback informed rapid program changes, while other input was incorporated into longer term planning tied to pathways and sustainability.</p>
<p>Contextual conditions that can shape which approaches are feasible</p>	<p>District and site capacity</p> <p>Staffing levels, turnover, and competing responsibilities</p>	<p>Number of sites and staffing roles</p> <p>Coordination needs differed for single versus multisite grants.</p>	<p>Existing leadership arrangements</p> <p>Prior governance routines shaped committee roles.</p>	<p>Partner availability and stability</p> <p>Consistency of service center and community partners</p>	<p>Communication infrastructure</p> <p>Use of email, text, calls, and informal check-ins between meetings</p>

**Touchpoint: Triangulating Steering Committee Structure, Operations, and Use
Across Data Sources**

To situate site-level steering committee findings within the broader evaluation evidence base, this touchpoint brings together data from three sources used in the study: steering committee member interviews conducted during spring 2025 site visits, site coordinator interviews conducted during fall 2024, and the spring 2024 statewide site coordinator survey.

Considered together, the three data sources suggest that steering committee structures and practices varied, at least in part, due to context rather than intentional model selection. Site coordinators who were interviewed, for example, did not describe deliberate decisions to adopt a center-based or a district-based steering committee model, or a structure that combined elements of both. Instead, they referenced operational conditions such as district size, number of sites served, staffing capacity, and existing leadership arrangements. Steering committee member accounts collected as part of the focus groups align with these descriptions, illustrating how committees functioned within existing conditions. Survey data confirm that this type of variation is common statewide, although of course the extent to which site staff were intentional in selecting a steering committee structure is not known.

Exhibit 17. Steering Committee Structure, Operations, and Use Across Data Sources

Domain	Steering Committee Members (Spring 2025)	Site Coordinators Interviews (Fall 2024)	Statewide Site Coordinator Survey (Spring 2024)	Cross-Source Synthesis
Committee structure and membership	Members described varied committee composition, including small core committees, broadly representative committees, and service center–led or externally supported committees across participating sites.	Coordinators did not articulate explicit rationales for adopting center-based, district-based, or dual structures. Instead, they described operational realities such as district size, number of sites served, staffing roles, and existing leadership arrangements.	School district grants were more likely to report steering committees serving a broader advisory role, while non-school-district grants were more likely to report site-specific committees.	Across all sources, committee structure appears to reflect local organizational context and capacity rather than intentional selection among predefined models.

Table Continues

Exhibit 17 (Continued). Steering Committee Structure, Operations, and Use Across Data Sources

Domain	Steering Committee Members (Spring 2025)	Site Coordinators Interviews (Fall 2024)	Statewide Site Coordinator Survey (Spring 2024)	Cross-Source Synthesis
Meeting cadence and operations	Members described meeting frequencies ranging from quarterly to more regular convenings, sometimes supplemented by informal communication between meetings.	Coordinators reported similar variation in meeting schedules and frequently described additional communication through calls, texts, or brief virtual check-ins between formal meetings.	Survey responses showed substantial variation in meeting frequency, with monthly meetings most common, followed by “as needed” and quarterly schedules.	Variation in meeting cadence is evident across sources and is described in operational terms rather than as a measure of effectiveness.
Use of informal communication	Members described informal communication as occurring between meetings to address questions or follow up on agreed items, not as a replacement for formal committee processes.	Coordinators described mixed communication strategies, including email, phone calls, text messaging, and virtual meetings, often used alongside scheduled meetings.	Survey data indicate varied communication practices exist but do not specify depth or function of informal communication.	Informal communication is consistently described as a supplement to formal meetings, supporting continuity between convenings rather than substituting for governance structures.
Roles and responsibilities	Members described roles extending beyond oversight, including planning enrichment, coordinating partnerships, and aligning programming with student and family needs, with variation by context.	Coordinators identified four levels of committee influence, ranging from informational to strategic, with committees differing in decision-making authority and scope of involvement.	A majority of respondents reported committee involvement in sustainability planning, data review, and quality improvement, with lower rates of coordination across multiple programs.	Across sources, steering committee roles vary by site context and capacity, with no single role definition applied uniformly.

Table Continues

Exhibit 17 (Continued). Steering Committee Structure, Operations, and Use Across Data Sources

Domain	Steering Committee Members (Spring 2025)	Site Coordinators Interviews (Fall 2024)	Statewide Site Coordinator Survey (Spring 2024)	Cross-Source Synthesis
Strategic input and feedback use	Members described feedback flowing through surveys, meetings, and informal conversations, with examples of feedback being documented, revisited, or translated into program adjustments.	Coordinators reported committees contributing to program offerings, quality improvement, data review, and partnerships, although not uniformly across sites.	Survey data show high rates of committee involvement in planning and review activities without indicating uniform depth of influence.	Feedback processes are consistently described as part of routine program operation, with an emphasis on process rather than outcomes or impact.
Basis for committee configuration	Members did not describe comparing alternative committee models or selecting structures based on perceived effectiveness.	Coordinators similarly did not report intentional model selection and did not reference TEA or grant requirements as drivers of committee structure.	Survey data show wide variation in committee types and roles across sites.	Across all three sources, steering committee configurations appear to emerge from local circumstances, historical practice, and operational pragmatism rather than deliberate design choices.

Source. Texas ACE site coordinator survey collected by AIR spring 2024, site coordinator interview data collected by AIR fall 2024, and focus group data collected by AIR during spring 2025.

Discussion

Multiple important themes emerge from the findings shown in this report. First, stakeholders who participated in the focus groups and interviews made clear that **Texas ACE functions not only as an afterschool program but as a strategic bridge between schools, families, and community organizations.** Stakeholders repeatedly described the program as an extension of the school community, offering reliability, enrichment, and relational continuity. For example, for many families engagement was described as relational, grounded in staff who treated children “like family.” Parents and guardians also emphasized the emotional and logistical relief

provided by academic and childcare support. School or district administrators, however, highlighted alignment with instructional goals and attendance initiatives, suggesting that Texas ACE is an integral part of a broader educational mission. In extension of this, community partners viewed Texas ACE as an entry point to extend their own organizational missions through deepened service delivery.

Second, **adult family member engagement should be understood as a multidimensional construct.** Although data derived from the site coordinator survey and site coordinator interviews focused on adult family member engagement in terms of advisory participation, volunteering, and similar activities, the parents and guardians in the focus groups showed that they perceive engagement in terms of trust, simple attendance at events, and family-to-family outreach. These forms of engagement seemed to hold equal if not greater significance for long-term buy-in. Simply, parents and guardians expressed that being heard, invited, and recognized were more meaningful than being assigned formal leadership tasks.

Along lines similar to adult family member engagement, a third emergent theme is that **steering committee work could be strengthened through intentional consideration of its design and function.** Steering committee implementation appears to vary widely, with variation seeming to depend at least in part on local contextual factors. Survey data from spring 2024 indicated steering committee variation in terms of site- or district-level structure, whereas fall 2024 site coordinator interview findings illustrated variation in membership, meeting frequency, and influence, from informational committees that received updates to more collaborative structures contributing to program design, partnerships, or sustainability planning. Yet the spring 2025 focus groups and interviews suggested not only that such variation may be unintentional or incompletely considered, but that the implicit choices that led to such variation do have downstream consequences. It seems beneficial for Texas ACE programs to therefore make such choices with intentionality about consequences aforesaid rather than by mere chance or contextual impetus.

Fourth, **using data to make real-time program adjustments emerged as an important aspect of program implementation,** aligning with findings in the previous report. Participants from several sites described mechanisms for using attendance data, survey input, or community feedback to refine enrichment offerings and identify needed supports. The presence of these feedback loops, whether formal or informal, was also linked to a perception that the program remained relevant and responsive to the communities it served, with some focus group stakeholders suggesting that site coordinators who regularly adjusted programming based on stakeholder input were critical to supporting site-level credibility.

Fifth and finally, **stakeholders repeatedly connected sustainability not just to funding, but to people and partnerships.** Consistent coordinators, strong site leadership, and collaborative steering committees were described as essential for maintaining momentum. Site coordinators were frequently described as relational anchors, individuals whose continuity enabled trust, daily communication, and consistent participation. In this sense, sustainability was tied to both financial resources and the capacity to build and maintain trusted relationships.

Note, however, that **important structural challenges were also consistently mentioned by focus group members.** These included transportation, staffing instability, communication breakdowns, and limited facilities. Of these, communication (which has been repeatedly identified in this report and the previous report as a critical foundational concern) may be most readily improved, with potentially dramatic return: For example, at some sites stakeholders noted limited awareness of events, unclear program branding, or confusion about which organizations were involved; and where communication was more consistent through regular meetings, updates, and outreach, stakeholders described stronger alignment across school, family, and partner roles. That said, some challenges may be intractable, and may require constant navigation rather than one-time solution.

Recommendations

Based on the emergent themes just discussed, and drawing on content presented throughout this report, four recommendations appear especially important:

1. **Reinforce the role of site coordinators as relational anchors.** Across sites and discussions, trust and consistency were closely associated with coordinator presence and continuity. Supporting coordinator stability, onboarding, and role clarity may help preserve the relational foundations that stakeholders identified as central to program value. Note that this recommendation overlaps with the prior report's recommendation to intentionally involve site coordinators in steering committee work, and to clearly present steering committee roles.
2. **Ensure that program purpose, including its role within a system of supports, is clearly and consistently communicated.** Stakeholders participating in the spring 2025 focus groups and interviews valued Texas ACE not for isolated activities but for its role as a dependable extension of the school community. Sites may benefit from articulating a shared program narrative that emphasizes safety, enrichment, and connection across families, educators, and partners.
3. **Maintain visible alignment with school priorities.** Administrators emphasized that Texas ACE was most valued when it reinforced attendance, engagement, and instructional goals.

It may be helpful to ensure that all site coordinators can document and communicate how afterschool activities connect with school-day priorities.

4. **Encourage Texas ACE programs to intentionally design their steering committee membership, structure, meeting frequency, roles, and communication practices in light of contextual needs and limitations.** There may not be a single right way to organize a steering committee, but choices around each of these should be made with intentionality, making adjustments as necessary to accomplish overall program goals.

This final recommendation encompasses and organizes the other three recommendations while supporting the Texas ACE Roadmap's three key strategies. Site staff seeking program improvement may therefore find it beneficial to focus on this last recommendation first.

Appendix A. Site Visit Sampling

Based on fall 2024 interviews of 19 Texas ACE site coordinators, nine sites were initially selected for subsequent site visit data collection, scheduled for spring 2025. Site selection was based on:

- an indication during the interviews that the site was engaged in promising or best practices from which other sites might benefit;
- cycle, grade levels served, and locale, with an interest in ensuring representation across these variables so that any best practices identified would apply to as many sites as possible across Texas; and
- site coordinator interest in a site visit.

TEA approved AIR's sampling logic in February 2025, after which AIR proceeded to finalize site visit protocol. There were four separate protocols (designed to allow for deep exploration of topics relating to strategic planning, partnerships, and engagement): (1) parents/adult family members of participating students; (2) school principal or administration; (3) partner staff; and (4) steering committee members (if not already accounted for in the other interviews or focus groups). TEA evaluation and program staff approved all protocols for the site visits on February 21, 2025. Final AIR Internal Review Board and TEA Data Governance Board approvals were received on March 13.

Invitations to participate in the site visits were sent out to the nine approved sites on March 17; a reminder invitation was sent on March 25. Of the initial nine sites, two declined to participate, and one subsequently canceled after initially agreeing. The remaining six agreed to participate, were scheduled, and were at least partially completed. To try to meet the original goal of conducting nine site visits, whether partial or complete, AIR suggested five alternate sites that were approved by TEA. Ultimately, however, two alternates declined to participate, and two other sites became nonresponsive after agreeing to participate. Only one additional site was successfully included, bringing the total number of site visits to seven.

In summary:

- Four sites declined to participate (two from the original nine, two from the alternates).
- Two sites initially agreed, but then became nonresponsive concerning scheduling.
- One site initially agreed, but subsequently canceled.
- Seven sites were visited.

A summary of the final sample is provided in Exhibit A1, showing information on locale and grade levels served.

Exhibit A1. Site Sample Characteristics for Visits Conducted by AIR During Spring 2025

Grade Levels Served	City	Rural	Suburban
Elementary	-	1	-
Middle	1	-	1
High	2	-	-
Mixed	1	-	1

Source. Site visits conducted by the American Institutes for Research at seven Texas ACE sites during spring 2025.

Not all interview or focus group types were carried out at all seven sites. This seemed largely driven by difficulty finding times that worked for stakeholder groups, combined with competing site coordinator obligations. In addition, some sites requested that a specific interview or focus group be conducted virtually rather than in-person (or that all interviews/focus groups be conducted this way). A summary of the interviews/focus groups successfully completed, along with the data-collection method, is therefore shown in Exhibit A2.

Exhibit A2. Total Site Visit Focus Groups Conducted by AIR, by Group and Data Collection Approach (Spring 2025)

	Principal/Admin	Parents/Family	Partners	Steering Committee ¹
In-person	2	5	1	2
Virtual	2	2	3	2
Total	4	7	4	4

Source. Site visits conducted by the American Institutes for Research at seven Texas ACE sites during spring 2025.

¹In cases where participants in the other three focus groups were also part of the steering committee, steering committee questions were added to the other focus group sessions (as approved in the protocols). The data in this column show stand-alone, separate steering committee interviews.

As shown in Exhibit A–2, a total of 19 focus groups were completed (for an average of 2.7 per site). The total number of focus groups per site ranged from one to four. Two sites provided one focus group; one provided two; one provided three; and three provided four.

Appendix B. Focus Group and Interview Protocols

Note: This appendix contains protocols for all four stakeholder groups included in the focus groups or interviews. Questions and topics overlapped across groups, with adjustments as deemed appropriate given stakeholder roles.

This document contains FOUR protocols for interviews and focus groups that American Institutes for Research (AIR) staff plan to conduct at nine Texas ACE sites. Notes

1. The four separate protocols are: School Administrators, Partner Staff, Parents/Guardians, and Steering Committee.
2. Steering Committee member questions appear in the fourth protocol but are also integrated into the other three protocols. If there is role overlap (e.g., if a School Administrator or Partner Staff member is also a Steering Committee member), then Steering Committee questions will be asked during those interviews. If there is not a significant overlap, however, a separate Steering Committee focus group will be conducted.
3. Questions generally overlap for each of the four protocols (thematically), but in some cases may not be asked in exactly the same way given interviewee roles.
4. Each interview/focus group length is anticipated to be 70-90 minutes in overall length.

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: Prior To Starting the Interview and Recording, Please Read the Following]:

Introduction and Permission To Record

Thank you for taking the time to join us for today's [Interview / Focus Group].

Hi, my name is [insert name], and I am a [insert role] with the American Institutes for Research (AIR), a nonprofit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research to address critical challenges in education and community well-being. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has contracted with AIR to study Texas ACE programs like the program here at [SCHOOL/SITE] to explore program implementation, identify approaches and practices that appear to support effective programs, and document program outcomes and impact.

School Administrators (Primarily Principals)

This 60-minute [Interview / Focus Group] aims to understand your unique perspective on how the Texas ACE program is implemented at [SCHOOL/SITE], particularly regarding the ways your leadership influences school community engagement, family engagement, partnerships, and the day-to-day operations. Through prior discussions with the site coordinator, we've identified

practices here that may offer valuable insights to other Texas ACE programs. Your experiences are essential for informing statewide program success. We're here to learn from your leadership perspective, including promising practices and challenges, if any, specific to your role, and this discussion is not for evaluating your program. Your insights will help us better understand how administrators shape effective engagement in Texas ACE programs.

Partner Staff (Major Program Partners)

This 60-minute [Interview / Focus Group] aims to understand your views on how the Texas ACE program is being implemented at [SCHOOL/SITE], especially in areas where partnerships support school community engagement, family engagement, and the program's operational goals. Previous conversations with the site coordinator have shown that your organization's involvement supports impactful practices that could benefit other Texas ACE programs across Texas. Your partnership perspective is valuable for informing our understanding of how external collaborations can enhance Texas ACE program outcomes. Please know that this conversation is solely for us to understand the dynamics of partnerships like yours and is not intended to evaluate the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] specifically. Your insights will help identify effective practices and any challenges partnerships face in supporting Texas ACE programs statewide.

Steering Committee Members

This 60-minute [Interview / Focus Group] seeks to understand your insights into the Texas ACE program's implementation at [SCHOOL/SITE], focusing on how advisory input contributes to school community engagement, family engagement, partnerships, and program operations. From previous discussions with the program team, we know that advisory perspectives can be instrumental in shaping program practices that could benefit other Texas ACE centers. Your role provides a unique view into the program's goals and long-term vision, which is valuable for strengthening Texas ACE programs across Texas. This conversation is an opportunity to highlight your experiences with and perspectives about the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] and is not intended to evaluate the program at [SCHOOL/SITE] specifically. Your input will help identify promising practices and areas for growth that can support statewide Texas ACE program improvement.

Parents/Guardians

This 60-minute Focus Group is an opportunity for us to learn about your family's experience with the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE], with a focus on how it supports family engagement, community connections, and your child's development. Conversations with program staff have emphasized the important role families like yours play in the program. Today, we're eager to understand which aspects of the program have been most beneficial for

your family and any challenges you may have experienced. This discussion is only to understand family perspectives in Texas ACE programs and will not be used to evaluate the program. Your feedback will help us learn from your experiences to strengthen family engagement across Texas ACE programs statewide.

[CONTINUE HERE FOR EVERYONE]

Your participation in the [Interview / 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 [Interview / 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 / Focus Group]?

I am going to begin the recording now. [TURN ON THE RECORDING.] Today is [STATE FULL DATE, E.G., FRIDAY, March 11th, 2025].

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: If interviewing School Administrators, Partner Staff, and Steering Committee Members]: Please state your name, title, and role, along with how many years you've been connected to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE], and the aspect of afterschool programming that you're most passionate about.

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: If interviewing Parents/Guardians] Please share your name, how many years your family has been connected to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE], and the aspects of afterschool programming that you find most beneficial for your family.

School Administrators (Primarily for Principals)

Introduction Questions (5 minutes)

“To start, we’d like to learn about your leadership perspective and how it influences the Texas Ace program at [SCHOOL/SITE].”

1. What do you understand to be the purpose and goals of the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific program goals that resonate most with you or your school community?

2. What does your involvement with the Texas ACE program typically look like?
 - a. Probe: Do you take part in program-related activities like volunteering at events or participating in a Steering Committee? **[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: probe for steering committee. if yes to steering committee, ask steering committee question subset before community needs section]**
3. Looking ahead, what long-term impact do you hope the Texas ACE program will have on your school community?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific changes or outcomes you aspire to see over time?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Is there anything else about your role or your perspective on the Texas ACE program that you'd like to share before we move on?"*

Steering Committee (15 minutes)

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: ask this set of questions only if school administrators are also members of the steering committee] *"In this section, we'd like to learn more about your experiences and perspectives as a Steering Committee member at the Texas ACE program. Specifically, we're interested in how the committee contributes to program goals, building long-term partnerships, and contributes to the program's ongoing growth and success."*

4. When and how did you join the committee, and how long have you been a member?
5. How is the steering committee structured? (E.g., who is on the committee? Is the Steering Committee specific to the Texas ACE program at your school, or does the Committee work with other programs or schools?)
6. What are the Steering Committee's primary responsibilities, and how does it operate?
 - a. Probe: What types of topics or issues are typically discussed?
 - b. Probe: How often does the committee meet?
 - c. Probe: How do members communicate or coordinate between meetings?
7. What is your specific role as a member of the Steering Committee?
 - a. Probe: How has your role evolved over time?
 - b. Probe: Can you share specific areas where your involvement has made a significant difference, or contributions and achievements you are most proud of?
8. From your perspective as a Steering Committee member, what needs within the school community does the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] aim to address?

9. How does the Steering Committee gather and use information, including feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders, to guide its recommendations for the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: What sources of input are most commonly used by the committee?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific approaches the committee uses to ensure a broad range of input?
 - c. Probe: Can you share an example where this feedback directly influenced a committee recommendation?
10. From your perspective, how well does the Texas ACE program listen to and incorporate feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders into its decisions?
 - a. Probe: What factors contribute to the program's ability to effectively use feedback?
11. What challenges, if any, has the Steering Committee observed in the Texas ACE program's efforts to maintain engagement with families and community members?
12. What are your aspirations for how the Steering Committee can continue to support the Texas Ace program in the future?

Community Needs and Program Impact (10 minutes)

"Next, I'd like to learn about the specific needs of the school community that the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] addresses and understand the impact of the program's activities in meeting these needs.

13. What are the primary needs of the school community that the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] is helping to address?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific areas where the program's support is particularly valuable?
 - b. Probe: In what ways have the program's efforts to meet these needs advanced the school's broader goals or mission?
14. Reflecting on the Texas ACE program, what positive outcomes or impacts have you observed as evidence that these needs are being met?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific activities or supports that stand out as especially effective?
 - b. Probe: How do these outcomes contribute to the overall school environment or culture?
15. **[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: If not addressed by the preceding question, ask]:** How does the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] support academic growth through activities like tutoring or school-day aligned supplemental support?

- a. Probe: Have you observed any improvements in student performance or engagement as a result of these supports?
- b. What feedback have you received from teachers or staff about these academic supports?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing these insights about community needs and program impact. Is there anything else on this topic that you would like to add before we move on?”*

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication (10 minutes)

We would like to understand how you connect with others and share feedback in relation to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE].

16. How do you see the Texas ACE program engaging families and community members within your school?
 - a. Probe: How do you see your support in facilitating connections between the program and specific groups, like families or community partners impacting the program’s success?
17. To your knowledge, does the school share any partners with the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: How were the partnerships between the school and these organizations established?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Is there anything else you’d like to add on this topic before we proceed?”*

Feedback and Continuous Improvement (15-20 minutes)

“In this section, we’re interested in understanding how community feedback influences the Texas ACE program.”

18. From your perspective, how does the Texas ACE program gather and use feedback?
 - a. Probe: What methods or strategies have you observed that seem effective for gathering meaningful input from families, staff, or other community members?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific groups (e.g., families, teachers, administrators) that the program finds harder to reach or engage?
19. In your opinion, how effective is the Texas ACE program at following up on the feedback it collects?

- a. Probe: How are program changes or adjustments communicated back to families, teachers, or school staff?

20. What opportunities do you see for the Texas ACE program to improve and encourage more ongoing feedback from families, staff, and students?

- a. Probe: How might these improvements strengthen collaboration, trust, and/or alignment between the school community and the Texas ACE program?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing your insights on feedback and continuous improvement. Is there anything else you would like to add or emphasize on this topic before we move to the next section?”*

Challenges and Barriers (15 minutes)

“In this section, we’d like to discuss the challenges, if any, and barriers that may impact the Texas ACE program’s ability to operate effectively and collaborate with the school.”

21. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges, if any, in ensuring that the Texas ACE program receives consistent support from the school, the district, or other key stakeholders?

- a. Probes: From your perspective are there
 - i. limitations in resources, such as funding, time, or staffing, that you have observed affect the program’s ability to operate effectively?
 - ii. logistical factors, such as transportation or scheduling, that present challenges to ACE program participation?
 - iii. district policies, state regulations, or other systemic factors that contribute to challenges for the ACE program in meeting its goals?
- b. Probe: What strategies or approaches would you recommend to address these challenges and improve support for the program?

22. What challenges, if any, do you encounter in supporting the Texas ACE program’s integration with the school’s existing priorities and operations?

- c. Probe: How does the program’s structure or activities align or conflict with existing school initiatives?

23. What role do you believe the school’s culture and climate play in shaping the success of the Texas ACE program?

- a. Probe: Are there aspects of the school’s culture that make it easier or harder for the program to connect with families?

- b. Probe: Can you share examples of how the school’s climate has positively or negatively influenced the program?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing your experiences with challenges and barriers. Is there anything else you’d like us to understand about this topic before moving on?”*

Wrap-Up Questions (5 Minutes)

“Thank you for sharing your insights with us. Before we conclude, we have a few final questions to capture any additional thoughts you may have.”

- 24. What advice would you offer to other school administrators working with Texas ACE programs to build strong community engagement practices?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific strategies or lessons learned from your experience that you would highlight?
- 25. Is there anything else you’d like to share about the Texas ACE program that we have not discussed today?

End of Interview: *“That was our last question. Thank you for your time, energy, and valuable insights today. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions. Our project email is included in the calendar invitation. Have a wonderful day!”*

Partner Staff (Major Program Partners)

Introduction Questions (15 Minutes)

“This first section focuses on understanding the nature of your partnership with the Texas ACE program, including how your organization supports its goals and aligns with its objectives.”

- 1. Can you describe the nature of your organization’s partnership with the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: How did this partnership begin? And how has it evolved over time?
 - b. Do you take part in program-related activities like volunteering or participating in a Steering Committee? [**NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: probe for steering committee. if yes to steering committee, ask steering committee question subset before community needs section**]
- 2. What resources, expertise, or services does your organization provide to support the Texas ACE program’s goals? [**NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: Listen for mention of the engagement strategies listed below and prompt the interviewee about ones they don’t mention.**]

- a. Goal and activity development?
 - b. Programming offerings?
 - c. Operating procedures?
 - d. Review of program data?
 - e. Involvement in quality improvement processes?
 - f. Making connections with community partners?
 - g. Assisting with sustainability, identifying other sources of funding?
 - h. Other?
3. Can you share an example of a successful collaboration between your organization and the Texas ACE program?
- a. Probe: How did this collaboration align with your organization's goals?
4. Probe: What factors contributed to its success?

Steering Committee (15 Minutes)

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: ask this set of questions only if partner staff are also members of the steering committee] *"In this section, we'd like to learn more about your experiences and perspectives as a Steering Committee member at the Texas ACE program. Specifically, we're interested in how the committee contributes to program goals, building long-term partnerships, and contributes to the program's ongoing growth and success."*

5. How did you join the Steering Committee, and how long have you been a member?
6. How is the steering committee structured? (E.g., who is on the committee? Is the Steering Committee specific to the Texas ACE program at your school, or does the Committee work with other programs or schools?)
7. What are the Steering Committee's primary responsibilities, and how does it operate?
- a. Probe: What types of topics or issues are typically discussed?
 - b. Probe: How often does the committee meet?
 - c. Probe: How do members communicate or coordinate between meetings?
8. What is your specific role as a member of the Steering Committee?
- a. Probe: How has your role evolved over time?
 - b. Probe: Can you share specific areas where your involvement has made a significant difference, or contributions and achievements you are most proud of?

9. From your perspective as a Steering Committee member, what needs within the school community does the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] aim to address?
10. How does the Steering Committee gather and use information, including feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders, to guide its recommendations for the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: What sources of input are most commonly used by the committee?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific approaches the committee uses to ensure a broad range of input?
 - c. Probe: Can you share an example where this feedback directly influenced a committee recommendation?
11. From your perspective, how well does the Texas ACE program listen to and incorporate feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders into its decisions?
 - d. Probe: What factors contribute to the program's ability to effectively use feedback?
12. What challenges, if any, has the Steering Committee observed in the Texas ACE program's efforts to maintain engagement with families and community members?
13. What are your aspirations for how the Steering Committee can continue to support the Texas Ace program in the future?

Community Needs and Program Impact (10 Minutes)

"Next, I'd like to learn about the specific needs of the school community that the Texas Ace program at [SCHOOL/SITE] address and understand the impact of the program's activities in meeting these needs.

14. Based on your involvement, what are the primary needs within the school community that the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] addresses?
 - a. Probe: Are there particular needs that resonate most with your organization's goals/mission?
 - b. Probe: How do these needs influence the ways your organization supports the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE]?
15. From your perspective, what impact has your organization's involvement with the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] had on students, families, or the broader community?
 - a. Probe: Can you share specific examples of successful activities or resources that have contributed to these impacts?

- b. Are there particular contributions from your organization that you believe have made the most difference?
 - c. Probe: Are there specific contributions from the partnership that stand out?
 - d. Probe: How do these outcomes reflect the strength and success of the partnership?
16. In what ways does your organization collaborate with the Texas ACE program to provide tutoring or other academic support?
- a. Probe: What role does your organization play in supporting school-day aligned academic activities?
 - b. Probe: How does your organization evaluate the success of these academic supports?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing these insights about community needs and program impact. Is there anything else on this topic that you’d like to add before we move on?”*

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication (10 Minutes)

We’d like to understand how you connect with others and share feedback in relation to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE].

17. In what ways does your organization collaborate with the Texas ACE program to enhance services for families and students?
- a. Probe: What kinds of support or collaboration have been most effective in achieving shared goals?
18. In what ways, if any, does your organization collaborate with other partners or resources to strengthen its contributions to the Texas ACE program and connect with the broader school community?
- a. Probe: Can you provide examples of how these collaborations, or your independent efforts, have impacted relationships with families or other stakeholders?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Is there anything else you’d like to add on this topic before we proceed?”*

Feedback and Continuous Improvement (15 Minutes)

“In this section, we’d like to learn about your organization’s role in gathering and responding to feedback to support continuous improvement efforts for the Texas ACE program ”

19. From your perspective, how effectively does the Texas ACE program gather and act on feedback from families? Community partners? School staff?
 - a. Probe: Have you observed any strategies the program uses to collect and apply community feedback?
 - b. Probe: In what ways do you think feedback has influenced program decisions or improvements?
20. How well does the program communicate feedback-driven changes to partners like your organization? Can you describe your organization's involvement in the feedback processes related to the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: In what ways have you been involved in providing input on program initiatives?
 - b. What opportunities, if any, have you had to support feedback collection efforts within the school community?
21. What potential areas for improvement do you see in how the ACE program seeks out or responds to community feedback? In what potential areas could your Texas ACE program seek out or respond to community feedback?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific supports your organization could provide to enhance these efforts?
 - b. Probe: How might these improvements enhance the partnership's impact on the community?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Thank you for your insights on feedback and continuous improvement. Would you like to add anything else on this topic before we move to the next section?"*

Challenges and Barriers (10 Minutes)

"In this section, we'd like to learn more about the challenges your organization may have experienced in its partnership with the Texas ACE program, including working with the program team, supporting students and families, and addressing any relevant organizational needs."

22. What challenges, if any, has your organization faced while collaborating with the Texas ACE program to meet its goals?
 - a. Probe: What difficulties have you experienced coordinating with program staff, understanding program priorities, or aligning with program timelines?
 - b. Probe: Have you encountered any specific policy or operational issues that have made engaging with the program challenging?

- c. Probe: How have these challenges affected your ability to support the program effectively?
 - d. Probe: If your organization's goals or priorities have ever differed from those of the Texas ACE program, how were those differences addressed?
23. What specific barriers, if any, has your organization encountered when supporting the needs of students and families in collaboration with the Texas ACE program?
- a. Probe: How has your organization worked with the program to identify and prioritize these needs?
24. Are there any gaps in services that your organization is unable to meet currently but hopes to address in the future?
- a. Probe: What types of resources, support, or assistance from the Texas ACE program would help you address these gaps?
25. How do limited resources, such as funding, staffing, or time influence your ability to support the Texas ACE program? **[NOTE FOR INTERVIEWER: If the respondent indicates they do not experience resource constraints, skip to Question 26]**
- a. Probe: Has your organization implemented any noteworthy or innovative solutions to address resource constraints? If not, what barriers have prevented such solutions?
 - b. Probe: How does your organization plan to sustain these strategies or resources over time?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Thank you for sharing your experiences with challenges and barriers. Is there anything else you'd like us to understand about this topic before moving on?"*

Wrap-Up Questions (5 Minutes)

"Thank you for sharing your insights with us. Before we conclude, we have a few final questions to capture any additional thoughts you may have."

26. Based on your experience, what advice would you offer to other partners seeking to strengthen community engagement practices at Texas ACE programs?
27. Is there anything else about your organization's partnership with the Texas ACE program that you feel we haven't covered today?

End of Interview: *"That was our last question. Thank you for your time, energy, and valuable insights today. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions. Our project email is included in the calendar invitation. Have a wonderful day!"*

Steering Committee Members

Introduction Questions (15 Minutes)

"In this section, we'll focus on understanding the Steering Committee's formation, its unique role within the Texas ACE program, and your experiences and perspectives as an Steering Committee member. Specifically, we're interested in how the committee contributes to program goals, building long-term partnerships, and supporting future growth."

1. How was the Steering Committee formed? What was its original purpose?
 - a. Probe: What goals or needs led to its creation?
 - b. Probe: Have any changes been made to its purpose over time?
2. How is the steering committee structured? (E.g., who is on the committee? Is the Steering Committee specific to the Texas ACE program at your school, or does the Committee work with other programs or schools?)
3. What are the Steering Committee's primary responsibilities, and how does it operate?
 - a. Probe: What types of topics or issues are typically discussed?
 - b. Probe: How often does the committee meet?
 - c. Probe: How do members communicate or coordinate between meetings?
4. What is your specific role as a member of the Steering Committee?
 - a. Probe: When and how did you join the committee?
 - b. Probe: How long have you been a member?
 - c. Probe: How has your role evolved over time?
 - d. Probe: Can you share specific areas where your involvement has made a significant difference, or contributions and achievements you are most proud of?
5. What opportunities exist for the Steering Committee to improve its contributions to the program?
 - a. Probe: What additional resources, processes, or strategies could enhance the committee's effectiveness and impact in the future?

Community Needs and Program Impact (15 minutes)

"Next I'd like to learn about the specific needs of the school community that the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] address and understand the impact of the program's activities in meeting these needs."

6. From your perspective as a Steering Committee member, what needs within the school community does the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] aim to address?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific needs that the committee prioritizes or focuses on?
 - c. What program activities or resources do you believe are most effective in meeting these needs?
7. What changes, successes, or unexpected impacts has the Steering Committee observed from the program's efforts to address community needs?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific outcomes or improvements the committee has highlighted?
 - b. Probe: How do these outcomes align with the committee's goals or priorities?
 - c. Probe: Have there been any surprising or unintended results, whether positive or challenging?
 - d. Probe: How has the committee responded to these unexpected impacts?
8. How does the Steering Committee ensure that the program addresses both immediate and long-term needs within the school community?
 - a. Probe: Are there strategies the committee uses to balance short-term impact with sustainable progress?
 - b. Probe: How does the committee consider future needs when guiding the program's activities?
9. From your perspective, how effectively does the Texas ACE program address academic needs through tutoring and other supplemental supports?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific academic challenges within the school community that the program addresses?
 - b. Probe: How does the Steering Committee guide or prioritize academic-focused activities?
 - c. Probe: Are there examples of tutoring or academic programs that have had a noticeable impact?
 - d. Probe: What additional academic supports or resources do you think the program should consider?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing these insights about community needs and program impact. Is there anything else on this topic that you’d like to add before we move on?”*

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication (15 minutes)

We'd like to understand how you connect with others and share feedback in relation to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE].

10. How does the Steering Committee gather and use information, including feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders, to guide its recommendations for the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: What sources of input are most commonly used by the committee?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific approaches the committee uses to ensure a broad range of input?
 - c. Probe: Can you share an example where this feedback directly influenced a committee recommendation?
 - d. Probe: How does the committee balance diverse perspectives to form effective recommendations?
11. How do partnerships with local organizations or community groups contribute to the committee's understanding and support of the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: Are there specific community partnerships that have enriched the committee's understanding?
12. How do these partnerships enhance the committee's recommendations? What has been most challenging for the Steering Committee when balancing different perspectives or needs from families, community members, and other stakeholders?
 - a. Probe: Are there particular areas where conflicting viewpoints arise?
 - b. Probe: How does the committee approach finding common ground or prioritizing recommendations when perspectives differ?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Is there anything else you'd like to add on this topic before we proceed?"*

Feedback and Continuous Improvement (15 minutes)

"In this section, we're interested in understanding how community feedback and the Steering Committee's input influences the Texas ACE program and drive continuous improvement."

13. What methods have you seen the program or committee use to gather feedback from the school community?

- a. Probe: Are there specific strategies that seem particularly successful for collecting meaningful input?
 - b. Probe: How frequently is this feedback shared with the Steering Committee to inform recommendations?
14. From your perspective, how well does the Texas ACE program listen to and incorporate feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders into its decisions?
- a. Probe: Are there specific types of feedback that the program tends to act on more readily?
 - b. Probe: What factors contribute to the program's ability to effectively use feedback?
15. Can you share an example of a time when community or Steering Committee feedback significantly influenced the program?
- a. Probe: How did the program respond to this feedback?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific examples where feedback highlighted gaps in program processes?
16. What opportunities do you see for improving how feedback is gathered, shared, and used to support continuous improvement?
- a. Probe: Are there innovative strategies or tools the committee could adopt to strengthen its feedback processes?
 - b. Probe: How could the committee better collaborate with the program to align on improvements?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Thank you for your insights on feedback and continuous improvement. Would you like to add anything else on this topic before we move to the next section?"*

Challenges and Barriers (15 minutes)

"In this section, we'll discuss the challenges, if any, the committee has observed and addressed in supporting the Texas ACE program."

17. What challenges, if any, has the Steering Committee observed in the Texas ACE program's efforts to maintain engagement with families and community members?
- a. Probe: Are there systemic or logistical issues the committee has noted that impact engagement?

- b. Probe: Do issues like trust and resource limitations affect the program’s interactions with families and community partners?
 - c. Probe: Do these challenges inform the committee’s recommendations?
18. What unmet needs or gaps in services do you believe the program should address in the future? Probe for why?
- a. Probe: What types of partnerships or funding sources has the committee explored to help address these constraints?
 - b. Probe: What specific changes or recommendations has the committee made to address these challenges?
19. What are the biggest challenges, if any, the Steering Committee faces in using community feedback to guide recommendations?
- a. Probe: Are there particular types of feedback that are harder to act on or incorporate?
 - b. Probe: How does the committee balance diverse perspectives to form effective recommendations?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing your experiences with challenges, if any, and barriers. Is there anything else you’d like us to understand about this topic before moving on?”*

Wrap-Up Questions (5 Minutes)

“Thank you for sharing your insights with us. Before we conclude, we have a few final questions to capture any additional thoughts you may have.”

- 20. What are your aspirations for how the Steering Committee can continue to support the Texas ACE program in the future?
- 21. What advice would you offer to other Texas ACE programs looking to strengthen their Steering Committee or community engagement efforts?
- 22. Reflecting on today’s conversation, is there anything we missed that you feel is important for us to know about the Steering Committee’s role or the program’s community engagement efforts?
- 23. Is there anything that you wished I would have asked you about school community engagement or the Steering Committee process here that I did not?

End of Interview: *"That was our last question. Thank you for your time, energy, and valuable insights today. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions. Our project email is included in the calendar invitation. Have a wonderful day!"*

Parents/Guardians

Introduction Questions (15 Minutes)

"We'd like to start by learning about your experiences as parents or guardians of children in the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE]. Specifically, we're interested in understanding how you and your family engage with the program and which aspects have been most valuable to you."

1. How did you first hear about the Texas ACE program, and what led you to enroll your child(ren)?
 - a. Probe: Was the information about the program clear and easy to understand? What about the enrollment process? How was it navigating the steps to ensure your child was able to participate?
 - b. Probe: Are there ways the enrollment process could be improved?
2. How do you and your family typically participate in the program?
 - a. Probe: Are there certain events or activities you're more likely to attend?
 - b. Probe: Are there any barriers that make it difficult to participate?
 - c. Probe: Do you take part in program-related activities like volunteering or participating in an advisory committee? **[IF YES:]** can you describe your experience? **[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: probe for steering committee. if yes to steering committee, ask steering committee question subset before community needs section]**
3. What do you find most valuable about the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: Can you share specific activities or services that have been particularly helpful for your child(ren)?
 - b. Probe: Are there ways the program has supported your family as a whole?

Steering Committee (15 Minutes)

[NOTE TO THE INTERVIEWER: ask this set of questions only if parents / guardians are also members of the steering committee] *"In this section, we'd like to learn more about your experiences and perspectives as a Steering Committee member at the Texas ACE program. Specifically, we're interested in how the committee contributes to program goals, building long-term partnerships, and contributes to the program's ongoing growth and success."*

4. How did you join the Steering Committee, and how long have you been a member?
5. How is the steering committee structured? (E.g., who is on the committee? Is the Steering Committee specific to the Texas ACE program at your school, or does the Committee work with other programs or schools?)
6. What are the Steering Committee's primary responsibilities, and how does it operate?
 - a. Probe: What types of topics or issues are typically discussed?
 - b. Probe: How often does the committee meet?
 - c. Probe: How do members communicate or coordinate between meetings?
7. What is your specific role as a member of the Steering Committee?
 - a. Probe: How has your role evolved over time?
 - b. Probe: Can you share specific areas where your involvement has made a significant difference, or contributions and achievements you are most proud of?
8. From your perspective as a Steering Committee member, what needs within the school community does the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] aim to address?
9. How does the Steering Committee gather and use information, including feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders, to guide its recommendations for the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: What sources of input are most commonly used by the committee?
 - b. Probe: Are there specific approaches the committee uses to ensure a broad range of input?
10. From your perspective, how well does the Texas ACE program listen to and incorporate feedback from families, community members, and other stakeholders into its decisions?
11. What challenges, if any, has the Steering Committee observed in the Texas ACE program's efforts to maintain engagement with families and community members?
12. What are your aspirations for how the Steering Committee can continue to support the Texas Ace program in the future?

Community Needs and Program Impact (10 Minutes)

"Next, I'd like to learn about the specific needs of the school and the broader community that the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE] address and understand the impact of the program's activities in meeting these needs."

13. What do you see as the most important needs the Texas ACE program is working to address?
 - a. In what ways has the program been helpful in addressing these needs?
14. How do you think the Texas ACE program helps build connections within the community?
 - a. Probe: What, if any, specific activities or events that stand out to you as helping build these connections?
 - b. Probe: What new opportunities or resources do you think the program could explore?
15. How has the Texas ACE program supported your child's or children's academic needs through tutoring or other activities?
 - a. Probe: Has/have your child or children participated in tutoring or homework help through the program?
 - b. Probe: What impact have you noticed on your child's or children's academic performance or confidence? Are there specific academic supports you believe are particularly helpful or could be improved?
 - c. Probe: How well do you feel the program communicates about academic opportunities for students?

End of Section Summary Question: *“Thank you for sharing these insights about community needs and program impact. Is there anything else on this topic that you’d like to add before we move on?”*

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication (10 minutes)

We’d like to understand how you connect with others and share feedback in relation to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE].

16. How does your child's or children's school help your family stay involved in the Texas ACE program?
 - a. Probe: Have you noticed any specific ways the school has encouraged your family to participate in the Texas ACE program?
 - b. Probe: Are there any school events or activities that have helped you learn more about the program?
17. What community partnerships or local connections have you observed that add value to the Texas ACE program at [SCHOOL/SITE]?
 - a. Probe: How do these connections benefit your family's experience with the program?

- b. Probe: Are there other partnerships or community resources you think the program could explore?

18. How would you describe the way the Texas ACE program communicates with families?

- a. Probe: What types of communication methods (e.g., emails, meetings, flyers) have been most helpful in keeping you informed about the program?
- b. Probe: What specific ways does the program's communication help build trust with families?
- c. Probe: What improvements in communication or transparency about goals and changes would better support families?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Is there anything else you'd like to add on this topic before we proceed?"*

Feedback and Continuous Improvement (10 minutes)

"In this section, we're interested in understanding how community feedback influences the Texas ACE program from your perspective."

19. What opportunities have you had to provide feedback on the program?

- a. Probe: Are there specific events, meetings, or methods, like surveys, that made it easier to share your thoughts?
- b. Probe: How often do you feel your feedback is requested or encouraged?

20. How would you describe the ways the Texas ACE program listens to and responds to feedback from families like yours?

- a. Probe: How did this change affect your family's experience with the program?

21. Are there additional ways the program could better include families in decision-making processes?

- a. Probe: What would help families feel confident that their feedback leads to meaningful changes?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Thank you for your insights on feedback and continuous improvement. Would you like to add anything else on this topic before we move to the next section?"*

Challenges and Barriers (10 minutes)

"In this section, we'd like to explore some of the challenges families might face in engaging with the Texas ACE program, as well as ways the program could better support families like yours."

22. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in staying engaged with the Texas ACE program and its activities? **[NOTE FOR INTERVIEWER: If the respondent indicates they have not encountered any challenges, skip to Question 23]**
- Probe: Can you share specific examples of ways the program has supported your family to stay engaged?
 - Probe: What additional steps could the program take to better support families in overcoming these challenges?
 - Probe: What changes could make it easier for families like yours to get involved and share their thoughts?
23. How important is trust in your relationship with the Texas ACE program?
- Probe: Have there been times when it was difficult to feel fully connected with the program's staff or activities?
 - Probe: What specific actions could the program take to build stronger trust and engagement for families?
 - What could the Texas ACE program do differently to make families feel more included and supported?
 - Probe: How would these resources help address any challenges your family has experienced?

End of Section Summary Question: *"Thank you for sharing your experiences with challenges and barriers. Is there anything else you'd like us to understand about this topic before moving on?"*

Wrap-Up Questions (5 Minutes)

"Thank you for sharing your insights with us. Before we conclude, we have a few final questions to capture any additional thoughts you may have."

24. What advice would you give to other families about how to get involved with a Texas ACE program and make the most of their experience?
25. Is there anything else about your experience with the Texas ACE program that you think we should know?

End of Interview: *"That was our last question. Thank you for your time, energy, and valuable insights today. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions. Our project email is included in the calendar invitation. Have a wonderful day!"*

About the American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).



AIR® Headquarters

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org)

Notice of Trademark: "American Institutes for Research" and "AIR" are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

Copyright © 2026 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).