

New Jersey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Summary of Findings from the Second Year of the Statewide Evaluation

Executive Summary

For the past eight years across the state of New Jersey, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs) have provided students in high-poverty communities the opportunity to participate in academic enrichment programs and other youth development and support activities designed to enhance their academic well-being. The primary purpose of this report is to highlight how well afterschool programs funded by 21st CCLCs have fared in relation to the goals and objectives for supporting student growth and development specified for the program by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE).

The majority of the results outlined in this report are associated with 21st CCLC-funded activities and services, delivered during the course of the 2009–10 school year, although at certain places in the report, data associated with the 2008–09 and 2010–11 school years are reported as well.

Evaluation Questions

The information collected and analyzed during the second year of the statewide 21st CCLC evaluation was meant to answer four primary evaluation questions related to the impact of the program on desired student outcomes:

1. To what extent does grantee performance on the *leading* and *summative indicators* defined for the program suggest that New Jersey 21st CCLC grantees are making progress in the delivery of effective programming and the achievement of desired program outcomes?
2. To what extent is there evidence that students participating in 21st CCLC-funded services and activities more frequently demonstrated (a) higher academic achievement in reading/language arts and mathematics and (b) an improvement in behaviors likely to be supportive of better academic achievement?
3. To what extent is there evidence of a relationship between select program and student characteristics and the likelihood that students demonstrated (a) higher academic achievement in reading/language arts and mathematics and (b) an improvement in behaviors likely to be supportive of better academic achievement?
4. To what extent is there evidence that students participating in services and activities funded by 21st CCLCs demonstrated better performance on state assessments in reading and mathematics than similar students not participating in the program?

Collectively, this domain of evaluation questions is representative of both the goals and objectives NJ DOE has specified for the 21st CCLC program and some of the more pressing questions currently before the afterschool field nationally.

Performance Indicator System

One of the tasks associated with the evaluation of the New Jersey 21st CCLC program was to develop a performance indicator system designed to:

- Outline how well an individual grantee and the state as a whole are doing relative to accomplishing the goals and objectives specified for the program.
- Help establish a standard of quality in the implementation of their programs that grantees should be striving toward.
- Influence grantee behavior by detailing service delivery expectations and performance relative to these expectations.
- Help inform state staff about the steps that need to be taken from a training, technical assistance, and policy development front to support grantees in the achievement of program improvement goals.

Two types of indicators were developed to support the 21st CCLC program in New Jersey: (1) *leading indicators* and (2) *summative indicators*. *Leading indicators* are meant to provide grantees with a summary of how well they are progressing toward meeting state-defined goals and objectives at the programming year midpoint and where deficiencies are noted, guiding them to resources, tools, and trainings that will facilitate their efforts to make the corrections necessary to get back on track before the programming year ends. This information also will prove useful to NJDOE staff by supporting the identification of common issues and areas that grantees statewide are struggling with and that can be targeted at statewide project director meetings and trainings to build program capacity in those areas. To date, a total of 21 leading indicators and 12 summative indicators have been defined and adopted by NJ DOE. Data underpinning both the domain of leading and summative indicators was obtained from the Program Activity and Review System (PARS21), the Evaluation Template and Reporting System (ETRS), the NJ SMART data warehouse, and the staff survey.

Although performance relative to the leading indicators was generally positive, there were some indicators that showed an opportunity for further growth and development on the part of participating grantees. This conclusion seemed to be the case in relation to indicators that use data about student academic and social–emotional/behavioral functioning to drive program design and delivery and in the adoption of service delivery practices that are consistent with core youth development principles. Examples of the latter include the adoption of approaches and strategies that promote youth ownership of the program and taking steps to embed content into activities that are meant to support the social–emotional learning of participating students. In these cases, roughly half of the reporting centers received scores on measures employed during the evaluation that indicated that the centers were not thinking about the design and delivery of programming in light of core youth development ideas and principles.

In contrast, the *summative indicators* developed for the program were meant to assess whether or not student participation in 21st CCLC programming was leading to student growth and development in both academic achievement and youth development-related behaviors and functioning. Almost all of the summative indicators established for the program, for which data

were available, were met, with the exception of one indicator that pertained to the program demonstrating a positive impact on *reading* state assessment scores relative to the scores from a comparison group made up of nonparticipating students. Overall, grantee performance relative to the summative indicators suggests that the program had a positive impact on student academic performance in mathematics and key academic-related behaviors.

Data on Program Outcomes and Impact

In a similar fashion, the program outcome data examined in this report suggests that, on the whole, 21st CCLC programs in operation during the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years made progress in providing programming that contributed to student growth and development from both an academic and behavioral standpoint. The strongest evidence for such a conclusion was the small, but positive and significant, impact the program had on the mathematics state assessment results for students who participated in the program regularly (for 70 days or more) during the school year, compared to a group comprised of students from the same schools that did not participate in 21st CCLC programming (although it is important to note that approximately one quarter of participating students attended for 70 days or more). This result was found in relation to 21st CCLC programs operating during both the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years. Similar results were not found in relation to student performance on reading state assessment results.

In addition, analyses examining the impact of program and student characteristics on student outcomes found that a positive and significant relationship existed between a higher number of days of attendance in 21st CCLC programming and improvement in student motivation and attentiveness, prosocial behaviors, and homework completion and quality, as well as in performance on state assessment results in mathematics. In addition, multiple years of participation in 21st CCLCs was found to be positively associated with student performance on state assessment outcomes in both reading and mathematics. In this regard, finding ways to retain students in 21st CCLCs across multiple programming years would seem to further facilitate efforts by centers to achieve the domain of desired academic outcomes associated with the program.

Theoretically, programs may find more success in retaining participants the more actively they take steps to adopt practices supported by the youth development literature. Based on center and staff performance on some of the newly developed leading indicators related to incorporating youth development and social–emotional learning into programming, there are opportunities for growth and development in this area, including the adoption and use of measures that would help programs better assess how students are functioning on these constructs and what they might want to target for growth and development through the provision of intentional programming.

The issue of obtaining and using student data to inform program staff about the needs of participating students and using this knowledge to design and deliver programming may also be potentially relevant to helping the state meet the one summative indicator that was not achieved in 2009–10— having a positive impact on reading state assessment results, when comparing program participants with nonparticipants. Here again, leading indicator results for 2008–09 and

2009–10 suggest that there are opportunities for growth in the use of student data to inform the design and delivery of programming.

Recommendations

In light of leading indicator results that suggest that additional steps can be taken by grantees to obtain and use student data on academic and social–emotional functioning to design and deliver programming, we would recommend that NJ DOE consider taking the following steps to further support the growth and development of 21st CCLC programs:

1. *Test approaches that help grantees gain access to data on student academic functioning and utilize these data to inform the design and delivery of programming.* Since the inception of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, most school systems are now awash with data from both state-mandated and district-adopted assessments that provide a substantial reservoir of information about the academic functioning of students served by the K–12 system. Unfortunately, there is less evidence that these data are being widely accessed by the majority of the programs funded by 21st CCLCs to support both (a) the identification of student academic needs and the construction of intentional programming to meet those needs and (b) the monitoring of student progress over time to assess the success of programming in supporting student growth and development in very specific and targeted ways.

We encourage the NJ DOE to consider taking steps to overcome these constraints by documenting the types of data states and districts maintain in their student and state assessment data warehouses; articulating how these data could be effectively used to support the design, delivery, and evaluation of 21st CCLC programming; and developing policies, procedures, and even Web interfaces about how these data could be delivered and presented to 21st CCLC grantees in a way that would more effectively support their utilization in program development and assessment.

2. *Select and pilot test one or more measures designed to assess the social–emotional and behavioral functioning of participating youth.* Unlike data on student academic functioning, there appears to be a dearth of data that exists in relation to how students are functioning from a behavioral and social–emotional standpoint. In this area, 21st CCLC programs are largely on their own in terms of selecting and using measures that would provide insight into student functioning in these areas, and, as a consequence, for a variety of reasons, these measurements are largely not done by most 21st CCLC projects. To address this gap, we would encourage NJ DOE to consider adopting on a pilot basis a validated measure or measures of social–emotional and behavioral functioning at the student level. Steps should also be taken by NJ DOE to work with its technical assistance provider to develop resources, support, and training on how programs can use information derived from such measures to again support both (a) the identification of student needs and the construction of intentional programming to meet those needs and (b) the monitoring of student progress over time to assess the success of programming in supporting student growth and development in very specific and targeted ways.

Future efforts undertaken as part of the statewide evaluation will focus on getting a series of online leading and summative indicator reports up and running as a way to help 21st CCLCs more actively engage with performance data about their programs and the steps they need to take to help ensure that the state is on the right track toward achieving the full domain of goals and objectives specified for the 21st CCLC program.