Rhode Island 21st Century Community Learning Center Evaluation 2011-12

Introduction

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct an evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program for the 2011-12 school year. The 21st CCLC programs are designed to provide opportunities to enhance students' academic well-being, sense of school belonging, and long-term academic success. This brief presents a summary of the evaluation framework and key findings.
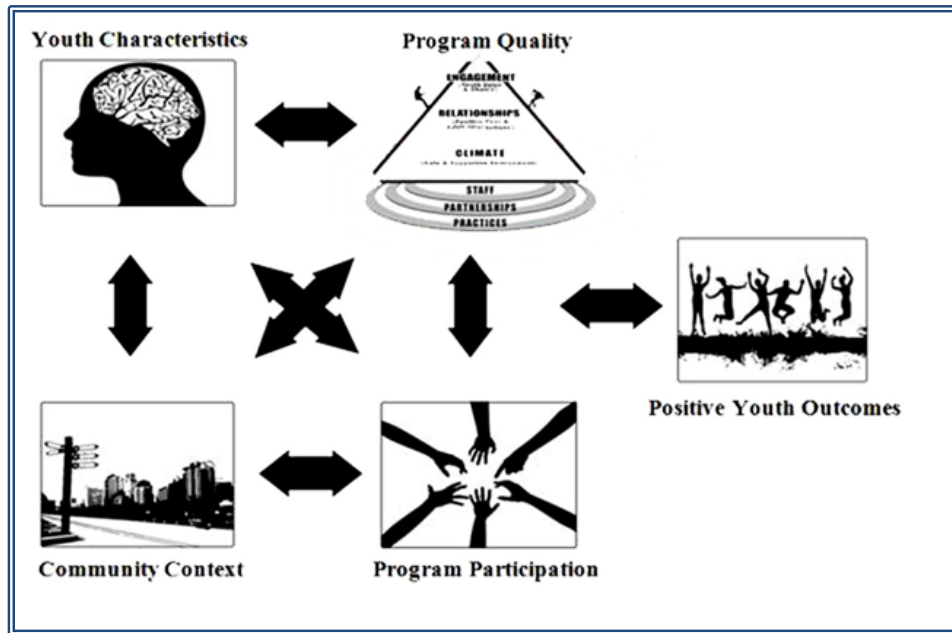
Evaluation Questions and Framework

The key objectives in conducting this evaluation are to understand (a) how well centers are implementing programming relative to research-based best practices and approaches and (b) the impact of 21st CCLC participation on student academic outcomes. The specific evaluation questions are the following:

1. To what extent is there evidence that students participating in services and activities funded by 21st CCLC demonstrated better performance on the outcomes of interest as *compared* with similar students *not participating* in the program?

2. To what extent is there evidence that students participating in services and activities funded by 21st CCLC grants *more frequently* demonstrated better performance on the outcomes of interest?

3. To what extent is there evidence of a relationship between center and student characteristics and the likelihood that students demonstrated better performance on desired program outcomes?

To address these questions, AIR employed a theory of change (Figure 1) as the guiding framework for the different components of the evaluation. The theory of change shows the key factors (Youth Characteristics, Program Quality, Community Context, and Program Participation), as well as the relationships between the factors and how they can work together to produce positive youth outcomes. Note that this theory of change is not intended to be final or prescriptive; rather, this framework is a "mental scaffold" on which to build, and is intended to be refined further in the future. It is provided here as a starting point, and as a way of organizing the report findings.

Figure 1: Theory of Change in Afterschool and Expanded Learning Settings

With this theory of change in mind, this brief provides an overview of grantee and center characteristics, a description of program attendance and activities, an analysis of how programs are implementing research-based practices in their organizational processes, and finally, an assessment of the impact of 21st CCLC programs on youth academic and behavioral outcomes.

Grantee, Center, and Student Characteristics

Grantees are the entities that apply for grants and serve as the fiscal agents for the 21st CCLC grant. Below is a summary of the 2011-12 Rhode Island grantees:

- **38 active grantees** in Rhode Island
- **53 percent** are school districts
- **68 percent** were mature grantees, meaning that they are in neither their first nor last year of funding

Centers are defined as the physical site where programming takes place.

- **93 percent** of centers are school-based, which is above the national average.
- **79 percent** of centers offered summer programming, which is higher than the national average of 54 percent.
- Centers in Rhode Island offered, on average, **11 hours** of afterschool programming per week.

> In 2011-12, Rhode Island had 38 active grantees, which operated a total of 56 centers across the state, which served a total of 12,388 students for at least one day of programming

- **39 percent** of centers served only elementary students, which has stayed fairly consistent over the last few years in Rhode Island.
- Centers reported **1,733 staff members**, of which **35 percent** were volunteers. Centers were most likely to employ a mix of youth-development workers, staff with no college, and school-day teachers (**40 percent**).
- Activities in Rhode Island centers were most likely to be *Mostly Enrichment*, at **34 percent**, followed by *Recreation* at **32 percent**, both of which are above the national average for these categories.

Participants in the 21st CCLC program are youth who attended programming for at least one day. *Regular attendees* are participants who attended at least 30 days of programming during the reporting period.

- Rhode Island centers served **12,388 youth** for at least one day of programming, of which **37 percent** classified as regular attendees, which is less than the national average. On average, each center served approximately **221 students**.
- The mean school-year attendance rate for regular attendees was **65 days**, with a median of **57 days**.
- Centers served primarily Hispanic (**39 percent**) and white (**33 percent**) students.
- In 2012, **11 percent** of regular attendees were Limited English Proficient (LEP) and **70 percent** were students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). These percentages have stayed fairly consistent in Rhode Island over the last several years.

Key Findings: Organizational Processes

A center's organizational processes—that is, practices that the center uses to design, plan, and deliver programming—have a strong impact on the quality of services that youth receive, which in turn affects youth outcomes. One focus of this evaluation was to identify whether centers were using organizational processes that previous research has found to be effective. To do this, the evaluation team administered surveys to program site managers during the 2011-12 school year using the following five dimensions to organize different types of program operations.

"All of the providers bring content area, materials, and experiences to the student participants that the school day would not be able to support and that our organization would not be able to provide on its own."

In terms of **Collaboration and Partnerships**, most site managers reported that their centers work either formally or informally with partners to establish program goals, provide professional development to staff, or lead activities. Sixty-seven percent of site managers reported that partners or collaborators lead some activities and 85 percent reported that certified teachers do so, both of which are likely to create a wider variety of activities available to youth. Although staff members regularly work together for program planning, site managers reported that linking afterschool programming with regular school-day activities was a minor strategy.

Findings from the second dimension, ***Staffing***, show that staffing challenges tended to be minor and included staff turnover and inadequate time for staff meetings and planning. In terms of professional development, staff members attended state or local sessions but only slightly more than half of site managers reported that staff members attended training before the start of the program year, either as new staff orientation or all-staff training. Of those attending professional development sessions, more than half rated the quality of the sessions as excellent or good quality.

> *"Our goal in hiring full-time staff for teaching positions is creating long-term relationships with very disconnected youth. Our program would not be successful if instructors were around for only a few hours a week."*

With regard to the ***Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment (RIPQA) Process***, site managers reported working an average of eight hours with Quality Advisors. They included two staff members on average and focused on major topics such as training staff and setting program goals. Overall, most site managers reported that the RIPQA process had a moderate impact on the program; most commonly, site managers reported that the RIPQA process impacted the way staff members interact with youth, professional development, and program activity design.

As programs considered ***Intentional Program Content and Activities***, the most common high-priority program objective was improving students' academic performance. The most commonly addressed academic subjects were reading, math, art and music, and health and nutrition. In planning content and activities, more than half of site managers reported conducting a formal needs assessment, while less than half conducted a formal planning process. Students were mostly recruited into the program based on specific academic needs such as low performance on state or local exams. To create youth ownership of the program, site managers most often reported seeking youth feedback on programming and engaging youth in planning activities, often on a weekly or monthly basis.

> *"Activities offered are hands-on experiential learning that is project-based, where students are empowered to discover their love of learning and its application to academics and real life."*

Staff members reported occasional use of student data to plan program activities, with a quarter of site managers reporting either no use of or no access to student data. However, half of program site managers reported aligning program content in core academic areas to Rhode Island state standards.

Finally, when asked about ***Intentional Family Involvement Activities***, site managers reported that staff members sometimes communicate with families about a child's progress. More often, staff members report encouraging family involvement in program activities. Research suggests that engaging adult family members of participating students can build the family members' skills while helping increase parental involvement in their youth's education.

Key Findings: Impact of 21st CCLC Programming on Participants' Academic and Behavioral Outcomes

Using propensity score matching techniques, which compare 21st CCLC participants to non-participants who have various characteristics in common, the evaluation team analyzed the impacts that the program had on student academic outcomes such as state assessment scores in reading and mathematics and behavioral outcomes such as unexcused absences and disciplinary incidents.

The evaluation team compared two groups of 21st CCLC participants to non-participants: those who participated in 30 or more days of programming and those who participated in 60 or more days of programming.

In terms of ***academic outcomes,*** there were few clear positive or negative impacts. There was a positive and significant effect on reading achievement on state assessments for students who attended 21st CCLC programming for 30 days or more, pooled across grades. This suggests that attending the program helped students improve their scores on reading, though the effect size was small; 21st CCLC participants scored 0.055 standard deviation units higher than non-participants. There was no significant impact on mathematics achievement across all grades, nor was there a significant impact for reading or math when the individual grades were analyzed separately. Similarly, there were no significant impacts for math or reading for students attending 60 or more days of programming.

The evaluation team also explored the impact of 21st CCLC programming on student ***behavioral outcomes***, such as unexcused absences and disciplinary incidents, and found stronger program impacts. There was a statistically significant negative impact of programming on unexcused absences when analyzing all grades, which is a positive finding, as students who participated for either 30 or 60 or more days had fewer unexcused absences than the students who did not attend programming. Similarly, there was a statistically significant effect on disciplinary incidents, as students who attended 21st CCLC programming had fewer disciplinary incidents than non-participants. When analyzing individual grades, the team found similar results for most grades as well.

Conclusion

This Rhode Island 21st CCLC evaluation shows promising findings for participants' behavioral outcomes while leaving a less clear picture of the program impacts academic outcomes. Moving forward, there is room for exploration of how different types of program models impact youth outcomes: How does program quality directly relate, if at all, to participants' academic and behavioral outcomes? In the future, the program and field at large may benefit from further exploration of this question.