

**Promising Practices
New Jersey 21st Century
Community Learning Centers
2008-09 and 2009-10**

October 15, 2010

Prepared by:
Eileen Foley

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
1718 Connecticut Avenue, NW, suite 400
Washington, DC 20009
www.policystudies.com

Prepared for:

American Institutes for Research
Naperville, Illinois

Table of Contents

	Page
1. Focus of Study	1
Overview of 21 st CCLC in New Jersey	1
Purpose of Report.....	1
Methods	2
Organization of Report	2
2. Lessons about Promising Practices from Recent Research	4
3. Program Goals, Linkages and Data Use.....	6
Learning and Developmental Goals	6
Linkages to School Day, Community Organizations and Families	7
Links to School-Day Programming	7
Links to Community Organizations.....	9
Links to Families	9
Ways of Using Data.....	10
Formal Strategies	11
Informal Strategies.....	12
4. Program Climate, Instructional Activities and Staff Development and Planning	13
Program Climate.....	13
Rewarding Activities	13
Quality Time with Adults.....	14
Programming Options.....	15
Flexible Administrative Policies	15
Amenities	16
Program Activities.....	16
Explicit Academic Instruction.....	16
Continuity of Instruction.....	17
Real-World Focus.....	18
Staff Development and Planning.....	20
Training.....	20
Planning	21
5. Conclusions.....	23
Established Practices	23
Quality-Improvement Opportunities	24
References	25

1. Focus of Study

Overview of 21st CCLC in New Jersey

In school years 2009 and 2010, the New Jersey Department of Education identified the primary goal of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) as supplementing the education of children who attended low-performing schools and lived in high-poverty areas so that they might meet state content standards. The Department charged these centers with offering four kinds of activities: (a) remedial education activities, (b) creative activities (art, music, dance, recreation, and cultural activities), (c) family literacy and enrichment activities that assist parents in becoming full partners in the education of their children, and (d) support services that target character education and prevent drug-use, violence and other problems (www.state.nj.us/education/21cclc). As of school year 2011, through grants to 38 organizations, the New Jersey Department of Education had created 92 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Purpose of Report

This report presents practices in six New Jersey 21st Century Community Learning Centers identified as promising by Learning Point Associates based on programming activities in the 2009 and 2010 school years. We describe 21st Century Community Learning Center conditions and activities with attention to the following five questions:

- *Program goals, intentionality, and data use.* What specific learning or developmental goals do promising programs target and how are data used to assess performance and to improve the quality of the program? (See Chapter 3)
- *Linkages to school day, community organizations, and families.* Through what means do programs align activities with the school day, engage other organizations, and communicate with families? (See Chapter 3)
- *Staff.* How do centers develop staff members? What opportunities do staff members have to plan activities individually and collectively? (See Chapter 4)
- *Activities.* What opportunities do students have to participate actively in engaging learning activities? In what manner are activities organized (e.g. individual and small group instruction) and sequenced so as to build students' skills progressively? How are activities structured so as to maximize student participation and attendance? (See Chapter 4)
- *Program climate.* How are activities structured to develop positive relationships among youth and with staff? (See Chapter 4)

Methods

This study was designed and carried out in four stages. The methods we used at each stage are described briefly below.

In stage one, Learning Point Associates and PSA focused the investigation. The direction of the inquiry was determined based on an examination of New Jersey Department of Education goals for 21st CCLCs and on a review of the professional literature describing promising practices in programs that serve students in non-school hours.

In stage two, Learning Point Associates identified six promising 21st CCLCs from among the 24 New Jersey centers charged with providing Learning Point Associates with comprehensive information about program practices.¹ Learning Point Associates rated centers based on students' average daily attendance, teacher survey and state assessment results in reading and mathematics, observations of activities provided to participating youth, and a survey of program staff working directly with students.²

In stage three, Policy Studies Associates developed descriptions of program practices in the six top-rated New Jersey 21st CCLCs drawing on data collected by Learning Point Associates. The most detailed descriptions of program activities, practices, and climate were obtained from Learning Point Associates' interviews with site directors and from their direct program observations. Practices are described in this report in a manner that is consistent with the level of detail and specification in available data.

In stage four of this research, PSA coded practices within and across programs and organized data in tables to identify trends. Ultimately, PSA developed a narrative elaborating programming activities and describing strengths and weaknesses of activities across cases.

Organization of Report

This report is presented in five chapters as follows.

¹ These data include the following: Department of Education Program Activity and Review System data (PARS21), Department of Education Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS), an online survey of the professional practice of staff working with youth in programs, and select program observations.

² Scales included on the staff survey measured the following constructs: collective staff efficacy in creating interactive and engaging setting for youth, intentionality in activity and session design, practices supportive of academic skill building—including linkages to the school day and using data on student academic achievement to inform programming, practices supportive of positive youth development, opportunities for youth ownership, staff collaboration and communication to support continuous program improvement, and practices supportive of parent involvement and engagement.

- *Chapter 1 Overview.* The overview outlines the aims and intentions of New Jersey’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers and presents study purposes and methods and the structure of the report.
- *Chapter 2 Lessons about promising practices from recent research.* This chapter summarizes recent literature describing best practices in organizing and delivering programming in out-of-school time (OST) and relates that literature to the design of this inquiry.
- *Chapter 3 Program goals, linkages, and data use.* This chapter identifies learning and developmental goals espoused by promising centers, the linkages between centers and schools and community organizations, and the ways centers use data to assess and improve program quality.
- *Chapter 4 Program climate, learning activities, and staff.* This chapter describes the attitudinal climate in promising programs, program activities, and staff development approaches. The focus is on learning activities, including individual and small group instruction and the approaches centers have developed to structuring and sequencing activities so as to maximize student participation and build skills.
- *Chapter 5 Conclusions.* The report ends with a summary of findings and conclusions regarding the state-of-the-art in programming in out-of-school time in 21st Century Community Learning Centers sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Education.

2. Lessons about Promising Practices from Recent Research

In 2009, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) released a guidebook by Megan Beckett and her colleagues, *Structuring out-of-school time to improve academic achievement: A practice guide*. The guide outlined directions for organizing and delivering school-based OST programming to improve students' academic achievement. Acknowledging that the research base for recommendations did not provide conclusive evidence of what works, the guide made five recommendations.

- The first recommendation was to align OST programs academically with the school day. The guide offered four strategies for aligning OST with the school day: (a) use OST program coordinators to maintain communication between school and program personnel, (b) designate a school staff person to coordinate communication with OST programs and to help them support school needs, (c) connect OST instruction to school instruction by identifying school-based goals and learning objectives, and (d) coordinate with the school to identify staff for OST programs.
- The second recommendation was to maximize student participation and attendance. The guide offered three strategies for maximizing student participation in OST: (a) design program features to meet the needs and preferences of students and parents, (b) promote awareness of the OST program within schools and to parents, and (c) use attendance data to identify students facing difficulties in attending the program.
- The third recommendation was to adapt instruction to individual and small group needs. The guide offered three strategies for adapting instruction to individual and small group needs: (a) use formal and informal assessment data to inform academic instruction, (b) use one-on-one tutoring if possible; otherwise, break students into small groups, and (c) provide professional development and ongoing instructional support to all instructors.
- Recommendation number four was to provide engaging learning experiences. The guide offered three strategies for providing engaging learning experiences: (a) make learning relevant by incorporating practical examples and connecting instruction to student interests and experience, (b) make learning active through opportunities for collaborative learning and hands-on academic activities, and (c) build adult-student relationships among OST program participants.
- The fifth and final recommendation was to assess program performance and use the results to improve the quality of the program. The guide offered four strategies for assessing program performance and using results to improve program quality: (a) develop an evaluation plan, (b) collect program and student performance data,

(c) analyze the data and use findings for program improvement, and (d) conduct a summative evaluation.

In 2010, a few months after the IES report, the nonprofit organization, Massachusetts 2020, released a related report, *More time for learning: Promising practices and lessons learned*, with a somewhat different model for expanding learning time. All schools in the Mass 2020 network of providers were expected to add 300 hours to school schedules. Programs were expected to frame enrichment time with attention to the following four practice exemplars: extracurricular electives designed to build new skills and to expose students to new topics (e.g. theater, photography, martial arts, etc.), academic electives taught by subject teachers with curriculum aligned with state standards that provide students with more hands-on, project-based approaches (e.g. forensics, environmental science, robotics, etc.), unified arts classes such as art, music, and drama that offer instruction more frequently or for a longer duration, and embedded enrichment projects that take place during an expanded core academic class often in partnership with a cultural or community partner.

The Mass 2020 report identified lessons the organization had learned from the state's pioneering work to increase learning in out-of-school time: (a) concentrate on a small number of key goals and add significantly more learning time, (b) use data to drive continuous improvement in instruction, (c) add core academic time that allows teachers to individualize support for students and accelerate achievement, (d) strategically add time for teachers to collaborate to strengthen instruction, and (e) engage students in high quality enrichment programs that build skills, interests, and self confidence.

The Mass 2020 model was different from the federal model in its attention to the need for additional learning time for teachers as well as for students. The Mass 2020 and IES approaches were, however, alike in other ways. Both reports recommended aligning programs with school goals, maximizing learning time, individualizing support for students, engaging students in high quality enrichment activities, and using data to drive continuous improvement.

The 21st CCLC program of the New Jersey Department of Education is aligned with IES-recommended approaches. Program goals call for an aligned, engaging and individualized expansion of the school day as follows: (a) provide academic enrichment opportunities for children, particularly those in high-poverty and low-performing schools, that meet the state's content standards in core academic subjects, (b) offer students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs before and/or after school or during hours when school is not in session, and (c) offer literacy and other education services to families of participating students.

The chapters to come describe practices in promising New Jersey Department of Education-funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers relative to those goals. In Chapter 3, we focus on the structure of promising programs, especially program goals, program linkages (including family linkages), and program managers' use of data. In Chapter 4, we focus on the instructional experiences offered to students and families. We look specifically at the social climate of centers, their program activities, and staff development and planning activities.

3. Program Goals, Linkages and Data Use

This chapter reports on the structure of promising New Jersey Department of Education 21st CCLC programs. We begin with an overview of program goals and follow with a look at the connections that exist between centers and schools, community organizations, and families. We end the chapter with a review of the approaches centers have adopted for using data to improve program activities and student outcomes.

Learning and Developmental Goals

Asked to identify center goals, four site coordinators stressed academic goals, especially improving students' school achievement. Two site coordinators were at least as interested, if not more interested, in social goals. Below are comments of coordinators who stressed academic achievement goals.

- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center coordinator said, “First and foremost we want to increase the students’ academic achievement...we want to provide a place for them to enjoy learning...it’s not just babysitting or homework.”
- According to the Leap Academy University High School Center coordinator, “The goals [of the Center] are to support what the students are learning during the school day, but in a different way...focusing more on hands-on projects.” This center also looks to “reinforce character education, social skills, and etiquette... [with a focus on] serving the community.”
- In describing the goals of the Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center, the site coordinator remarked, “Our primary goal is to create an atmosphere where children are getting enrichment in math and reading.”
- The coordinator of the Newcomb School Center said that the center aims to help students achieve academically and learn new skills through enrichment clubs. We were told it also emphasizes character education by expecting students to participate in community service, become team players and good citizens, and improve their social skills.

While acknowledging the importance of academics, two site coordinators stressed social goals, and most especially, the importance of keeping children safe.

- The Jersey City Center coordinator reported that the program is interested in “...helping kids with academics if they should need some extra help...” and in providing students with “...activities they wouldn’t get during the regular school

day....” The coordinator said “...we focus on providing kids with a safe environment so they are not hanging out in the streets....”

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center site coordinator described the goals of the Center as providing “...a safe environment for the kids to come to after school to focus on their academic and...their social skills...and hopefully have a lot of fun doing it.”

Linkages to School Day, Community Organizations and Families

Efforts to link center programs with important potential partners—schools, community organizations and families—appeared to be deepening, particularly on the school front. Managers of promising programs reported multiple successful means for aligning program activities with school-day activities. Work with community organizations appeared, on the other hand, to be in a formative stage. For the most part, center coordinators reported working with one or two external organizations in a restricted domain of activity. While center coordinators described several strategies with potential for engaging busy parents, coordinators were typically unsatisfied with their progress in this area.

Links to School-Day Programming

Center coordinators reported that they were making progress in linking center activities with school day goals and activities. Their strategies included adopting state curriculum standards as a guide for center programming, obtaining guidance and feedback from classroom teachers, hiring staff whose role was to reach out to teachers, and hiring actual teachers. The strategy identified as most helpful in linking after-school programming with school-day programming was hiring classroom teachers to lead after-school activities. Some center coordinators employed state curriculum standards and classroom assignments as a programming guide.

- According to the Jersey City Center site coordinator, center staff members were expected to follow the same curriculum as the school, but “it’s just not as stern” and more “hands-on.”
- The Newcomb School Center coordinator indicated that her center required students to bring “an agenda book” with their assignments to homework help. The presiding teacher marked the assignment page with a 21st CLCL Homework Club stamp to indicate that the student worked on the assignment at the center.

Several center coordinators obtained guidance and feedback about academic programming directly from teachers and school administrators.

- The Leap Academy University High School Center asked classroom teachers to complete weekly homework logs specifying where each child is struggling.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center surveyed teachers at the beginning of the program to get information about student needs.
- The Newcomb School Center reported that the school principal is very involved in helping to identify student needs and map out program offerings.

Several center coordinators hired staff whose specific charge was to reach out to teachers.

- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center coordinator hired staff to "...keep contact with [students'] school-day teachers...sometimes on an individual level...sometimes a whole class."
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center coordinator noted that the school principal, vice principal and school liaison were engaged and "very accommodating" and that several school-day teachers worked in the program and others stopped by to explain where the program should focus its energies. We were told that the center also relied on a school liaison to talk directly with teachers and to administer pre- and post-program surveys to teachers each year to determine if students were making progress.

Most center coordinators reported that they employed classroom teachers to lead after-school academic activities.

- At the Jersey City Center teachers provided tutoring in every subject, and we were told, "...teachers basically know what students need to learn."
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center coordinator reported that most of their program staffers are experienced teachers who have worked in the center for several years. These staff members understand how to coordinate hands-on program activities with the school curriculum.
- We were told that the Leap Academy University High School Center relied on curriculum specialists to develop its instructional program. All curriculum specialists and many center staff members were school-day teachers.

Links to Community Organizations

Some inter-organizational partnerships generated short-term services and opportunities for students. Other inter-organizational partnerships generated a steady stream of services and opportunities. The following are examples of partnerships that generated short-term services and opportunities.

- The Jersey City Center was reaching out to local businesses and universities. A local entrepreneur visited the center to make a presentation on starting and maintaining a business. A recruiter from Jersey City University came in to talk about college, and center staff took students on a tour of Princeton University.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center reported that it was challenging to engage local community leaders and organizations in their “Celebration Night,” which recognizes student achievement, but staff members continued to reach out to local restaurants, local leaders, and community organizations like the library, the Elks, and the Boy Scouts.

The following are examples of partnerships that generated a stream of support for students and teachers.

- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center obtained free memberships to the Boys and Girls Club so that their students could learn how to swim. The Center also garnered the support of local business owners. One was donating funds to the program, and another was providing free pizzas for select student activities.
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center developed a relationship with the Liberty States Science Center. The Science Center made curricula available to the school center, and it provided students with opportunities to engage in hands-on projects at the Science Center.
- The Newcomb School Center introduced the 4-H Club goal setting and leadership curriculum, and 4-H experts provided center teachers with staff support.

Links to Families

Several coordinators reported in one way or another that “...parent outreach and engagement had been tough.” Social events appeared to attract the most parental interest, but coordinators had a variety of strategies for engaging parents. Below are examples of the ways coordinators employed social events (dinners, talent shows, and field trips) to connect with parents.

- The Jersey City Center coordinator reported, “We’ve been trying to do a lot of things to reach out to our parents. That’s our biggest problem. The only thing that was successful was the dinner.”

- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center regularly showcased student projects and invited parents to participate in showcases three or four times per year. When the center had adequate resources, it also offered prizes for good student work and awarded those prizes at school events.
- The Newcomb School Center coordinator found that parents enjoy helping out on field trips.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center was planning to showcase student singing, dancing, and reading poetry in an event for community leaders and parents.

Below are examples of communication strategies that coordinators used to connect with parents including sending out flyers, making phone calls, and arranging meetings.

- The Leap Academy University High School Center parent coordinator reported that a calendar of events was sent home every month and fliers were sent home with students to announce every event.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center used an automated call system to reach homes when students miss program session. The center coordinator believed the program got more mileage, however, from sending fliers and calendars home. We were told, "...a lot of the people have trouble paying for their phones [so] we mail things home...."
- In addition to fliers, the Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center sponsored a monthly "partners meeting" for program managers, school personnel, and parent and student representatives. These meetings kept participants informed about program events and provided administrators with feedback on partners' attitudes about program operations including programming quality, snacks, and field trips.

Ways of Using Data

Are promising 21st CCLCs effectively supplementing the education of children who attend low-performing schools so that they meet state content standards? According to coordinators, promising centers had developed a variety of useful means, both formal and informal, for addressing this question.

Formal Strategies

Center coordinators reported several systematic means for tracking program quality and impact. These included monitoring students' behavior and test scores and surveying stakeholders to gather impressions of current program offerings. Most centers reported using both monitoring and surveying techniques. Below are examples of the ways centers monitored student performance to assess program quality.

- The Jersey City Center monitored student report cards and test scores along with program attendance.
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center reviewed students' school-year performance (grades and tests scores) and compared outcomes for students in the program with outcomes for students who do not attend the program.
- The Leap Academy University High School Center used a comprehensive data system (*PowerSchool*) to monitor student performance over time. As these data took some time to be processed and emerge for use, for more timely information, the center directly examined report cards to identify areas in which students were receiving grades of "C" or lower. The center organized tutoring sessions and hands-on classes with attention to those problematic areas.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center reviewed student report cards every marking period. It also used pre-tests and post-tests embedded in program materials to follow students' day-to-day progress.
- The Newcomb School Center used the district's database to monitor student performance data.

Below are examples of the ways centers used teacher and student surveys to assess program quality.

- The Jersey City Center surveyed students at the end of the year to determine what was working and what could be improved. This year, when staff members found that students were no longer interested in studying Spanish, they replaced instruction in Spanish with instruction in Arabic.
- Each year the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center asked classroom teachers to complete a survey indicating if participants' homework and behavior (particularly their capacity for group work) was improving.
- Every cycle (or 13 weeks) the Leap Academy University High School Center asked classroom teachers to complete a survey describing student progress. The program coordinator also visited program activities each cycle.

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center asked classroom teachers to complete pre- and post-program surveys to assess program participants' progress.
- This year the Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center asked children to complete a survey indicating how they felt about individual program components and the program overall.
- Twice each year the Newcomb School Centers surveyed students to hear about their favorite activities and enrichment clubs and to identify new activities and enrichment clubs they would like the center to initiate.

Informal Strategies

Center coordinators reported several informal means for tracking program quality. Common strategies included conducting informal observations and engaging in conversations with classroom teachers, parents, and program participants. Below are examples of the ways informal observations of program operations helped coordinators to assess program quality.

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center site coordinator said, "I have a notepad with me all the time...I notice things...."
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center site coordinator said, "I walk around. I make sure that everyone is where they're supposed to be and doing what they're supposed to be doing."

Below are examples of the ways informal conversations with stakeholders helped coordinators to assess program quality.

- The Jersey City Center coordinator engaged in informal conversations with parents at the end of the program day. When concerns emerged, the coordinator followed up by visiting classroom to see that students were engaged, using supplies, and producing interesting products. According to the coordinator, "The kids...give away everything."
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center coordinator made ample use of informal conversations with students' school-day teachers and with parents to understand what's working in the program and what needs to be changed.

4. Program Climate, Instructional Activities and Staff Development and Planning

This chapter reports on programming environments in promising New Jersey 21st Century Community Learning Centers. We start with a look at the program climate or the attitudinal infrastructures in evidence across centers. We follow with a review of instructional activities. We end with an examination of planning and professional development opportunities available to staff members.

Program Climate

Climate has been defined as the attitudinal infrastructure within an organization. We use the term here to refer to students' and staff members' attitudes toward one another and toward 21st CCLC program offerings.

Respondents in promising centers described the climate in their organizations as “positive” and “comfortable.” According to one coordinator, center programs hired the “...kind of staff that the kids feel safe around...”

This is not to say that discipline was not a concern. Centers typically adopted school-day codes of conduct and expected compliance. Implementation of the rules appeared to be relatively trouble-free, however. In the words of one respondent “...98 percent of students really follow [the code]...”

Coordinators offered several explanations for participants' positive attitudes and behavior: (a) the work is rewarding, (b) program staff members are caring, (c) students may select activities from among strong alternatives, and (d) program administrators adjust organizational policies to meet students' legitimate needs. These factors are described below.

Rewarding Activities

Center activities were structured to be rewarding to students. Below are examples of ways centers integrated positive experiences throughout the program day.

- The Jersey City Center coordinator reported, “[The students] see us in a different light...because they’re doing stuff they enjoy...These kids can go home [they are eighth graders], but they come every day.... They want to be here.... They are doing what they love.”
- The Leap Academy University High School Center coordinator explained that the program provided students with a chance “...to talk about their troubles” and “manage their stress” through its confidential peer counseling program. In

addition, there was a focus on youth accomplishments and on rewarding youth accomplishments. The Center sponsored end-of-activity events called *finales* for students to show off what they've learned.

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center also sponsored a *character-cash program*. Here the focus was on rewarding students for good grades. An intern moved through center classrooms asking students if they had any A's to show on papers, quizzes, or tests. A student who got 15 or more A's was rewarded with a gift card to Dunkin Donuts. When a classroom got 35-40 A's, the classroom was rewarded with a pizza party.

The *character-cash program* at the Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center was structured to respond to other-than-academic behaviors as well. As described by the site coordinator, "We go to Staples, get a big stack of green paper, [and] make fake money out of it...If the kids show good behavior...we give them \$2.00...at the end of the day when they sign out. We have a bank [where] they put their money...and it [allows] them to write out a check...We have a store on Fridays [where] they can spend their money....They love it....They get tickets for misbehaving and breaking things, bullying, fighting, language, running...and we take the money away....If kids get over \$100 in tickets...[they] get a call home....They will get suspended from the program if their behavior continues...." According to the coordinator, no one has been suspended this year.

- The Newcomb School Center reinforced positive student behavior with small rewards like pencils and notebooks. Students got points for completing homework, and they were invited to an ice cream party when they completed their homework for a full month. The coordinator explained that the center wanted students to "feel special" about their membership in the program. The center rewarded students with pins and certificates, movie nights and field trips, and showcased their talents.

Quality Time with Adults

Center activities were structured to provide students with quality time with caring adults. Coordinators provided several examples of the ways unpressured time with adults enhanced students' security and well-being.

- The Jersey City Center coordinator reported, "We talk with kids and have quality time.... [Teachers] don't get a chance to sit down and check in with kids during the day. I get to do that after school."
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center coordinator noted, "They [the students] really respect and like the staff of the program. They are closer with our staff because we get to see them in a non-school climate. They love fun

Fridays...when it gets warmer they love to go outside and play kickball, and we participate in the activities with them.”

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center coordinator reported, “The counselors are excellent at talking with the kids, and the kids love talking to them, which is very surprising. When I was a kid everyone was afraid to go talk to the counselors. They seem to love it. They go in groups of three and have group counseling with them...the counselors are excellent at helping the kids express their feelings toward each other or modify their behavior.”

Programming Options

Coordinators expressed an interest in offering students a variety of strong programming alternatives. They provided several examples of the ways programming options could be designed with student preferences in the forefront of considerations.

- At the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center students were given opportunities to suggest activities, and teachers were expected to be responsive to student suggestions. This year the center developed a fashion club in response to a “persuasive essay” written by several students.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center encouraged students to suggest clubs, and it created a formal process for students to vote on alternative possibilities. In the summer, students were asked, for example, to choose field trip destinations from a short list of local museums.
- The Newcomb School Center asked students to select three programming options from a larger list, and it developed activities so that most, if not all, students would have access to their two preferences.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center coordinator cautioned that it was important to set some limits on student choice. This center controlled enrollment a bit because students might otherwise only “...want to be with their friends.”

Flexible Administrative Policies

Center coordinators indicated an interest in creating environments that were administratively, as well as programmatically, flexible. Coordinators provided several examples of ways institutional policies were adjusted to accommodate students’ legitimate needs.

- According to the Jersey City Center site coordinator, “What keeps the kids coming are the activities...and the flexibility.” They don’t have to do the same thing or follow the same schedule every day.

- At the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center, students were expected to attend throughout the program day, but when they had a compelling reason to leave at another time, they were permitted to do so.

Amenities

Two center coordinators pointed to the role “little things” played in maintaining a positive social climate in programs.

- The Leap Academy University High School Center coordinator said that the meal the center provided mattered to students as well as the availability of transportation services at the end of the program day.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center coordinator recommended connecting students to opportunities they could enjoy when they are not in the program so that they know staff members care about them generally. He said, “Almost all of them have bikes they can ride to go fishing, and there are spots they could go camping...I [try] to find different ways...so they are not bored when they’re out of the program.”

Instructional Activities

Federal guidelines required 21st Century Community Learning Centers to provide students with learning opportunities that complemented (not merely extended) the school day. Interviews and observations indicated that promising centers offered explicit academic instruction. They structured activities over an extended time period so as to maximize student attendance and build skills progressively. They also rooted instruction in real-world activities so as to stimulate engagement. Illustrative approaches are presented and discussed below.

Explicit Academic Instruction

Centers operated at least three hours per day, typically from 3:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M., five days per week, although arrangements could vary somewhat depending on local school-day schedules. The Newcomb School Center offered programming, for example, from 2:10 P.M. to 5:10 P.M., and the Leap Academy University High School Center offered programming from 4:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.

A second scheduling norm was to offer explicit or formal academic instruction in the first half of the after-school day. This tendency developed, we were told, both to accommodate teacher schedules and in recognition of the fact that some students became fatigued as the after-school day progressed. As the three illustrative program schedules that follow show, enrichment clubs were often offered at the end of the program day.

- During its first program hour (3:00 P.M. to 4:00 P.M.), the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center focused on math, reading, science, and social studies to help prepare students for state exams. Snack and homework help were offered from 4:00 P.M. to 4:30 P.M. Enrichment clubs met from 4:30 P.M. to 5:40 P.M., followed by dismissal from 5:40 P.M. to 6:00 P.M.
- The Leap Academy University High School Center provided a snack from 4:00 P.M.-4:15 P.M. The academic period was from 4:20 P.M. to 5:30 P.M. This period included direct instruction as well as opportunities for students to visit the college center and participate in SAT-prep. Enrichment classes (art, basketball, etc.) ran from 5:30 P.M. to 6:45 P.M. Dismissal was at 7:00 P.M.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center offered snack and recreation from 2:50 P.M. to 3:30 P.M. This was followed by math and language arts instruction from 3:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M. Clubs focused on learn life skills and social interaction (like cooking) occurred at the end of the day.

Continuity of Instruction

Asked how centers framed learning activities so as to build students' skills progressively, coordinators explained that they used clubs and detailed curricula to establish instructional continuity and encourage ongoing student participation.

- The Jersey City Center offered some single-day activities. The center sponsored, for example, a whale-watching field trip and visits to Princeton University and Wall Street, and it offered students individual and small group tutoring on an as-needed basis day. The focus at the Jersey City Center was, however, on longer-term activities. While one group of students was developing a community newsletter, a second group was broadcasting a news program, a third group was studying guitar and writing songs, and a fourth group was conducting science experiments on the school's roof-top garden.
- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center also sponsored several enrichment clubs. The list included a science club, an engineering club, a PowerPoint club, a theater club, a women's studies club, and a graphic arts club. Every nine weeks or so students joined a new club to guarantee their exposure to a variety of activities and people.

In fact, most activities, not only clubs, were designed and structured around multi-session curricula.

- The Leap Academy University High School Center estimated that 80 percent of their activities were long-term and designed to develop students' skills sequentially.

- At the Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center program teachers submitted syllabi for clubs and activities and linked lessons across sessions.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center reported that about 40 percent of program activities built progressively on prior activities.
- The Newcomb School Center coordinator estimated that 60 percent of program activities were long-term and developed skills sequentially. The coordinator noted that there was, however, an important place for day-long events at the center. The coordinator found that field trips were exciting and important for students who didn't have opportunities to venture out to museums and other educational settings.

Real-World Focus

Federal guidelines required 21st Century Community Learning Centers to provide students with hands-on learning opportunities that complement school day activities. In promising centers, group leaders used real-world activities both as the centerpiece of instruction and as a means of reinforcing instruction. We begin first with examples of real world activities used as the centerpiece of instruction.

- Members of the research team observed a drama group at the Leap Academy University High School Center in the early stages of efforts to prepare a play that they would perform for the entire community center. The teacher leading the activity asked students to write back-stories about the scenes they were rehearsing. The leader explained that a back-story described an individual character and how that character met others in a scene. Such stories helped actors to create their characters' mannerisms and to improvise when they forgot a word or a phrase. The youth practiced a variety of communication skills as they talked in small groups, wrote back-stories, and shared these stories aloud in class.
- Members of the research team observed the first session of the Newcomb School Center science club. The teacher informed the class that the club would be studying animals and plants. As the youth sat at their desks, the teacher displayed pictures of classrooms on the monitor and asked club members to identify objects pictured in those classrooms. The youth noted images of people, fish, and food, among other things. The teacher explained that the science of classification is called *taxonomy*. A college assistant then entered the room, and the teacher and the assistant gave each student samples of rocks to place side-by-side under microscopes. The teacher asked students to identify what was different about the rocks. Students began calling out variations as they identified them; noting enthusiastically, for example, that one rock sparkled and another rock was flat.
- Members of the research team observed fourth-grade girls at the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center working in pairs to build model bridges out of

cardboard, paper, cups, and other assorted materials using curriculum provided by the National Partnership for After School Science based at the Education Development Center. The teacher asked the students to assess the strength of their constructions by placing washers on the bridges to see how many washers each bridge could hold. As bridges started to buckle, the teacher asked students to discuss how they could shore up their structures. The students shared ideas and continued working amiably, noting how many washers they had installed until one group ended up with 52 washers on its bridge. The teacher ended the session by calling the girls together and summarizing principles involved in constructing a good bridge. The aide praises the group for using their brains and solving problems by critical thinking.

The activity below illustrates how group leaders used real-world activities to reinforce concepts presented more abstractly or canonically earlier in a lesson.

- Members of the research team observed a math class at the Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center. The class began with the group leader handing out a worksheet. The group leader explained that the worksheet contained problems that required students to use fractions because the students' school-day teacher said the group needed help with fractions.

Hearing this news, one student lowered her head to the desk. In a gentle voice, the group leader asked the student to raise her head. The group leader then put a fraction on the board. She asked the class what the top number in the fraction was called. And the students gave the correct answer. She then asked what the bottom number was called, and again the students responded correctly.

The group leader then began working with the full class on worksheet problems. After the group completed a few, she asked the students to complete two more problems on their own.

A few minutes later, she asked the students if they would like to see their problems illustrated in color. The group leader walked around the room giving each student the opportunity to select two or three crayons from a box. She told the students to draw circles and to shade in specific parts of their circles—first a half, then a third. She asked the students if coloring one-half and then coloring one-third made it clearer to them which fraction was larger and which fraction was smaller. They indicated that it did. The teacher then asked the students if their circles were cookies and they could eat only the shaded area of one, which cookie they would want to eat. The students indicated that they would prefer to eat a half of a cookie as compared to a third of a cookie.

The lesson ended with the group leader reminding the class about an upcoming state test. She told the students that they knew a lot, and she urged them to take their time on the test and not to be in a rush. She prompted the class regarding the location of their next activity, and she walked the group out of the room.

Staff Development and Planning

In promising centers, core instructional staff members were selected from among the ranks of local school faculty, non-pedagogues who were specialists in high-interest subject areas, and college and high school students. The varied profiles of staff working in 21st CCLC—both in terms of their professional backgrounds and schedules—created distinct challenges for training and planning. Training and planning approaches are discussed below.

Training

Center staff members were required to participate in a limited number of training activities. Among these training activities were CPR (cardiac pulmonary resuscitation) training and training in the use of systems for reporting program performance data (PARS).

Promising centers expanded upon the foregoing options. They offered center staff opportunities to participate in district training, privately-sponsored training, and in training programs developed by center administrators. The following are examples of externally sponsored training opportunities made available to center staff.

- Select members of the Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center participated in a three-day workshop in science education.
- The Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center arranged for staff to attend a variety of professional development sessions: training in reading and math provided through the American Tutoring Program, two two-day training conferences held at a local university, and AIMS-sponsored training in science and math.
- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center made arrangements for club leaders to participate in training activities provided by the local 4-H Club.

The following are examples of training events and processes designed by center coordinators and offered internally.

- The Leap Academy University High School Center sponsored a one-hour “get-together” for new staff members to acquaint them with program norms and expectations. The core team at the site held intensive planning sessions to review the overall progress and prepare for the upcoming program year. It also sponsored an orientation for new staff members to acquaint them with program norms and expectations. Staff development sessions were offered in the following areas: Promoting Positive Behavior among Children and Youth; Working with Children with Special Needs; Character Education; First Aid/CPR. Core instructional staff members were selected from among the ranks of local school faculty, non-pedagogues who were specialists in high-interest subject areas, and college and high school students. The varied profiles of staff working in 21st CCLC—both in

terms of their professional backgrounds and schedules—created distinct challenges and opportunities for training and planning. Staff meetings are held to address “things that work and things that don’t work.”

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center paired successful teachers and club leaders with new staff.

At least one center offered both external and internal training opportunities.

- The Newcomb School Center encouraged program staff to take advantage of professional development sessions in literacy, math, science, and other subjects offered by the local school district. The center also brought in 4-H Club staff to present workshops on structuring hands-on learning opportunities. And the center started each program year out with a two-day orientation for teaching assistants, most of whom were college students. These sessions introduced assistants to the goals of the center, explained center routines including requirements for reporting program statistics, and outlined concepts in child development, communication, discipline, and positive reinforcement.

Planning

Most coordinators indicated that group planning was problematic during the school year. This was because program staff members tended to have competing obligations outside the program day and because it was costly to close down the program and hire substitutes during the program day. Some promising centers sponsored individual and group planning activities at the beginning (and/or end) of program cycles. Below are examples of pre- and post-program planning activities that were employed at promising centers.

- The Anthony V. Ceres Elementary School Center sponsored a team-building meeting at the end of the year to prepare for the next year. Staff members also met as a group every other month or so.
- At the Etta Gero No. 9 Elementary School Center, teachers were given the first week of each program cycle to prepare lessons. For the shorter five-week summer cycle, teachers were given one day to plan. If an issue emerged during the cycle, the program coordinator used email or called staff members.

Below are examples of the ways some centers structured planning activities during the school year.

- Jersey City Center staff members participated in joint half-hour planning meetings each month.
- The Leap Academy University High School Center sponsored planning sessions on school half-days when the program was not in session. These half-days occurred about once a month.

- The Bound Brook Smalley Middle School Center sponsored staff meetings four times per year.

Program coordinators had questions about the value of planning sessions as they currently designed and operated. One coordinator ventured, "...staff want to leave right away. We're looking for [better] ways to get them speaking or interacting..." Another coordinator noted that it might be better to hold one joint planning meeting and thereafter to hold separate meetings for sub-groups of staff (teachers, club leaders, high school assistants, etc.).

5. Conclusions

This chapter presents a closing assessment of program practices in promising 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Education. We begin by identifying areas of practice that appear to be well-established across promising centers, and we end by identifying areas of practice in which there are improvement opportunities yet to be acted upon.

Established Practices

Promising programs appeared to have well-established means for doing the following: (a) aligning program activities with the school day, (b) maximizing student participation, and (c) creating engaging learning activities.

The following strategies were used across centers to align program activities with the school day: Center coordinators maintained close communication with school principals and assistant principals and adopted host schools' codes of conduct and curriculum. Coordinators employed a staff person/s (typically a teacher) to facilitate communication between center staff and classroom teachers and to monitor students' academic progress. Coordinators hired teachers to implement academic activities.

The following strategies were utilized across promising centers to maximize student and parent participation in program activities. Centers made it a practice of hiring the kinds of adults around whom students felt safe. Centers conducted surveys to identify student and parent needs and preferences. Centers sponsored clubs to encourage students to make longer-term commitments to program activities. Centers advertised clubs and activities within sponsoring schools and sent announcements home to parents. Centers monitored students' program attendance, rewarded success, and intervened when attendance faltered. Centers invited parents to participate in field trips, in dinners, and in events that showcased student achievements.

The following strategies were employed across promising centers to encourage group leaders to develop lessons that included engaging learning experiences. Staff members were required to develop multi-session lesson plans that related to learning standards, incorporated hands-on activities, connected with students' interests and experiences, and allowed time for students and staff to interact socially. Explicit academic instruction was provided earlier in the after-school day when students were less tired. Coordinators solicited feedback regarding the quality of program activities from participants, their parents, and their teachers. Coordinators also observed program activities.

Quality-Improvement Opportunities

Promising programs appeared to have less well-established means for doing the following: (a) creating linkages with community organizations and families, (b) using student performance data to shape program offerings, and (c) providing instructors with ongoing professional development and instructional support.

Efforts to link center programs with important potential partners—schools, community organizations and families—appeared to be making strides on the school front. Managers of promising programs reported multiple successful means for aligning program activities with school-day activities. Work with community organizations appeared, on the other hand, to be in a formative stage. For the most part, center coordinators reported working with one or two external organizations in a restricted domain of activity. While center coordinators described several strategies with potential for engaging busy parents, coordinators were typically unsatisfied with their progress in this area.

There was considerable evidence that centers aspired to use student performance data to adjust program offerings. We typically heard that student performance data were available and reviewed. We did not hear, however, that sites had systematic means for analyzing performance data in relation to program participation. For example, we never heard that centers were comparing student gains on subtests in relation to participation in particular streams of 21st CCLC programming. One coordinator did, however, report that his center compared the performance of center participants to comparable non participants.

Across centers we were told that coordinators aspired to provide staff with meaningful professional development opportunities. No coordinator seemed, however, to have a clear view of the kinds of professional development experiences that would be most helpful for group leaders and other staff. And we did not hear about any systematic professional development efforts.

References

- Author. (2010) *More time for learning: Promising practices and lessons learned*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts 2020. Retrieved from www.mass2020.org.
- Beckett, M., Borman, G., Capizzano, J., Parsley, D., Ross, S., Schirm, A., & Taylor, J. (2009) *Structuring out-of-school time to improve academic achievement: A practice guide* (NCEE #2009-012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.
- Naftzger, N., Gibbs, C., Manzeske, D., Akerstrom, J., Kwon, S., & Davidson-Gibbs, D. (2010) *New Jersey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) impact report 2004-05 to 2008-09*. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.