



21st Century Community Learning Centers

Proven to improve students' academic performance, attendance, behavior, and career readiness

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Over the course of more than 20 years, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative has expanded and evolved to offer elementary, middle, and high schoolers enriching learning activities outside of the school day in literacy, math, science, the arts, and music, as well as hands-on experiences to help develop workforce skills.

Community Learning Centers practice a continuous improvement process that involves staff training, resources dedicated to program improvement, and quality monitoring to ensure that students are developing foundational skills they need to thrive in the classroom and in their daily lives. This includes how to work collaboratively, how to express their ideas, and how to think critically about their experiences. While students have opportunities to engage in hands-on learning—building circuits, growing vegetables, crafting business plans, and more—they are developing vital skills and competencies that will help them graduate and prepare for adulthood.

Community Learning Centers are modeled on local hubs created by community and education leaders to complement the school day by inspiring young people to learn, keeping children and teens safe, and supporting working families.

Today, Community Learning Centers serve approximately 1.7 million students and families in more than 10,000 communities nationwide, including in small towns, large cities, and rural America.

Community Learning Centers Are Proven Effective

Evaluation studies demonstrate that Community Learning Centers positively impact factors that are integral to the ABCs of student engagement and graduation: attendance, behavior, and coursework.¹ Studies also show that Community Learning Centers are helping young people gain the workforce skills that will benefit them throughout their life. This brief provides a small sampling of current research that demonstrates participation in Community Learning Centers makes a positive difference in all four areas.

Attendance

- ▶ **Decreased school day absences:** A statewide evaluation of California's After School Education and Safety (ASES) program and After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) program found that students participating in programs for 60 days or more attended school up to 17 more days than their peers who did not attend afterschool programs. The report estimated that this earned schools more than \$183 million in average daily attendance funding.²
- ▶ **Greater improvement in school day attendance among regularly attending students:** Students regularly participating in New Jersey's Community Learning Centers saw statistically significant reductions in school-day truancy compared with their nonparticipating peers. The evaluation found that students with very high levels of attendance (those who attended the program 60 days or more) demonstrated an even greater reduction in truancy.³

Behavior

- ▶ **Improved class participation and homework completion:** According to teachers surveyed in a number of statewide evaluations of Community Learning Centers, students in programs overwhelmingly improved their school day engagement. In New Mexico, 88 percent of students regularly attending programs improved their homework completion and class participation. In Kansas, based on teacher surveys from 43 grantee reports, most students participating in the program improved, stayed the same, or did not need to change in the areas of academics (96 percent), homework completion (95 percent), behavior (90 percent), and attendance (98 percent). In West Virginia, teachers reported 66 percent of students regularly participating in Community Learning Centers improved their homework completion and 63 percent improved their class participation.⁴
- ▶ **Positive impact on students in most need of improvement:** According to teacher reports from an evaluation of North Dakota's Community Learning Centers, there was a positive impact among participating students who needed to improve their participation in class and motivation to learn: 61 percent improved their class participation and 55 percent showed improvement in coming to school motivated to learn. Additionally, 3 in 4 parents agreed that their child's attitude toward school improved as a result of participating in the afterschool program.⁵



Images provided by The 50 State Afterschool Network

- ▶ **Decreased disciplinary incidents:** Evaluations of the Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) found a statistically significant relationship between students regularly attending the program and fewer school-day disciplinary incidents. For instance, a 2016 evaluation found that the school-day disciplinary incidence rate for high school students attending the program for 60 days or more was 23 percent lower than students who did not participate in the program.⁶
- ▶ **Teachers and principals see a boost in students' motivation to learn:** According to an evaluation of New Hampshire's Community Learning Centers, more than 3 in 4 principals surveyed reported that the programs improved students' attitudes toward school and more than 5 in 6 principals believed the programs boosted students' motivation to learn.⁷ Similarly, in an evaluation of Montana's Community Learning Centers, 94 percent of teachers and 96 percent of school administrators reported that the afterschool program is an "integral component of the school."⁸

Coursework

- ▶ **Increased likelihood of grade promotion:** A 2016 evaluation of Texas ACE, found that students with high levels of attendance in the program saw gains in their math performance, which was consistent with previous positive outcomes associated with the program. A 2013 evaluation found that students attending the program saw improvements in their Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills reading and math scores, and were more likely to be promoted to the next grade. For high school students, participation in an ACE program increased the likelihood of grade promotion by 79 percent among students with low levels of attendance and 97 percent for students with high levels of attendance.⁹ In a 2019 evaluation of Montana's 21st CCLC programs it was reported that almost all students participating in the program advanced to the next grade level (98 percent).¹⁰
- ▶ **Improved grades:** The Georgia Department of Education reported that 80 percent of students who regularly participated in the state's Community Learning Centers during the 2017-18 school year improved or maintained an A, B, or C in math and 75 percent improved or maintained an A, B, or C in English language arts (ELA).¹¹
- ▶ **Improved academic performance:** A statewide evaluation examining three years of data on the ASSETs program—California's high school component of the Community Learning Centers program—found that students participating in the program received higher ELA and math assessment scores, and performed better on the ELA and math sections of the California High School Exit Examination than non-participants.¹²

Community Learning Centers Help Students Stay in School and Graduate

A 2019 study of LA's BEST, an afterschool program which receives both federal 21st CCLC funding and California state's ASES funding, found elementary school students who had high levels of attendance were **5 percent less likely to drop out of high school and 6 percent more likely to graduate from high school on time** compared with their peers who were not involved in the program. LA's BEST serves approximately 25,000 children in close to 200 Los Angeles Unified School District elementary schools. The study was conducted by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles.¹³



Career Readiness

- ▶ **Stronger communication and collaboration skills:** An evaluation of Arkansas' Community Learning Centers found that 9 in 10 participating students reported that the program helped them with their communication and collaboration skills, such as working well with others and sharing their thoughts with other students, even if those students disagreed.¹⁴
- ▶ **Gaining knowledge about and interest in STEM careers:** An evaluation of K-5 students in the SHINE program, a 21st CCLC funded program in rural Pennsylvania that offers STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning, found that 91 percent of participants believed science and math will be used in their future career and 52 percent would like to have a science or computer job in the future. Participants also gained an understanding of the specifics of STEM careers—80 percent reported they know what engineers do and 94 percent understood engineers need to know both math and science.¹⁵
- ▶ **Developing workforce readiness skills:** A 2019 evaluation by Education Northwest of 21st CCLC afterschool programs in Alaska found that approximately 2 in 3 students who regularly participate in the program improved their ability to form positive relationships with adults (70 percent), work collaboratively with peers (68 percent), and persevere through challenges (66 percent).¹⁶ In an evaluation of 21st CCLC programs, 7 in 10 regularly attending students surveyed felt that 21st CCLC programs help them "prepare for a job or a career" (72 percent) and "learn the knowledge and skills that [they] will need to be ready for a job or career" (71 percent).¹⁷

For more research on the impact of 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, visit afterschoolalliance.org.

Parents and Students Value Community Learning Centers

Statewide evaluations of Community Learning Centers have reported high levels of support for the program from both students and their parents:



Idaho: More than 9 in 10 surveyed Idaho parents (91 percent) of participants agreed that the program is beneficial to their child.¹⁸



Mississippi: More than 8 in 10 surveyed Mississippi parents with a child participating in a 21st CCLC program agreed that they felt better able to communicate with their school about their child (83 percent) and that their child benefits from the program (87 percent).¹⁹



Nevada: An overwhelming majority of students reported that the programs had a positive impact on their life (88 percent), and almost all parents surveyed (99 percent) believed that the program had a positive impact on their or their child's life.²⁰



Flaws and Limitations of the First 21st CCLC National Evaluation

At the outset of the 21st CCLC, the Department of Education contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. to conduct a national evaluation of the program. Data were collected starting in fall 2000 through spring 2002 and released in three phases (2003, 2004, and 2005). This initial evaluation remains the centerpiece for critics of 21st CCLC. However, this study does not accurately capture the success of 21st CCLC due to major limitations:

- ▶ **The methodology has significant flaws.** Researchers* identified serious methodological concerns with the evaluation, ranging from substantial differences between the treatment and comparison groups to issues with the sample size. For example, the sample of elementary school students participating in 21st CCLC programs evaluated represented fewer than 1 percent of students in the program.
- ▶ **The goals of the programs evaluated were not the same as the evaluation's measures of success.** Test scores were a major emphasis of the evaluation, yet it examined data from programs that were focused on the broad objective of serving children and families during the after school hours. It wasn't until the enactment of No Child Left Behind and the 21st CCLC programs that began operating in the 2002-03 school year that academic improvement as measured by test scores was prioritized as a goal of the 21st CCLC initiative.
- ▶ **The findings are severely outdated.** The last phase of the evaluation was released in 2005 and based on data collection completed in spring 2002. At the time of the evaluation, 21st CCLC was still in its infancy. In the years since the last wave of data were collected, the 21st CCLC program has undergone tremendous growth, including sustained efforts to improve the quality of programming, ongoing staff training, dedicated funding for program improvement, and quality monitoring. Currently there is a large and growing body of research demonstrating that afterschool programs, including 21st CCLC programs, have a positive impact on students' academic outcomes and social and emotional competencies.

*Researchers including members of the Scientific Advisory Board for the 21st CCLC evaluation, the Harvard Family Research Project, and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of California, Irvine's School of Education and former Chair of the Advisory Committee for the Social, Behavioral and Economic Directorate at the National Science Foundation.

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