

The Evolution of 21st Century Community Learning Centers:
Working to Meet the Holistic Needs of America's Students

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ABSTRACT

Even though the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program has enjoyed ongoing support from the general public since policymakers passed the initial legislation in 1994 (Afterschool Alliance, 2009), its policy and research histories, as well as the contemporary politics surrounding the initiative, shine a bold light on the steady challenges it has still faced while striving to demonstrate its overall efficacy. Commencing as a community learning center model that provided a variety of enrichment, health-related and academic services to all families and children that lived within a local rural or urban community, the current structure of the 21st CCLC initiative under No Child Left Behind places a greater emphasis on meeting the academic needs of students who are enrolled in impoverished, low-performing schools (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). As the sole source of federal funding committed to afterschool programming, it is imperative to comprehend the complex evolution of the 21st CCLC model over the past fifteen years and the impact it has had on millions of young people across the country.

HISTORY

Historically, the American federal government had little involvement with after-school programs. Prior to the mid-1990s, after-school structured activities were primarily community-based (Halpern, as cited in Gayl, 2004). For example, local institutions such as the YMCA and Boy Scouts of America provided a place for children to grow and develop during the after-school hours (Gayl, 2004). Thus, traditionally, after-school time was seen as a concern and responsibility of the community (Gayl, 2004). However, two major shifts brought the issue of after-school programs into the national limelight.

First, as more women began to enter the workforce in the second half of the 21st century, parents struggled to find the “precarious balance between work and family” and expressed concerns about the safety of their children after the end of the school day (Gayl, 2004, p. 1). To gather more data, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice commissioned a comprehensive report on after-school programs, titled *Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids* (1998). It found that while “...more than 28 million school-age children have parents who work outside the home...an estimated five to seven million, and up to as many as 15 million ‘latch-key children’ return to an empty home after-school” (Pederson, de Kanter, Bobo, Weinig & Noeth, 1998, p.1). After-school programs offered a nice alternative to an empty house or the dangerous streets; students could be in safe and enriching environments (Pederson et. al, 1998). There was clearly a need for adult-supervised activities during non-school hours because between 1987 and 1999, the percentage of public schools offering “extended-day” programs (which include before- and after-school programs) more than tripled, from about 16 to 47 percent (DeAngelis and Rossi, 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, as cited in Mathematica, 2005).

Second, the publication of the 1984 *Nation At Risk* report increased the "...intense society-wide focus on boosting academic achievement for all K-12 students" (Gayl, 2004, p.1). The concern of safety after-school coincided with the growing accountability movement in the United States, which focused on improving students' academic achievement. Before the 1990s, some schools used a portion of their Title 1 funding to support "extended learning opportunities for low-income students" but there was no federal program in place to directly fund after-school initiatives (Chambers, Lieberman, Parriah, Kaleba, Van Campen & Stullich et al., as cited in Gayl, 2004). States, on the other hand, were looking to create "...extra learning supports to help children achieve" (Gayl, 2004, p.2). For example, Gayl (2004) sites the 3:00 project, a state-wide, after-school initiative started in Georgia in 1994. The program had three main goals: to provide a safe space after-school, to encourage community collaboration, and improve academic success (Gayl, 2004). These three elements became fundamental centerpieces of the philosophy behind 21st Century Community Learning Centers (Gayl, 2004).

The Development of the 21st CCLC After-School Program

The apprehension over both student safety and academic achievement prompted the federal government's involvement with the after-school sector. As Gayl (2004) documents, in 1994, Senator James Jeffords (I-Vt.) (who at the time was a Republican) and Representative Steve Gunderson (R.-Wis.) introduced the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act to Congress. The act would provide a grant for services that would benefit students and families in rural and inner-city communities (Gayl, 2004). The legislation authorized \$25 million¹ for a variety of non-school time opportunities, including: literacy education programs, day care

¹ Only \$750,000 was released for Fiscal Year 95

services, weekend school programs, and extended library hours (Gayl, 2004). The bill was ultimately attached to the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Gayl, 2004).

The major push for 21st CCLC funding, however, came from the private sector. In 1997, the Mott Foundation partnered with the Department of Education to provide technical assistance and training for the sites that received the grant (Gayl, 2004). The National Center for Community Education (NCCE) conducted the trainings and recruited an elite team of about 20 technical assistance trainers, including Karen Mapp, Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. While the training focused on different tracks, such as management, programming, evaluation, communication, and linking K-12 and after-school, there was also a strong emphasis on community-based partnerships and family engagement as vital elements for successful 21st CCLC programs (Mapp, personal communication, October 21, 2009). At the end of the day, the NCCE trainings for 21st CCLC sites proved to be sparse which, along with the absence of common criteria for implementing the 21st CCLC model at a given site, helped contribute to the great variability among 21st CCLC programs (personal communication, October 21, 2009). Despite these limitations, Mott's commitment to the 21st CCLC program helped secure \$40 million for the initiative in FY 98 (Gayl, 2004).

The 21st CCLC gained additional momentum when the Clinton administration used the program to promote their "out-of-school time" agenda. In FY 99, President Clinton proposed an \$800 million increase for the program over five years (Gayl, 2004). Finally, the Clinton administration also commissioned Mathematica Policy Research, based in Princeton, New Jersey, to conduct a three-year national evaluation of the 21st CCLC program (Gayl, 2004). The Clinton administration was interested in "learn[ing] how to make after-school programs even

more effective..." (Riley as cited in Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). Mathematica's results, which will be addressed later in the paper, were mixed.

Growth of 21st CCLC and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

By FY 01, the federal budget for 21st CCLC was \$845.6 million (Gayl, 2004). In January 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law by President Bush and had a significant impact on both the funding and direction of the 21st CCLC program. Under NCLB, the program would receive a \$250 million increase each year for six years to reach a level of \$2.5 billion in FY 07 (Gayl, 2004). Additionally, the legislation made important changes affecting both policy and implementation (Gayl, 2004). Under NCLB, the emphasis on student achievement changed the focus of the 21st CCLC program. Originally, the program had broader goals of providing "educational and social services" to local children and families (Gayl, 2004). With the provision of NCLB, the program honed in on providing students in high poverty and low-performing schools with more academic enrichment opportunities (Gayl, 2004). The implications of this policy change will be described and discussed in the following section.

The growth of 21st CCLC over the past fifteen years has been tremendous. According to the After-School Alliance report, *21st Century Community Learning Centers: Providing Afterschool Supports to Communities Nationwide*, there are now 3,309 grants for afterschool programs, serving 1,456,447 children and youth in 9,824 school-based and community-based centers across the country (2009, p. 1). The most common services offered by these programs are: Academic assistance, enrichment activities and recreational activities (2009). As Gayl (2004) observes, "In less than one decade, the 21st CCLC program grew from small pilot project to an integral part of the nation's largest federal education reform law since 1965" (p.3).

Example of a Successful 21st CCLC Site: The Gardner Pilot Academy

What does an effective 21st CCLC program in 2009 look like on the ground? Although there is great variability among sites due to local needs and the absence of a distinct national program model, it is important to examine at least one successful site to illustrate the inner-workings of a 21st CCLC program. Lauren Fogarty, the Director of Extended Learning Time at the Gardner Pilot Academy, explains that the philosophy of the Gardner's 21st CCLC site is to foster the development of the "whole child" (personal communication, November 10, 2009). This outlook is rooted in the full service/community model, which then principal Catalina Montez started in the 1990s (personal communication, November 10, 2009). The program not only focuses on academic enrichment, but provides community resources as well.

The program has a holistic focus, concentrating not only on the academic enrichment but other factors that influence learning. During the afterschool site, students work on activities that expand on what they had learned during the day in their academic classes (personal communication, November 10, 2009). This alignment is possible due to the fact that the lead teacher in the after-school classroom works at the school between 10:30 am -5:30 pm, which helps to create a strong sense of continuity between the regular school-day and the after-school site (personal communication, November 11, 2009). Additionally, the site has a mental health clinic, a full time nurse, a full time student support coordinator, a school counselor, a psychologist and programs in adult education (personal communication, November 18, 2009). Taken together, all these elements work to ensure that students have the resources they need to succeed academically, as well as keep a tight connection to the community.

POLICY RESEARCH

An evaluation of the policies and research connected to the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) initiative sheds some valuable light on the successes and challenges the program has experienced throughout its complex history. Starting as a community learning center model that served all children and families residing within a local rural or urban community, the current iteration of the 21st CCLC initiative under No Child Left Behind focuses heavily on providing academically targeted services to students enrolled in impoverished, low-performing schools (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). In light of the federal government's enormous investment in the 21st CCLC program since 1998 (Afterschool Alliance, 2009), it is critical to understand the development of this influential after-school policy, as well as the research that has been used to both support and critique the outcomes associated with the 21st CCLC program.

The Beginning of a New Era in After-School Research and Policy: Meeting the Holistic Needs of Students and Families During the After-School Hours

The late 1990s represented a formative moment for after-school research and policymaking in the United States. Not only did Congress authorize \$40 million for the 21st CCLC program in the FY 98 budget, but the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Justice Department also released *Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids* in June 1998, which underscored the growing need for effective after-school programs. Before examining the development of 21st CCLC policy during the mid-to-late 1990s, it is important to understand the findings from *Safe and Smart*, which made a strong case for expanding high-quality after-school programming and was ultimately distributed to every school district in the United States (<http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/1999pres/19991015.html>).

Summarizing a collection of positive research—both empirical and anecdotal—*Safe and Smart* drew attention to the potential of first-rate after-school programs to ensure that students are safe and engaged in meaningful academic learning once the school day has ended (Pederson et al, 1998). Identifying eight characteristics that are typically present in outstanding after-school programs,² which focus on meeting the holistic needs of children, *Safe and Smart* helped to lay a strong foundation for the 21st CCLC program. Nonetheless, the authors of the report did acknowledge that the majority of their results were based on the beliefs of experts instead of ongoing rigorous evaluations. As a result, they emphasized the critical need for researchers to conduct more thorough and extensive evaluations of after-school initiatives in the future (Pederson et al, 1998).

The Development of 21st CCLC Federal Policy (1994-2002)

While a confluence of forces in the mid-to-late 1990s motivated the federal government to become involved with funding after-school programs, the government's recognition of two serious social problems played an influential role in its growing support of the after-school sector (Gayl, 2004). First of all, more parents than ever before were holding down jobs outside the home and struggling to secure decent after-school child care options. Secondly, new research reports, such as *Safe and Smart*, were boldly highlighting that after-school programming could help to reduce juvenile crime and other high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol, drug and tobacco use, that often take place between 2:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Pederson et al, 1998). Taking these

² *Safe and Smart* claims that the following features contribute to shaping high-quality after-school programs: goal setting and strong management; quality after-school staffing; attention to safety, health and nutrition; effective partnerships with community-based organizations; strong involvement of families; coordinating learning with the regular school day; linkages between school-day teachers and after-school personnel, and evaluation of program progress and effectiveness (Pederson et al, 1998, p. 26).

two overriding social concerns into consideration, along with the heightened attention from state and federal legislators towards improving academic standards, Senator James Jeffords (I-VT) and Representative Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.) presented the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act to Congress in 1994 (Gayl, 2004).

Congress ultimately authorized the 21st CCLC initiative for \$750,000 in FY 95 “to provide grants to rural and inner-city public schools for ‘projects that benefit the educational, health, social service, cultural and recreational needs of a rural or inner city community’ ” (Gayl, 2004). In other words, the original purpose of the 21st CCLC program was to invite communities to take advantage of a broad range of services in their local schools, such as computer labs and gymnasiums, that would be made available during the non-school hours (Holmes, 2003). As a result of this authorization, the 21st CCLC program became the sole source of federal funding committed to supporting after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

The period of 1998 to 2002 represented a time of rapid growth and change for the 21st CCLC initiative. Recognizing the powerful role that the 21st CCLC program could play in advancing its agenda for after-school programming, the Clinton administration recommended in 1998 that an additional \$800 million be allocated to the initiative over the course of five years in order to advance the current state of “childcare services” (Gayl, 2004). Leading up to President Clinton’s proposal, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation offered to collaborate with the Department of Education to provide comprehensive technical assistance and training opportunities to 21st Century grantees. All in all, the private sector’s newfound attention and interest in the 21st CCLC program, along with President Clinton’s support, helped the initiative’s budget to grow from \$40 million in 1998 to \$1 billion in 2002 (Jacobson, 1998).

During these years of incredible momentum behind the 21st CCLC initiative, the Clinton administration adapted the program from an after-school community learning center model that was supplying local children and families with a diverse array of services, such as literacy and health programs, to a more concrete after-school program model geared towards “providing academic, enrichment, and recreational activities in public schools during the after-school hours” (James-Burdumy, Dynarski, Moore, Deke, & Mansfield, 2005, p. xiii). Even though the 21st CCLC initiative maintained strong support from both democratic and republican legislators during the late 1990s (Sack, 1999), Congressional Republicans stressed that the program could lose their backing if it didn't continue to support the academic development of young people.

The 21st Century effort has the support of House Republicans on the Education and the Workforce Committee--as long as it retains a strong educational component and doesn't become federally financed child care, said Jay Diskey, a spokesman for the committee's GOP members (Sack, 1999).

Aligned with the views of Congressional Republicans on the Education and Workforce Committee in 1999, the 21st CCLC program would veer more in the direction of an academically focused after-school program under the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

No Child Left Behind and 21st CCLC: Shifting the Emphasis to Academic Outcomes

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act not only reauthorized the 21st CCLC program in 2002 and committed to increasing the federal government's investment in this initiative, but it also made several notable modifications to the 21st CCLC model (Gayl, 2004). The following is a brief description of four salient changes that impacted the 21st CCLC program under NCLB:

- NCLB stressed the importance of 21st CCLC programs improving the academic outcomes of students attending underprivileged and low-performing schools and helping them to meet state academic standards in reading and math (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).
- Under NCLB, the federal government turned the administration of 21st CCLC grant-making over to state education agencies, which would receive funding from the federal government based on their share of Title I funds for low-income students. Previously, the

federal government had been responsible for awarding 21st CCLC funds on a competitive basis to deserving applicants (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

- NCLB altered the permissible duration of 21st CCLC grants from three to five years in order to improve the sustainability of 21st CCLC programs (Gayl, 2004)
- Under NCLB, faith-based and community-based organizations were granted permission to apply for 21st CCLC funding (Gayl, 2004).

Jen Rinehart, the Vice President of Policy & Research at the Afterschool Alliance, explained that the 21st CCLC program's heightened focus on academic achievement under NCLB proved to be very difficult for some communities since many support services were no longer available to local families (personal communication, November 4, 2009). Echoing Rinehart, Phillip Lovell, who is the Vice President of Education at First Focus, noted that when 21st CCLC became more academically oriented, attention was deviated from meeting the holistic needs of children and their families (personal communication, November 2, 2009).

Mathematica's National Evaluation of the 21st CCLC Program: A Controversial Intersection of Policy and Research (2003-2005)

A three-year national evaluation of the 21st CCLC program, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education during the Clinton administration and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, released its first-year findings in February 2003 (Dynarski & Moore, 2002). While 34 school districts and 62 21st CCLC sites were assessed in the middle school study, 14 school districts and 34 centers were evaluated in the elementary school evaluation (Dynarski & Moore, 2002). In its first-year report, which evaluated data from the 2000-2001 school year, Mathematica ultimately concluded that 21st CCLC programs were not improving the academic achievement, behavior, safety or developmental-related outcomes of students (Gayl, 2004).

In a very rapid response to the release of Mathematica's first-year findings in February 2003, the Bush administration proposed that a 40% (or \$400 million) budget cut be made to the

21st CCLC program in the FY 04 budget (Gayl, 2004). As quoted in the Progressive Policy Institute's July 2004 report, the Bush administration highlighted "disappointing initial findings from a rigorous evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program" (Gayl, p. 5). President George W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, subsequently clarified in a *Washington Post* editorial that "It is irresponsible to continue funding increases unless they improve academic achievement or foster positive behavior" (2003).

Ranging from concerns about Mathematica's methodology to President Bush's decision to make a significant policy move based on one research evaluation, a host of researchers, policymakers and practitioners expressed very critical reactions to the Bush administration's recommended budget cuts (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). As quoted in a brief published by the Harvard Family Research Project in 2003, Dean Kathleen McCartney of the Harvard Graduate School of Education claimed that instead of using the Mathematica evaluation to "promote continuous improvement...the administration has acted based on first-year data, collected during the implementation phase of the study" (2003). Moreover, Heather Weiss, who is the Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, noted that Mathematica used NCLB measurement tools to evaluate pre-NCLB 21st CCLC programs. "In the case of 21st CCLC programs, old programs were held accountable for new outcomes, thereby almost 'preordaining' failure. Moving forward, all players must strive for alignment between desired outcomes and program strategies" (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003, p. 6).

Due to very strong bipartisan support for the 21st CCLC program, Congress ultimately rejected the Bush administration's proposed 21st CCLC budget cuts. Phillip Lovell of First Focus highlighted that during the two years or so after the release of the 2003 Mathematica study, the 21st CCLC program unquestionably enjoyed more support. He pointed out that

policymakers and politicians, alike, including Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, started to lobby heavily around the 21st Community Learning Centers initiative. Additionally, Lovell noted that even though Mathematica's 2005 third-year findings of the 21st CCLC program ultimately confirmed many of Mathematica's 2003 results, its 2005 evaluation did not garner nearly as much attention from the political community and was still viewed with skepticism by some prominent research organizations (personal communication, November 2, 2009).

Contemporary After-School Research (2005-2009): Shining a Spotlight on Best Practices

Since the release of Mathematica's first-year findings in 2003, not only has federal funding for the 21st CCLC initiative remained stable³, but several new research studies have also challenged Mathematica's results by drawing attention to high-quality after-school initiatives (some of which are funded by 21st CCLC) that are positively impacting a range of student outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). When developing the two-year 2007 *Promising Afterschool Programs* study, Deborah Lowe Vandell, who is the chairwoman of the Department of Education at the University of California, Irvine, acknowledged her desire to confront some of the central limitations of the Mathematica evaluation, such as its methodology (Viadero, 2007). Specifically, one of her central priorities was to cultivate a sharper understanding of the relationship between first-rate after-school programs serving disadvantaged children and positive student outcomes. Evaluating "35 programs serving 2,914 students in 14 communities stretching from Bridgeport, Conn., to Seaside, Calif" (Viadero, 2007), all of which had been in operation for at least three years, the *Promising Afterschool Programs Study* ultimately selected its sites based on their successful track record of student achievement.

³ While Congress authorized \$993.5 million for the 21st CCLC program in 2003, it approved \$1.13 billion for the initiative in 2009 (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

Overall, the *Promising Afterschool Programs Study* concluded that students who participated regularly in after-school programs with certain characteristics,⁴ such as tightly-knit partnerships with their schools/communities and a combination of high-quality arts, enrichment and recreational programming, were more likely to experience improvement with their standardized test scores, academic work habits and behavior (Vandell, Reisner & Pierce, 2007). As quoted in *EdWeek*, Deborah Lowe Vandell underlines why these findings are so remarkable. “The math gains are occurring in programs that are not specifically targeted to academic skills...Children were developing persistence, focus, and engagement, and we believe those are the kinds of skills that maybe children take to school with them and that may contribute to their math gains” (Viadero, 2007).

Validating the results from *The Promising Afterschool Program* study, the Harvard Family Research Project published a brief in February 2008, which showcased findings from a collection of rigorous after-school program research reports that had been released over the past decade. A close examination of the Harvard Family Research Project's findings highlights that effective after-school programs, which balance academic support with a range of activities that are focused on the whole child, can produce significant academic, social/emotional and health-related outcomes for participating students (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). Even though *The Promising Afterschool Programs Study* and the Harvard Family Research brief did not exclusively zero in on the best practices of 21st CCLC programs, the lessons learned from highly successful non-21st CCLC after-school programs have the potential to lay a strong foundation for future 21st CCLC policymaking.

⁴ The following is a list of the eight characteristics identified by the *Promising Afterschool Programs* study in its review of successful sites: tightly-knit partnerships with their schools/communities, high expectations for student attendance; comprehensive academic support; a combination of high-quality arts, enrichment and recreational programming as well as thoroughly trained after-school staff.

Conclusion: Absorbing the Successes of 21st CCLC Program

James Comer, who is the Founder of the Comer School Development Program,⁵ writes that “An understanding of the strategies and strengths of the ‘survivors’ will tell us more about the obstacles and ways around them than an exclusive focus on ‘the victims’ ” (1988). Comer’s insights illuminate the importance of learning from the successes that after-school programs, including 21st CCLC, have demonstrated. Even though comprehensive research studies, such as the Mathematica report, are useful in understanding the variability that exists among 21st CCLC programs (Gayl 2004), it is also important to absorb the compelling research studies examined above, which emphasize the positive influence 21st CCLC has had on scores of American children (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).

⁵ The Comer School Development Model “promotes the collaboration of parents, educators, and community to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children that, in turn, helps them achieve greater school success” (<http://www.med.yale.edu/comer/about/profiles.html>).

CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

As the only federally funded after-school program in the United States, the 21st CCLC initiative has both its opponents and its advocates (Gayl, 2004; Pederson, et. al, 1998). Although the 21st CCLC program has garnered steady support from the general public since policymakers passed the initial legislation in 1994, the program has not been without its critics, including powerful political leaders such as President George W. Bush (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Thus, before moving into policy recommendations, this section will highlight the contemporary politics of the 21st CCLC program, identifying the major actors and coalitions that play a significant role in supporting or opposing the initiative. Additionally, this section explores the political barriers that could hinder the future successes of the 21st CCLC initiative and concludes by pinpointing opportunities for the program to improve and increase its impact on the American youth.

Current Opponents and Advocates of 21st CCLC: Voices from Both Sides of the Fence

After the 2003 Mathematica study drew attention to inconclusive academic outcomes for 21st CCLC students, several key opponents emerged (Mathematica Policy Research, 2002). As previously mentioned, the Bush administration immediately proposed a 40% cut in federal aid for 21st CCLC (Gayl, 2004). Even though the cut did not pass and Congress ultimately upheld the funding of the program, the administration continued to push for budget cuts or to flat line funding for several years (Gayl, 2004). According to the Afterschool Alliance newsletter, “While *No Child Left Behind* authorizes \$2.5 billion for 21st CCLC in fiscal year 2007, the President proposed just \$981.16 million. That is \$20 million less than the appropriation in 2002” (Afterschool Alliance, 2007).

In addition to opposition at the federal level, there was also some resistance from the private sector. Mark Dynarksi, the Director of Research for the Mathematica study, stated, "Generally, when we looked across the full spectrum of findings, the patterns don't support the general sense of academic impact" (Education Week, *Study Rekindles Debate on Value of After-School Programs*, 2004). Additionally, Darcy Olson, president of the Goldwater Institute, a think tank in Phoenix, said, "Government should not be putting money into afterschool programs and should instead be concentrating on improving what happens in the regular school day"(Education Week, *Study Critiques Federal After-School Program*, page 10).

Although 21st CCLC confronted obstacles after the release of the 2003 Mathematica study, prominent education coalitions, such as the Afterschool Alliance, issued strong arguments in the program's defense, which enabled it to maintain its current level of funding (P. Lovell, personal communication, November 2, 2009). The basis of the argument from key supporters revolved around the narrow set of data used in Mathematica, which provided an inaccurate picture of the true impact of 21st CCLC. While Mathematica's researchers used the new metrics under NCLB to analyze the academic outputs of 21st CCLC students, the original focus of the program was to provide services for the whole community and "find ways to more efficiently use school resources, especially in rural and inner-city areas, for all citizens all year" (Harvard Family Research Study, 2003). Jen Rinehart, of the Afterschool Alliance, stated "They're taking a pre-NCLB program and using an NCLB measuring stick to determine the quality of the old program," (*EdWeek* article (2004): *Study Rekindles Debate on Value of After-School Programs*).

Moreover, education experts, who had served on an advisory board to the Mathematica evaluation, released a statement in May 2003, which criticized the methodologies used in the Mathematica report ("After-School Report Called Into Question," as cited in "Study Rekindles

Debate on Value of After-School Programs”). That Mathematica study failed to sufficiently measure valuable outputs from the 21st CCLC program provided central proponents of 21st CCLC, such as the Afterschool Alliance, with ammunition to move the program forward.

21st CCLC continues to receive strong bi-partisan support from Congress. According to the Capital Hill Reports website, two of the key champions of the program are Barbara Boxer (Senator, D.-CA) and John Ensign (Senator, R- NV) who consistently vote to support 21st CCLC and have taken the lead to establish a deficit natural reserve fund for the program. Additionally, after Bush proposed flat-funding 21st CCLC for the fourth year in a row, the Afterschool rallied senators and congressmen to lobby support for monetary increases for FY 05. In addition to Senator Boxer, other event guests were Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Hillary Rodham Clinton (D- NY), Elizabeth Dole (R-NC), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Patty Murray (D-WA), Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Debbie A. Stabenow (D-MI) (<http://www.capitolhillreports.com/040209.htm>). Overall, 21st CCLC has wide nets of support from both sides of the political spectrum on Capitol Hill.

In addition to its Capitol Hill supporters, the 21st CCLC program's community-based roots have helped to leverage considerable investments for its program sites. The U.S. Department of Education and the Learning Point Associates report that the typical 21st CCLC grantee has six partners, including community based organizations, faith-based organizations, nationally affiliated non-profits such as YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, and health clinics. This wide array of partners provides additional funding and human capital for each site. (<http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policy21stcclc.cfm>). Overall, the prominence of 21st CCLC on the national, state, and local arenas has cultivated a strong web of support for the program that has helped it to push back on criticisms of its work (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003).

Political Barriers: Obstacles 21st CCLC Faces

Although the 21st CCLC program has enjoyed widespread support and weathered close scrutiny, barriers still exist that could hinder further growth of the program. Most strikingly, the absence of national standards and accountability can create variability in how the program is implemented on both the state and local levels. In order to acquire a deeper understanding of how this challenge manifests itself on the ground level, the state of Georgia provides several noteworthy examples. First of all, in 2006, the state director of 21st CCLC at the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) mismanaged funding and resource allocation. Although the state of Georgia has several metrics in place to determine fund allocation, some state employees appeared to be arbitrarily allocating funds to their local sites. As a result, every 21st CCLC site that received funding in 2006 had to reapply for the grant the following year (Kotras, personal communication, 10/30/09).

In addition to resource mismanagement, the DOE discovered the existence of unethical practices in some of Georgia's 21st CCLC sites in 2009. When the DOE launched an investigation into the Georgia Virtual Schools, which was one of the 21st CCLC sites implementing an academic credit recovery program, it "discovered irregularities...[t]he investigation found grades had been changed late at night and some students were given scores for tests they never took. One student obtained a teacher's password and changed twenty seven classmates' grades" (http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2009/03/21/met_515440.shtml). At the end of the day, the two scandals in Georgia demonstrate that, while widely supported, 21st CCLC still has significant room for improvement.

Opportunities for Growth in 21st CCLC

Despite the shortcomings of some 21st CCLC programs at the state and local level, other sites actively plan and execute best practices, which demonstrate the true potential of 21st CCLC to positively impact student outcomes. Karyl Resnick, the state coordinator of the 21st CCLC program in Massachusetts, states, “What set us apart from the other after-school programs are the connections [in how we] support learning in classroom. We are not child-care or babysitting programs.” Resnick continues to expound upon the best practices used in MA and includes components such as professional development for staff, setting clear goals at sites, and providing a safe environment after-school that supports academic learning (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

A similar theme arises from the Glascock County, Georgia 21st CCLC site, run by Wanda Davis. Continually recognized as one of the premier 21st CCLC sites in Georgia, Davis emphasizes high-standards for staff selection, a strong family and community involvement component, and supplemental academic activities for students (Kotras, personal communication, 10/30/09). In the end, exemplary 21st CCLC sites demonstrate the potential the program has to effectively meet the academic and social needs of students during the after-school hours.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

President George W. Bush's strong emphasis on academic accountability under NCLB shifted the priorities of 21st CCLC away from the original community-based model to a more prominent focus on academic outcomes. According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2003), this shift framed the research for the seminal *Mathematica* study and shaped the way many policymakers view 21st CCLC. Despite *Mathematica*'s inconclusive evidence pertaining to the academic outcomes of students in the 21st CCLC program, the history and research linked with the 21st CCLC initiative underscore that it has had positive impacts on students across the country (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). With this in mind, it is important to continue funding the 21st CCLC program at high levels, while simultaneously thinking about ways policymakers can continue to improve the quality of the programming.

The policy recommendations provided in this section acknowledge that while positive academic outcomes are necessary to increase student achievement, focusing only on these elements does not capture the broad impact 21st CCLC has on other outputs linked with student success (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). As outlined in *Safe and Smart*, after-school programs must strive to increase school attendance, discourage risky behaviors, improve health and nutrition, and heighten family involvement (Pederson, et. al,1998). At the same time, it is important to align community-based services with academic rigor so 21st CCLC can improve the overall success of our nations' students (Community Schools Research Brief, 2009).

Overall, there are three key policy recommendations recommended for improving the quality of 21st CCLC programs. First of all, it is important to reform the current 21st CCLC accountability system in order to gather more comprehensive data set from each site. Secondly, states need to establish clear goals for sites to develop community partnerships. Lastly,

policymakers need to create and implement a set of national programmatic standards for 21st CCLC sites across the nation. By creating key policy levers at the federal and state levels for these recommendations, 21st CCLC sites can work towards implementing the initial community-based goals of the program, which focus on meeting the holistic needs of program participants, while assessing them under the current standards for academic accountability.

Policy Recommendations: Moving 21st CCLC Forward

1. Broadening the Metrics Used To Evaluate the 21st CCLC Program

Currently, states require 21st CCLC sites to report annual outcomes based on metrics such as standardized test scores, grades, and attendance (Davis, personal communication, 11/17/09). Although these metrics provide valuable insight, they are limited because they only evaluate the academic effectiveness of the program. In order to assess the impact of a 21st CCLC on the whole child, the first policy recommendation is for sites to include quantitative metrics that review holistic measures of student success. For example, an analysis completed by the Harvard Family Research Project states that, in addition to assessment outcomes, after-school programs have a positive impact on “better attitudes toward school and higher educational aspirations, higher school attendance rates and less tardiness, less disciplinary action, lower dropout rates...greater on-time promotion, improved homework completion, [and] engagement in learning” (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). Therefore, collecting a more comprehensive set of data around these metrics posits a more accurate view of the impact of the sites on non-academic, yet vital, measures.

2. Strengthening Community Partnerships

The second policy recommendation is for states to call on 21st CCLC sites to create community partnerships that effectively leverage a variety of stakeholders to provide support for students. Although the current era of academic accountability under NCLB mandates that 21st CCLC sites focus heavily on academic achievement, the program originally had deep community-based roots (Gayl, 2004). According to a study about community schools, a concept similar to 21st CCLC because of the community involvement component, “by extending the “web of family, church, and neighborly relationships [students receive] naturally extended instruction and discipline in work and in the conduct of life” (Benson, Harkavy, Johaneck, and Puckett, 2009, pg. 22). Additionally, Wanda Davis, the 21st CCLC project director in Glascock County, Georgia, provides a tangible example of the benefits of partnerships. “Our partnerships with the sheriff’s department, the 4-H center, and local churches allow us to provide additional services and resources to our students we could not provide on our own” (Davis, personal communication, 11/17/09). Emphasizing the importance of community partnerships, a March 2007 report from the *Promising Afterschool Programs Study* states, “when all parties with responsibility for and interests in the welfare of youth engage then in high-quality after-school experiences, they are more likely to succeed in promoting positive development” (Vandell et al., 2007). With this in mind, policymakers need to ensure that the broader range of metrics under the first policy recommendation include community partnerships.

3. National Program Standards for 21st CCLC Sites

In addition to broadening the measures of accountability and refocusing sites on community partnerships in order to meet the needs of the whole child, 21st CCLC should provide a set of national implementation standards that will help to ensure high-quality and

consistent work at each site across the country. According to Dr. Mary Ann Kotras, a regional Communities In Schools coordinator in Georgia, "There is still a great degree of variability between [the quality of] sites," (Kotras, personal communication, 10/30/09).

At present, models of national standards exist in well-respected organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which could help to guide the standards developed for the 21st CCLC program. Because of the similarities between the PTA and 21st CCLC, including academic and social development of students, involvement in schools, and community-based partnerships, the PTA's guidelines could serve as a strong foundation to launch a similar movement of national standards for the 21st CCLC program. The National PTA has six implementation standards, which include the following: "welcoming all families into the school community; communicating effectively; supporting student success, speaking up for every child; sharing power; and collaborating with community" (PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, 2009, pg. 6). Thus, by following the lead of other well-regarded national organizations and implementing national standards, policymakers can ensure each 21st CCLC site strives for the same, high-quality, levels of implementation.

Conclusion: The Potential of 21st CCLC to Impact our Nation's Youth

Overall, the 21st CCLC program represents the only federal support offered to after-school programming that addresses the holistic needs of America's students and must continue to receive support and funding (Gayl, 2004). Davis, who runs a 21st CCLC site in Glascock County, GA, states, "I believe in [21st CCLC] and we should continue to fund them. For our case, I know that it is making a difference and it is worth the money coming into our county" (Davis, personal contact, 11/17/09). Even though the Mathematica study highlighted the

inconclusiveness of the academic impact of the 21st CCLC program, there is a significant need to take other metrics into account (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). The interviews and research conducted reveal that policymakers must examine closely the best practices of 21st CCLC sites, which focus on building strong communities, providing safe places for our children, and positively impacting school-related outcomes such as, attendance, risky behaviors, and crime (Pederson, et.al, 1998). By creating three sets of strong recommendations, 21st CCLC can return to the community roots upon which it was founded, while implementing strong measures of accountability promoted by No Child Left Behind. The successful execution of these measures could ensure that our nation's most vulnerable youth have the supports necessary to succeed.

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