

The academic and social and emotional benefits of participation in 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative, local school and community-based organizations provide students in kindergarten through 12th grade with a safe and supportive environment where they participate in academic enrichment opportunities, get excited about learning new things, and connect with caring mentors before school, afterschool, and during the summer months. 21st CCLC programs serve students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these programs were a vital source of support for underserved communities. Now, with many students having spent significant amounts of time out of the classroom since March 2020, feeling isolated from their teachers and peers, and in need of additional enrichment and learning opportunities, 21st CCLC programs are more essential than ever.

As schools begin to reopen, 21st CCLC programs are well positioned to help students—in particular those who need extra support—take part in hands-on learning, build healthy relationships, explore a diversity of subject areas, and have a safe space to talk about their experiences and emotions. Statewide evaluations of 21st CCLC programs show the holistic set of benefits programs provide, with students in programs demonstrating academic gains, becoming more engaged in learning, and developing social and emotional skills and competencies that will help them in and out of school. This brief provides a snapshot of what the research says about 21st CCLC programs, categorizing findings to demonstrate the benefits programs provide to support the whole child.



21st CCLC steps up during COVID-19

A national October 2020 survey of program providers found that among 21st CCLC programs, almost 2 in 3 providers (65 percent) reported being physically open in at least some capacity; 68 percent were serving youth remotely; 58 percent were serving as a meals site, delivering meals, or distributing other resources to families; and 52 percent were connecting families with community resources.¹ For example, during the 2020-21 school year, the Elkhart Boys & Girls Club in Elkhart, Indiana, is serving students in person through morning and afternoon sessions that include STEM activities, arts programming, music lessons, gardening, and homework help. In Waterville, Kansas, Valley Heights Community Education is responding to the pandemic by providing daily meals and delivering schoolwork to their students, as well as conducting regular check-ins with families. During the summer, they focused on outside learning, physical activity, and community service.

Quick facts on 21st CCLC²

Serves:

- ▶ Approximately **1.7 million students**
- ▶ **381,018** adults and family members
- ▶ **10,125** communities



More than **4 in 5 programs** are located in public school districts



Programs stay open on average **5 days per week, 32 weeks per year**

The 2018-19 national annual performance report of 21st CCLC found that:



Nearly half of regular participating students improved their math (**48%**) and English (**48%**) grades



69% of students increased their rates of homework completion and class participation



62% of students improved their behavior



Promoting academic growth

- ▶ **Improving grades:** In a 2019 evaluation of Washington's 21st CCLC programs, students who consistently attended programs and were in need of academic improvement had higher cumulative GPAs and percentage of credits earned compared to non-attendees.³ In New Mexico, a 2019 evaluation found 29 percent of 21st CCLC participants raised their grade by a full letter, and roughly half of participants (49 percent) who earned below a passing grade raised their grade by the end of the year.⁴
- ▶ **Increasing likelihood of grade promotion:** A 2020 evaluation of the Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) found that students who participated in the 21st CCLC programs for 60 days or more across two years of programming had a 42 percent higher chance of grade promotion than students not in the program. High school students participating in ACE at least 45 days had up to a 127 percent higher chance of being promoted to the next grade level compared to similar students who did not attend 21st CCLC programs.⁵ In a 2019 evaluation of Montana's 21st CCLC programs, almost all students (98 percent) participating in the program advanced to the next grade level.⁶
- ▶ **Helping traditionally underserved students:** A 2018 evaluation of Massachusetts' 21st CCLC programs reported that "...data indicates that 21st CCLC programs may help reduce the opportunity and achievement gap as well as contribute to decreasing the high school drop rate." For example, based on the Survey of Academic Youth Outcomes (SAYO) results, economically disadvantaged students made significantly greater gains in English language arts (ELA) and math compared to their non-economically disadvantaged peers, and English language learners (ELL) in the program made statistically significant greater gains in ELA and critical thinking compared to non-ELL participants.⁷
- ▶ **Stronger standardized test performance:** A 2020 evaluation of Arkansas' 21st CCLC programs showed that, when compared to statewide averages, both 4th and 8th grade 21st CCLC students scored higher on their state assessments in math and English. Among 4th grade 21st CCLC students, 48 percent scored proficient in math versus the statewide average of 33 percent, and 36 percent scored proficient in English, compared to 31 percent statewide. More than one-third of 8th grade 21st CCLC students (35 percent) scored proficient in math and 41 percent scored proficient in English compared to 27 percent and 30 percent statewide, respectively.⁸ In Hawaii, a higher percentage of regularly attending 21st CCLC participants met or exceeded proficiency compared to those who did not attend the program in both English language arts (52 percent vs. 42 percent) and math (41 percent vs. 31 percent).⁹



Keeping kids connected and building relationships

- ▶ **Improving communication and collaboration skills:** A 2020 statewide evaluation of Alaska's 21st CCLC programs found that an overwhelming majority of students who participated in 21st CCLC programs made gains in forming relationships with adults (72 percent), working collaboratively with peers (71 percent), and getting along with other students (66 percent).¹⁰ In Arkansas, youth reported that the program helped them work well with other kids (86 percent) and tell others what they thought even if they disagreed (83 percent).¹¹
- ▶ **Opportunities to expand peer networks:** Evaluations of 21st CCLC programs found that the afterschool programs provide youth opportunities to build their social skills and interact with students they might not otherwise during the school day. In Michigan, 87 percent of students strongly agreed or agreed that their programs helped them make and keep friends, and in Minnesota, 77 percent of youth felt that their 21st CCLC program helped them to make new friends.¹² More than 3 in 4 youth (76 percent) participating in Arkansas 21st CCLC programs reported that the program helped them talk with people they did not know.¹³
- ▶ **Building positive relationships with adults:** A 2019 statewide evaluation of New Jersey's 21st CCLC programs reported that students have strong relationships with adults in the program. Roughly 8 in 10 students agreed that there was an adult in the program who they enjoyed being around (86 percent), who helped them when they had a problem (85 percent), whom they will miss when the program is over (81 percent), whom they can talk to when they are upset (79 percent), and who has helped them find something they are good at (78 percent).¹⁴
- ▶ **Relationships are key to student gains:** A 2019 statewide evaluation of Ohio's 21st CCLC programs found that strong relationships, especially with adults in the program, were important factors in students making gains. Youth who reported strong relationships with adults in the program had higher pre-to-post growth outcomes on youth survey items related to academic identity, interpersonal skills, mindsets, and self-management. The effect sizes were large, with the stronger the relationship reported by youth with adults, the stronger the growth on all four outcome scales.¹⁵



87% of surveyed North Dakota parents with a child participating in a 21st CCLC program agreed that their child's attitude toward school improved as a result of their participation in the program.¹⁶



Engaging, inspiring, and motivating students

- ▶ **Positive impact on engagement and motivation:** A number of statewide evaluations of 21st CCLC programs found that the programs positively impacted student engagement. For example, a 2020 evaluation of Colorado's 21st CCLC programs found that based on teacher reports, among students in need of improvement, an overwhelming majority saw improvements in their classroom participation (73 percent), motivation to learn (66 percent), and attentiveness in class (66 percent). Teachers note that students who attended afterschool programs for the full year made significantly more improvement.¹⁷
- ▶ **Gains in engagement seen across grade levels:** A 2020 statewide evaluation of Kentucky's 21st CCLC programs found that based on teacher surveys, elementary, middle, and high schoolers attending 21st CCLC programs improved their class participation (elementary schoolers by 78 percent, middle and high schoolers by 75 percent), attentiveness in class (elementary schoolers by 74 percent, middle and high schoolers by 73 percent), and motivation to learn (elementary schoolers by 73 percent, middle and high schoolers by 65 percent). Additionally, 82 percent of middle and high school students said that their afterschool program helped them to be more involved in school, and 72 percent said that the program helped them enjoy coming to school more.¹⁸
- ▶ **Engaging underserved students:** A 2020 evaluation of Massachusetts 21st CCLC programs found that, based on teacher reports, historically underserved students in programs made strong gains in engagement in learning. While participants improved overall, economically disadvantaged program participants made greater statistically significant gains in measures of youth interest and active involvement in school and afterschool activities than their more advantaged peers. Black students showed the most growth compared to their White and Hispanic peers, rising from the lowest average score at the start of the year to the highest scores by the end of the year.¹⁹
- ▶ **Reducing unexcused absences and chronic absenteeism, with regular afterschool attendees seeing the greatest improvement:** A 2019 statewide evaluation of the Ohio 21st CCLC program found that students who attended before-school, afterschool, and summer school programs had a statistically significant lower unexcused absence rate than their matched non-participating peers. Students attending programs for 60 days had even lower rates of unexcused absences than those who attended for 30 days.²⁰ During the 2018-19 school year, fewer students who participated in Hawaii's 21st CCLC programs were chronically absent compared to nonparticipants (15 percent vs. 24 percent), with students who regularly attended the program less likely to be chronically absent (13 percent).²¹



Preparing students for life after high school

- ▶ **Developing strong foundational workforce readiness skills:** A 2020 evaluation of Massachusetts' 21st CCLC programs reported that a majority of students improved their relationships with adults (68 percent), critical thinking skills (62 percent), leadership skills (59 percent), ability to self-regulate (57 percent), perseverance (55 percent), and communications skills (54 percent).²² In a 2020 evaluation of Arkansas' 21st CCLC programs, an overwhelming majority of youth reported strong work habits, including following classroom rules (93 percent), practicing good time management (91 percent), finishing their work on time (89 percent), keeping track of their things at school (89 percent), and working well by themselves (87 percent).²³
- ▶ **Building confidence about life after high school:** In a 2020 evaluation of Virginia's 21st CCLC programs, more than 7 in 10 students agreed that the program helped them learn the knowledge and skills needed to be ready for a job or career (76 percent) or helped them learn what is necessary to be ready for trade school or college (71 percent). More than 8 in 10 students also agreed that their afterschool programs sometimes or always taught them skills that helped when they were not in school (84 percent) or taught them about professional behavior (81 percent).²⁴
- ▶ **Helping students find their passions:** A 2019 New Jersey statewide evaluation found that more than 8 in 10 youth reported that their program helped them find out what they are good at doing (86 percent), find out what they like to do (86 percent), find out what is important to them (84 percent), discover what they want to learn more about (84 percent), and think about what they might like to do when they get older (84 percent).²⁵ A 2020 evaluation of Nebraska's 21st CCLC programs found that programs helped middle and high school youth explore new areas of interest. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is "not at all true" and 4 is "completely true," middle and high school youth agreed that it was true that the program helps them explore new ideas (3.11), there are things in the program they feel excited about (3.16), and what they do in the program is important to them (3.06).²⁶



Missouri parents with a child in a 21st CCLC program say it is true that the programs help prepare their child for the future.²⁷

Endnotes

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