

The role of federal and state policy in addressing early childhood achievement gaps: Parent perceptions and student outcomes related to 21st Century Learning Centers programming in the United States ^[1]

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Excerpted from abstract and introduction

Abstract

As policymakers and school communities work to address underlying causes of achievement gaps and access to quality early childhood education, this study considers the use of 21st Century Community Learning Centers to address early childhood education needs on western U.S. state, Idaho. The study sought to understand the relationship between federal and state policies related to out-of-school opportunities to enhance early childhood education. Utilizing data from a statewide evaluation of Idaho's 21st Century Learning Centers, the study examined 92 centers providing after school, before school, or summer programs in grades preschool through the third grade to predominately at-risk children. Data collection included quantitative data from a survey given to parents ($n = 183$), as well as qualitative data collected through site-based interviews, focus groups and observations. Data included a review of historical and current data on participation rates; attendance rates; standardized test scores for program participants in grades PK-3 ($n = 3258$). Data were analyzed for themes and transfer. The study findings provide further insight into understanding possible relationships between U.S. federal and state policy regarding 21st Century Community Learning Centers on both students' outcomes and parent satisfaction. The findings further support the role of out-of-school time (OST) experiences in the larger ecosystem of learning and provides insight into understanding how the OST activities are carried over into family life.

Introduction

As a country, the United States has grappled with how to close the achievement, access and opportunity gaps in our schools, but we also wrestle with our expectation that the traditional school day is the only place where and when children are learning. Decades of research and education policy demonstrate that learning opportunities, family engagement, and development of academic and social-emotional skills also occur after school, before school and during the summer months.

Too many of our children are not ready to gain the skills they need from our educational systems to be successful in their future—either in college or career. They enter school behind, and many will not read at grade level by the end of third grade, or go on to graduate with their peers from high school—not to mention how they might struggle in becoming fully functioning adult citizens able to earn a living to meet a family's needs. Many of these students are at-risk from an early age and often start school lagging behind in their school readiness, never catching up to become college and career ready. "At-risk" is a term often used to describe students, or groups of students, who are considered to have a higher chance of failing academically because of factors related to their life experiences, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other factors (Elbaum et al., 2000 ^[4]). Underserved learners—often those from racial and ethnic minorities, rural communities, and poverty—are overrepresented in the population of students that are not school ready. Researchers and practitioners alike affirm that in addition to families, peers, and schools, high quality, organized out-of-school time activities have the potential to support and promote youth development. Such activities (a) situate children in safe environments; (b) prevent youth from engaging in delinquent activities; (c) teach youth general and specific skills, beliefs, and behaviors; and (d) provide opportunities for youth to develop relationships with peers and mentors (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002 ^[5]). However, disadvantaged youth are less likely than their peers to have access to these learning opportunities, and this inequity further deteriorates their chances for school success (Wright, 2011 ^[6]).

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative is the only federal funding source dedicated exclusively to supporting local after-school, before-school and summer learning programs. Each 21st CCLC program is shaped by state policies and priorities, as well as the local community of each center, to best meet the needs of the students and organizations it serves. In a meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2010) evaluating 69 different out-of-school (OST) programs, student participation in OST learning was

shown to have an, “overall positive and statistically significant impact on participating youth.” The authors went on to demonstrate that programs that followed the SAFE programming structure (sequenced, active, focused and explicit) saw significant increases in youths’ self perceptions, positive social behaviors, school grades and standardized test scores. Further research (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007 [7]; Granger, 2008 [8]; Lauer et al., 2006 [9]; Vandell, 2013 [10]) shows that participation in high-quality OST programs like 21st Century Learning Centers help to close the achievement gap, have positive long-term effects on school attendance and task persistence, have positive effects on school grades and academic work habits, and improves achievement test scores. However, few studies have examined the relationship between 21st CCLC OST programs on early childhood education achievement and family literacy or educational development.

This study examined data from across multiple ($n = 96$) 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) working to address long-standing achievement and opportunity gaps for their students by providing out-of-school time learning, specifically focusing on those providing early childhood education. All centers in the study were located in Idaho where kindergarten is not mandated, nor is all day kindergarten funded. Pre-school is not considered part of the public school system and is often not available in rural communities. Further, statewide data from the Idaho Reading Indicator shows that less than half of Idaho’s students have the basic skills to enter school and be ready to learn when they come to kindergarten (Richert, 2018 [11]). They are not able to recognize basic letters, numbers or colors and many never catch up and read at grade-level by the end of 3rd grade. Lesnick et al. (2010 [12]) explain the importance of reading on grade level by third grade, “Third-grade reading level was shown to be a predictor of eighth-grade reading level and ninth-grade course performance even after accounting for demographic characteristics...it is also shown to be a predictor of graduation and college attendance.” The issues often become amplified in high-poverty districts, where students have less access to academic opportunities and vocabulary outside of school, as well as limited options for childcare, quality early childhood education programs, or resources to support parents’ efforts as their child’s first teacher.

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of OST learning, specifically 21st CCLC programs, on student achievement, as well as explore parent perceptions of the value of the program. The research design utilized data from the administration of Idaho’s statewide assessment for K-3 students known as the Idaho Reading Indicator. The State Department of Education is responsible for collecting and reporting results from the IRI. Staff in local schools record IRI “correct scores” and skill level (i.e., achievement level) for each student in kindergarten through the third grade in the fall and in the spring (Stoneberg, 2016 [13]).

Research Question 1: What was the effect of 21st CCLC programs on student performance on the Idaho Reading Indicator for 2017–2018?

Research Question 2: What is the effect of 21st CCLC programming on early childhood education as perceived by parents?

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