

Summary of Key Findings From the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Integrated Service Delivery Study



WHY THE 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS PROGRAM MATTERS

As the nation's longest running and most significant funding stream for afterschool and summer programming, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program has become a critical vehicle for providing supports and opportunities that promote positive youth development for students and families experiencing poverty. Students participating in 21st CCLC programs each year gain exposure to new concepts and ideas, have opportunities to connect with academic content in applied and relevant ways that support deeper learning and understanding, and develop social and personal skills critical to success in education and in the workforce. Additionally, caregivers and family members participating in 21st CCLC programming have opportunities to develop deeper connections with their child's school community, learn more about how they can support their child's learning and development, and build critical skills that will help along their own life's journey.

An Invitation

We encourage 21st CCLC site coordinators, project directors, school and district leaders, and state coordinators to view the briefs created as part of the 21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery Study as an invitation to think more broadly about the needs and aspirations of the students and families they serve. In reviewing the briefs, we hope that readers will explore what steps could be taken to help integrate 21st CCLC programming into a larger system of supports and opportunities for the populations they serve.



[Shared Vision and Commitment](#)



[Leveraging Grantee Structures to Leverage Capacity](#)



[Developing Relationships and Trust](#)



[Sustainability and Continuity in Expansion of Resources](#)

The 21st CCLC program aspires to provide quality supports and learning opportunities to students during the critical afterschool hours and provide a bridge for learning and development during the summer. ***When done well, afterschool and summer programs have proven critical to helping youth across the country:***



gain access to spaces where they belong and matterⁱ



develop positive mindsets and beliefs about their abilities, including confidence and a sense of agencyⁱⁱ



develop a more expansive set of knowledge and skills from which to draw when connecting with, understanding, and processing school-day content and interacting with their peers in positive, supportive, and responsible waysⁱⁱⁱ



cultivate their interests and future aspirations^{iv}

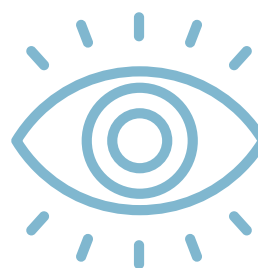
21st CCLC programs have a track record of providing measurable benefits to youth and families on key outcomes. State and local evaluations of the 21st CCLC program have demonstrated consistent, positive effects related to mathematics achievement, school-day attendance, fewer disciplinary incidents, grade promotion, and credits earned toward high school graduation.^v



HOW 21ST CCLC PROGRAMS CAN BUILD ON THIS FOUNDATION TO FURTHER SUPPORT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

It is evident to professionals who work with students and families that things have changed in many communities since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with students and families facing a series of new and more pressing challenges. Higher levels of chronic absenteeism, slow recovery in academic performance, more substantive social and emotional needs, and a more challenging fiscal environment for families created by high inflation have led many schools and youth-serving organizations to reexamine the supports and opportunities they provide to better meet these emerging needs.^{vi}

It is within this context that we launched the **21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery System Study**. Our goal in undertaking the study was to look for examples of 21st CCLC programs that were part of something bigger and more expansive in terms of supporting students and families during this period of new and emergent challenges. Our hypothesis was that 21st CCLC programs could better serve youth and families if they collaborated with other programs, organizations, and networks to **coordinate service delivery** to provide access to a broader range of supports and opportunities. In many respects, we saw this as a logical next step for 21st CCLC programs to take once they had their afterschool and summer learning activities up and running and performing at the desired level of quality. The goal here is to provide students and families with access to a **comprehensive set of wraparound supports and opportunities** that offer multiple points of entry, including through the 21st CCLC program.



We also sought examples of 21st CCLC programs that had become **the social and support hub for their local community**, reflecting the original vision of the program from the late 1990s, when 21st CCLC grants were seen as a vehicle for the creation of community-based service delivery hubs. Some of the 21st CCLC programs represented in the study evolved into community hubs that made schools the key focal point in the community, improved trust and relationships, increased opportunities and services for students and families, and even supported community renewal in some places.

We designed the 21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery System Study to identify what **practices and approaches** support effective implementation of these types of systems and what **enabling conditions** facilitate the capacity of 21st CCLC–funded programs to play a substantive role in these efforts and sometimes even serve as the central entity in coordinating activities and services. The hope is that findings from our study could potentially be replicated by other 21st CCLC grantees that are ready to take this next step in supporting the students and families they serve.

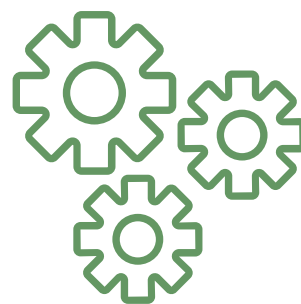
STUDY OVERVIEW AND BRIEFS

We launched the study in early 2022 by recruiting a total of five state education agencies to participate. The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) has a long history of supporting the 21st CCLC program, providing technical assistance, supporting federal data collection, and conducting numerous statewide and local evaluations of the program. We started our recruitment efforts by looking to some of the states we work with, resulting in Illinois, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington joining the study. We added Oklahoma to the study to bring geographic and additional urban-rural diversity to the project.



The study was designed to first gain a broad understanding of the extent to which 21st CCLC programs in our partner states had adopted processes and structures to support integrated service delivery. Then, in subsequent phases, we focused on specific programs that had adopted promising practices and approaches, with each phase of our research providing a more robust picture of how a select group of programs were able to excel in meeting the needs of their students, families, and communities. Each of the study phases is described in greater detail in Appendix A.

Our key findings from the study are summarized in a series of briefs (which can be found on our [website](#)) that outline key enabling conditions and practices that support integrated service delivery and the creation of 21st CCLC–funded sites as community hubs.



21st CCLC programs could **better serve youth and families** if they collaborated with other programs, organizations, and networks to coordinate service delivery to provide access to a broader range of supports and opportunities.

MAJOR STUDY FINDINGS

In the following text box, we highlight some of the key enabling conditions and practices found across the 21st CCLC programs enrolled in this study. We then provide an overview of findings in each key area with links to the briefs that describe each of the key practices in detail.

Key Enabling Conditions and Practices That Support The Building of Integrated Service Delivery Systems

Developing a partnership-oriented mindset and shared vision. Building an integrated service delivery system is not viable unless all parties involved see the value of partnerships in accomplishing a shared vision for supporting students and families.

Maintaining relational trust, which is foundational to the functioning of integrated service delivery systems. Integrated service delivery systems work best when there is relational trust among partners built on partner reliability, capacity to deliver quality services, and flexibility to change and evolve as needed.

Establishing key implementation structures and practices that help inform, develop, and sustain service coordination. Many of these structures depend on the creation and maintenance of relationships with school leadership and staff, other program coordinators, and service providers working within the broader community. For example, being involved in or leading needs and assets assessments, advisory boards, school improvement planning, and backbone organizations all were practices found to support coordination efforts.

Being intentional about what organization is serving as the 21st CCLC grantee. Some organizations, whether it be the school district or a community-based organization, may be in a better position to support efforts to develop and maintain more integrated service delivery systems of which 21st CCLC is a part. Communities are encouraged to have discussions around who is in the best strategic position to be the 21st CCLC grantee in light of goals to develop more coordinated service delivery.

Inviting the community into the school. Some 21st CCLC grantees have found ways to bring the broader community into the school, which has had the net effect of supporting a broader vision for community renewal. For example, holding social events, recruiting community members to staff programming, and creating leadership opportunities for older youth in the program all helped to support the community renewal vision of some programs.

Embracing new opportunities and committing to sustainability. Some 21st CCLC programs were able to expand their service delivery capacity by embracing new opportunities to support students and families, like taking on an adult education program or contracting with the school district to provide social and emotional support to students during the school day. In other cases, we found examples of districts that were deeply committed to sustainability and worked hard to braid funding streams to ensure service continuity over time.

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Developing a partnership-oriented mindset and shared vision. For any meaningful progress to be made in developing more integrated service delivery systems, it is critical that both district and school leadership adopt a philosophy that acknowledges the need to develop, nurture, grow, and sustain cross-program and cross-sector partnerships to expand access to supports and opportunities for students and families. “We can’t do this alone” was a key quote from an administrator associated with one of the programs our team visited during the study. School leaders with this philosophy understand schools as a platform for whole-child development and recognize that [relational trust and partnerships](#) are critical to supporting this development process. This works best when the task of establishing the vision is a [collaborative effort](#), not driven by any one person or organization. Further, the day-to-day work of partnership and collaboration helps lay the foundation for the shared vision to take root and thrive.

Maintaining relational trust, which is foundational to the functioning of integrated service delivery systems. A shared vision for child and family well-being and development can be brought to fruition only if [relational trust](#) is fostered among all partners represented in an initiative. To establish and maintain relational trust, it is critical to invest in formal and informal communication structures and create space for partners to be present in schools. We found that relational trust hinges on the ability of partners to be reliable, have sustained capacity to provide high-quality activities and services for students and families, and be responsive to shifting needs by modifying approaches to service delivery and developing new supports and opportunities. Districts and school leaders have a key role to play in this process as well by helping to preserve partnerships characterized by high levels of relational trust and effectiveness, which includes making sure principals who see the underlying value of cross-sector partnerships and embrace collaborative leadership are assigned to schools with thriving partnerships.

Establishing key implementation structures and practices that help inform, develop, and sustain service coordination. When seeking to [coordinate the 21st CCLC program with other programs and activities](#) within a school, it is critical for site coordinators to build and strengthen relationships with other program coordinators and staff



working inside the school who provide other activities, supports, and services for students and families. This relationship-building work includes developing processes with these other program coordinators to refer 21st CCLC students and families to those non-21st CCLC activities (and vice versa) and share program updates and data that will enhance the provision and coordination of services.

Several processes appear to provide the conditions for success, including using a school’s improvement plan as a resource for identifying programs and services that may be complementary to the activities being provided in the 21st CCLC program. Additionally, reoccurring needs and assets assessments and the creation of advisory boards can create opportunities for school stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers) and representatives from other programs to weigh in on the supports and opportunities that should be coordinated. Finally, [backbone organizations](#) can be an especially effective approach to organizing youth and family-serving organizations in a community around a shared vision for well-being and positive development.



Being intentional about what organization is serving as the 21st CCLC grantee. We found that the decision about what [organization will serve as the actual 21st CCLC grantee](#) can be a facilitating factor in building more integrated service delivery systems. ***In some cases, we found community-based organizations were in the best position to be the grantee given:***



structures that supported greater coordination and stability over time, including nonprofit organizations created specifically to serve a given school district



a capacity to support a regional approach to service delivery, which resulted in greater economies of scale when it came to developing broader partnerships to expand services to schools



a plan to expand access to other supports and opportunities to students and families through other programs managed by the organization, including early childhood, economic assistance, adult education, and child care programs

In other cases, we found some **school districts** were well poised to support the development of integrated service delivery systems given a vision for braiding various funding streams to provide program and service continuity over time and expand access to non-21st CCLC-funded supports. We also found many examples of school districts that relied on a [community schools framework](#) to support the development and maintenance of an integrated service delivery system.



Inviting the community into the school. Some of the programs we studied were especially effective at becoming the service and support hub in their community and intentionally used the 21st CCLC grant to instantiate a vision for [community renewal](#). Sites in our study that embraced this strategy with their 21st CCLC funds were motivated by the goal of building trust and a greater sense of collective responsibility for supporting the development of the community's youth. Observed primarily in rural communities we studied, grantees invited the community in through:



holding events that resulted in the school being seen as the hub for the social life of the community, providing a place for a wide segment of the community to gather, connect, and socialize



recruiting community members with specialized skills or knowledge to play an active role in staffing programming, making them feel needed and supporting a sense of purpose toward supporting the community's youth



engaging older youth from the community to staff programming, offering them leadership opportunities and skill development that will aid their transition to college or the workforce, economic assistance, adult education, and child care programs

These strategies both cultivated a real and tangible sense of partnership between the school and community in developing youth and made the school the hub of social life and a source of pride for the community.

Embracing new opportunities and committing to sustainability. We also learned about how some organizations used 21st CCLC funding and a commitment to addressing the emerging needs of students and families [to develop a wider funding base](#) from which to support sustainable integrated

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service delivery. For example, one grantee started with just 21st CCLC funding but eventually added contracts supported by other funding streams to provide a variety of adult education and workforce development services as well as social, emotional, and behavioral supports during the school day. Many of these funding and service enhancements were driven by being attentive to emerging needs in the school and community, willing to develop and pilot new approaches, and committed to identifying new funding to support programs and services that effectively addressed these emergent needs.

We also observed a **district** that thought deeply about program and service sustainability and aggressively sought new funding to sustain and grow the supports and opportunities provided through its integrated service delivery system. Working with key partners, the district adopted a proactive approach to identifying opportunities to integrate multiple funding streams toward common goals. The superintendent and multiple district-level staff regularly collaborated to identify diverse funding streams and integrate those funding streams to support and sustain programs or initiatives, while ensuring staff who know the community and families are able to remain in their roles over time. To help other programs consider how they might follow a similar path, we have tried to identify other common funding streams that programs may want to tap into as well.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Taking the first step can be challenging, but we think that 21st CLCC programs can start by simply sharing the briefs highlighted in this document with their broader team, setting aside time to review them, and then meeting to identify those strategies and approaches that may make sense to pursue given the local context. It is quite possible many teams will find they are already implementing many of these practices, providing an opportunity to celebrate the progress that has been made, while also identifying new steps that can be taken to continue building out a more integrated service delivery system.

Although the study has officially ended, we are committed to supporting this work.

If you have questions for our team, have feedback about this work, or want someone to discuss these strategies with you in greater detail, **please feel free to reach out to the study team at 21stCCLCStudy@air.org.**

We would be happy to connect.

i Akiva et al. (2013); Auger et al. (2013); Durlak & Weissberg (2007); Kauh (2011); Larson & Dawes (2015); Miller (2007); Naftzger & Sniegowski (2018); Traill et al. (2013).

ii Beymer et al. (2018); Larson & Angus (2011); Larson & Dawes (2015); Naftzger & Sniegowski (2018); Nagaoka (2016).

iii Black et al. (2008); Durlak & Weissberg (2007); Durlak et al. (2010); Jones et al. (2017); Jones & Kahn (2017); Little & Pittman (2018); McCombs et al. (2017); Payton et al. (2008); Naftzger et al. (2023); Smith et al. (2016).

iv Barker et al. (2014); Beymer et al. (2018); Lyon et al. (2012); Naftzger et al. (2018); Naftzger & Sniegowski (2018); Renninger & Hidi (2011); Wang & Billington (2016).

v Devaney et al. (2016); Huang & Wang (2012); Naftzger et al. (2012); Naftzger et al. (2014); Naftzger et al. (2015); Naftzger & Liu (2019).

vi Arnold (2020); Mury et al. (2021).



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Appendix A: Study Phases

There were **3 distinct phases** to the 21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery Study.

Phase 1

We began the study by surveying existing 21st CCLC site coordinators in each of the five states in the spring of 2022 with the goal of understanding the processes and structures that may have been related to enhanced coordination of activities and services for students and families. *The survey questions covered the following topic areas:*

- Program objectives and activities
- Presence and role of advisory committees
- Coordination efforts
- How centers assess and track needs
- Alignment to other initiatives
- Changes to programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

A summary of key findings from the survey can be found [here](#).



We then used the survey, as well as recommendations from 21st CCLC state coordinators, to identify a total of 30 centers in each of the five states that appeared to demonstrate enhanced service coordination and integration with the school or community.

Phase 2

In the fall of 2022, our research team conducted virtual interviews with project directors and site coordinators from the 30 centers to understand their roles in supporting integrated and coordinated service delivery. We explored how these centers engaged with their communities and whether they were part of a broader, coordinated delivery system operating at the school or community level. *These interviews informed an initial set of briefs that include strategies and practices used by these 21st CCLC centers to support more integrated service delivery systems:*

- [Structuring Grantees for Community Context](#)
- [Coordinating Service Provision to Facilitate Access to Resources](#)
- [Expanding the Pool of Available Resources](#)



Phase 3

Using what we learned from the interviews, we selected 12 of these centers to visit, where we observed programming, administered youth experience surveys, conducted focus groups with key stakeholders within the school and across the community, and conducted additional targeted interviews to better define key enabling conditions, strategies, and approaches related to supporting more integrated service delivery systems. *Findings from these data collection activities resulted in the following set of briefs in which we highlight individual grantees and centers to provide examples of coordinated service delivery and engagement with the community:*

- [Relational Trust](#)
- [Community Renewal](#)
- [The Role of the Backbone Organization in Strengthening 21st Century Community Learning Centers](#)
- [Leveraging Grantee Capacity for Sustainability](#)

