Executive Summary

Study Background and Overview

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program is a federal program authorized in 1994 under Title IV, Part B, of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (*ESEA*), as amended. The program was originally intended to provide funding to school districts to support continuing education and lifelong learning opportunities to children and adults to help keep the country's workforce competitive for the 21st century. The program's authorizing statute was amended by the reauthorization of *ESEA* in 2002 to provide before- and after-school and summer academic enrichment opportunities for children, particularly children attending low-performing public schools, and to eligible private school students. The goal of the program is to help students meet local and state academic standards in core subjects, such as reading and mathematics. In addition to adding to academic content, programs may also provide youth development activities, drug and violence prevention, technology education, art and music activities, character education, counseling and recreation. The federal program is administered by the United States Department of Education, which awards grants to states by formula. States, in turn, award subgrants to eligible entities on a competitive basis. Eligible entities include education agencies, community-based organizations and other entities operating in either school or community settings.

The previous national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (Dynarski et al., 2003; James-Burdumy et al., 2005), which examined centers funded under the pre-2002 legislative authority, found that the centers did not focus on academic achievement and had no effects on participants' academic outcomes. These findings raised questions about the level of program quality in after-school programs. The requirements changed to focus more on academics, so a study conducted today of program impacts might not find the same results.

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education's Policy and Program Studies Service contracted with SRI International and its partner, Policy Studies Associates, to undertake an evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers The following evaluation questions informed this study:

1. What is the nature of activities in centers that are designed to promote the academic development of students?
2. How do centers vary with respect to regular attendance?
3. How do center leaders staff their centers, coordinate with other service providers and use data to improve programming?

The sources of data for the study were surveys and site visits. A sample of 516 center directors intended to be nationally representative of centers offering academic activities completed a written survey in the 2006–07 school year. A subsample of administrators and program staff members from 122 centers completed a more in-depth telephone survey on attendance and staff characteristics in the same school year. Site visits in fall 2006 and spring 2007 provided data on the nature of instruction to compare with the survey data; the visits also provided observational data on instruction and student participation. The study team interviewed program staff members and observed after-school programming at 12 sites (11 served elementary

school students; one served middle school students). The site visit data are not nationally representative and observation protocols used have not been related to any outcomes of importance to the program. The study also used grantee- and center-level data collected by the 21st CCLC program office at the U.S. Department of Education, through the Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS) database, to identify the basic center characteristics nationwide and to construct the survey and case study samples.

The study provides descriptive information on the 21st CCLC program; it does not provide information on program outcomes or impacts. In addition, the study's original sampling strategy and its reliance on self-reported data from surveys limit the generalizability of the findings and provide no basis for making causal inferences. To ensure that all centers surveyed could respond to questions about academics, the sampling plan limited the sample to centers that were funded at the time of the study, and that offered instruction in reading, mathematics and technology; thus, the sample was not nationally representative of all 5,122 centers funded at the time of the study. To address this limitation, the data were poststratified to reflect the full population of centers. Respondents' self-reported answers to survey questions may reflect unreliable memory of past events and may include responses on academic instruction that center staff considered socially desirable. This report presents findings on academic instruction only for centers serving elementary school students in which the study team collected observation data. Findings on academic instruction for centers serving middle and high school students are reported in Appendix A.

Key Findings

This report on the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program focuses on the implementation of reading and mathematics activities, student attendance and hiring and retaining qualified staff in centers from which data were obtained.

Nature and Quality of Reading and Mathematics Activities

The program statute requires that centers focus on academics and use research-based strategies for instruction. The law requires that students participate in academic activities at a frequency that is "sufficient to influence their learning."

According to grantee performance data, nearly all centers funded offered reading[1] and mathematics activities.

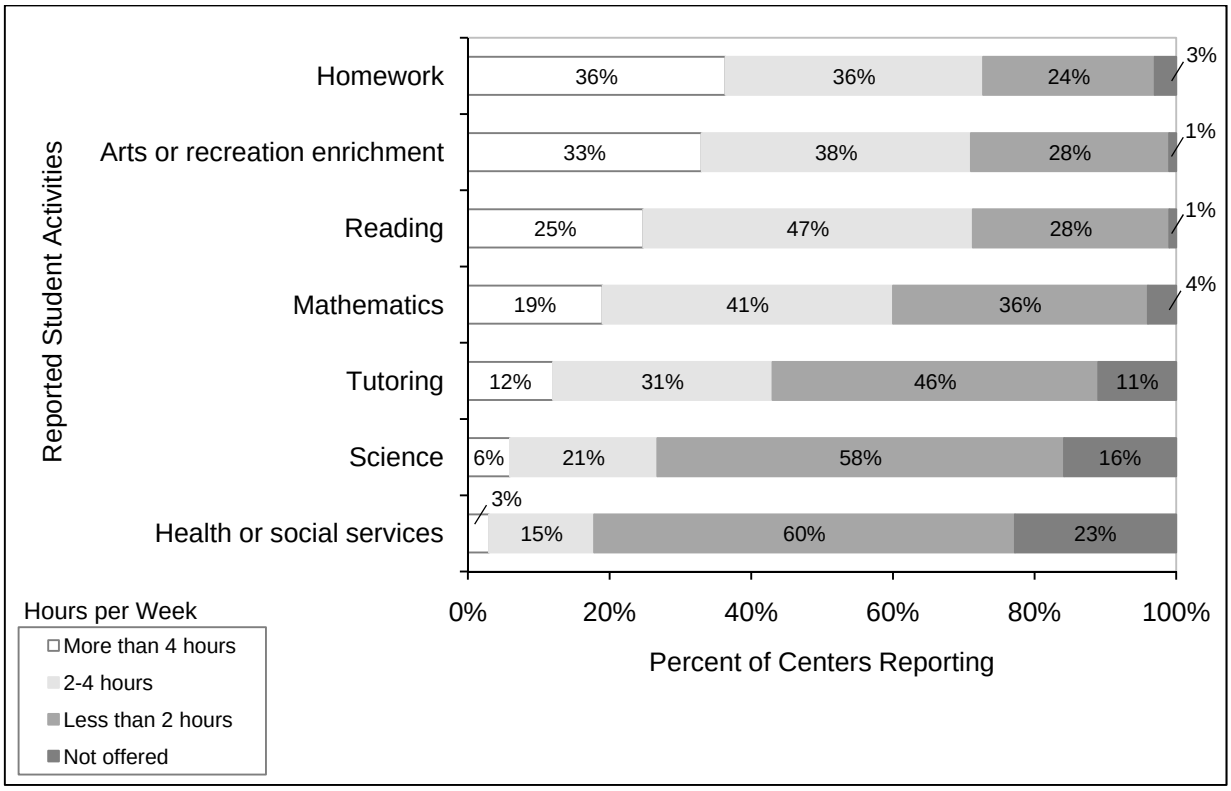
Ninety-eight percent of all centers funded as of the 2006–07 school year (the time of the study) reported that they offered activities in reading, and 94 percent of all centers offered activities in mathematics. Whether students are required to participate in these activities, however, varies by center.

Three-quarters of the centers reported that a typical student participated in reading activities (75 percent) and mathematics activities (81 percent) for less than 4 hours per week.

Centers serving elementary school students reported that the average student spent the most amount of time per week doing homework in a group setting (36 percent) or participating in arts or recreation activities (33 percent) (Exhibit ES-1). One-quarter of centers reported that a typical student received instruction in reading or practiced reading skills, and 19 percent of centers indicated that a typical student engaged in mathematics activities for more than 4 hours per week. Thirty-six percent of centers reported that a typical student worked on homework in a group setting (which could also include reading and mathematics activities), and 33 percent said that the typical student was involved in arts/recreation activities for more than 4 hours per week. Because centers were open for about 16 hours per week, on average, student participation for 4 hours per week in a particular activity represented 25 percent of the available time.

[1] Reading enrichment activities are defined as structured activities designed to build students' literacy skills. Reading enrichment may include scheduled time for independent student reading, writing and literacy enrichment activities but not homework assistance. However, homework assistance activities could include reading activities.

Exhibit ES-1
Percentage of Centers Serving Elementary School Students That Reported Participation in Activities by a Typical Student, by Type of Activity and Amount of Time of Engagement per Week



Note: Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.
Source: National Survey, Item 5.
n = 389
Exhibit reads: Thirty-six percent of centers serving elementary school students reported that a typical student participated in homework activities for more than 4 hours per week.

A majority of centers serving elementary school students reported that reading activities included the five essential components of reading instruction.

Many centers serving elementary school students reported emphasizing comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonics and phonemic awareness in at least some activities. Seventy-four percent of centers serving elementary school students reported that they focused on comprehension in all or most instructional activities in reading, compared with 52 percent that concentrated on phonics skills in all or most activities. Observational data were consistent with the pattern reported by centers serving elementary school students: 86 percent of observed activities focused on comprehension, compared with 46 percent that focused on phonics.

However, the observation data were collected from a small number of purposively sampled sites.[2] Thus the comparison may not be useful.

Centers reported that mathematics activities focused on basic skills.

Seventy-one percent of centers surveyed serving elementary school students reported stressing operations with whole numbers in all or most mathematics activities. Centers serving elementary school students also reported that they were more likely to engage students in tasks that required simple rather than complex problem solving. Sixty-eight percent of centers reported asking students to practice basic facts in all or most instructional activities in mathematics. Observational data from a small, purposive sample of case study sites were consistent with the pattern of emphasizing basic mathematics facts: 83 percent of observed activities involved practice with basic facts.

Observers in case study sites found that staff providing instruction used active teaching strategies in academic activities, communicating goals clearly to students in most activities.

However, staff were more likely to use multiple teaching strategies in reading than in mathematics. Staff providing instruction communicated the goals, purposes and expectations of activities to students more often in mathematics activities (89 percent) than in reading activities (60 percent). Staff providing instruction used multiple strategies in 22 percent of the mathematics activities observed, compared with 53 percent of the reading activities observed.

Student Attendance in Center Activities

Researchers have linked regular participation to better outcomes for students in after-school programs (e.g., Lauer et al., 2006). Although ED's annual performance reporting guidelines define regular attendance as 30 days or more per year, the number of days required to have an effect on academic achievement is not known.

Centers reported that about half of their students attended roughly 2 days a week or more.

The study team asked a random subset of 140 centers in the study to report on student attendance and participation. Just 75 of the 119 centers (63 percent) that completed surveys indicated they could track these data. The centers that could track attendance indicated that 44 percent of all center students attended 60 days (roughly 2 days per week) or more in the last year.

[2] It is important to note that the study team asked center directors to obtain these data from someone familiar with the activities, but they may have responded without consulting an expert. Additionally, center directors may have had reasons to provide socially desirable responses to a U.S. Department of Education (ED) survey.

More than half of all centers reported having policies that required students to attend at least 2 days a week, but attendance policies were not associated with greater attendance.

Centers' attendance policies varied. About half of all centers (56 percent) had policies requiring student attendance at least 2 to 3 days per week in order to remain enrolled in the after-school program.[3] Thirty-eight percent of centers reported requiring attendance daily. Twenty-six percent did not require attendance. There were no significant differences in attendance requirements between school-based and nonschool-based centers. A higher percentage of centers serving elementary school students (41 percent) were more likely to have policies requiring attendance than those centers not serving this age group. In contrast, 31 percent of centers serving middle school students and 22 percent of centers serving high school students required attendance every day. Beyond basic attendance requirements, more than half of the centers required the participation of all students in specific academic activities, including homework help (73 percent), reading activities (60 percent), mathematics activities (58 percent) and tutoring (14 percent).

In centers that required attendance, 66 percent of students attended for more than 30 days; 62 percent of students attended for the same duration in centers that did not require attendance. No relationship was found between any kind of attendance policy and actual attendance for centers overall or for centers serving elementary school students. For the middle grades, centers that required attendance every day had higher attendance than those that did not require attendance. In high school, centers that required attendance 2 to 3 days per week had higher attendance than those that did not require attendance.

Although attendance rates varied little by center type, elementary school students were more likely to attend center programming than older students.

The pattern of higher attendance for elementary-serving centers than for secondary-serving centers mirrors that of the previous national evaluation.

Centers that served elementary school students and had adequate tracking systems reported that 48 percent of students attended 60 days or more in the 2005–06 school year, or roughly 2 days per week. Centers serving the middle grades indicated that 36 percent of students attended this often, and centers serving high school students cited 30 percent of their students' meeting this attendance level. Researchers conducting the previous national evaluation found a similar pattern of results for elementary school students but not for middle school students: In their study, 55 percent of elementary students attended 51 or more days, but just 20 percent of middle school students attended that often (Dynarski et al., 2004). Their study used different methods to study attendance, however.

[3] Although requiring attendance was not defined on the survey, respondents may have varied in their interpretations of this question, depending upon the consequences attached to nonattendance; therefore, data are included in a separate question about consequences of nonattendance. "Require attendance" may mean that center directors have a rule that only students who attend five days per week may enroll in the program; in other instances, requiring attendance could simply mean to center directors that there is a norm that students will attend regularly.

Organizational Supports for Instructional Quality

Offering high-quality instruction in reading and mathematics requires recruiting, developing and retaining high-quality staff, as well as developing policies and programs that attract and retain students and reflect students' academic needs.

Centers reported that they relied primarily on part-time staff, who were unlikely to receive benefits from their work in the center. This latter finding is not surprising, as the centers are open for an average of only 16 hours per week.

Seventy-six percent of program staff members in centers who led instructional activities reported working fewer than 20 hours per week. Centers infrequently offered job benefits for part-time staff members. Fourteen percent of centers reported offering a retirement savings plan to part-time staff, 11 percent offered paid time off for vacation and sick leave, 8 percent offered health insurance and 4 percent offered tuition reimbursement. It is important to note that part-time staff may include individuals who have full-time teaching positions in addition to working at the 21st CCLC center.

To provide professional development to staff, about half of centers reported offering opportunities through training courses or conferences.

Centers indicated that the school-day teachers they employed may have had increased opportunities for staff development through activities offered by their districts and schools than did other types of center employees. Sixty-two percent of centers offered other paid training or professional development to full-time staff, and 55 percent did so for part-time staff. Fifty-three percent of centers offered paid conference attendance to full-time staff; 39 percent offered this opportunity to part-time staff. In the case studies, center directors in school-based programs said they relied on professional development opportunities the staff received through the district. They also reported that they encouraged staff to share their ideas for innovative programming through weekly staff meetings that served as school-based professional development opportunities.

Across all centers, 29 percent of staff had worked at the center for less than 1 year.

About half of centers (48 percent) reported that the primary reason for staff turnover was graduation from school or completion of a program of study. Other commonly reported reasons for staff turnover were lack of benefits and the centers' inability to offer full-time positions.

Centers reported that more than two-thirds of staff providing instruction in reading and mathematics had prior experience as certified classroom teachers or as instructional specialists in reading or mathematics.

Fifty-five percent of the staff who provided instruction in reading or mathematics had been or were, at the time of the study, regular classroom teachers, and 23 percent had been instructional specialists in reading or mathematics. Twenty-three percent of staff providing instruction in reading or mathematics were currently or had served as classroom aides.

Centers reported that nearly two-thirds of reading and mathematics instructors had a bachelor's degree or higher (64 percent for reading and 63 percent for mathematics).

Centers reported that a little more than a third of their instructors reported having only a bachelor's degree (32 percent for reading and 33 percent for mathematics).

A majority of centers reported using assessment data to improve existing program offerings and evaluate program success.

Seventy-one percent of centers reported having access to whole-school state assessment data. In addition, more than four-fifths reported that they received state assessment results for individual students at their centers (83 percent in reading and 82 percent in mathematics). Centers said that they used a variety of data to assess student academic growth, make program adjustments or evaluate program success periodically. Almost half (47 percent) of centers noted that once or twice a year they used results from tests administered at the students' school, while 34 percent of centers said that written reports from students' teachers were used to assess academic growth once or twice annually.

About 40 percent of centers reported some involvement with supplemental educational services (SES). Like 21st Century Community Learning Centers, SES is intended to provide after-school academic activities to students. A small percentage (9 percent) of centers said they coordinated their activities with SES providers. Fifteen percent of centers reported being authorized to provide SES themselves.

On average, each center that was an SES provider reported offering supplemental instructional services to 38 students in reading and mathematics. Just 9 percent of all centers reported coordinating with one or two providers, and only 5 percent of all centers reported that their coordination activities focused on aligning schedules with the providers, while 4 percent indicated they coordinated their academic support activities with the providers.

Just under one-third of all centers reported that coordination with staff from the school-day instructional program was a challenge to implementing high-quality programming. However, the percentage was higher for nonschool-based centers.

Lack of information about students' academic needs, school-day teachers' lack of responsiveness to requests from after-school staff for information and lack of information about the school-day curriculum were cited as barriers to implementing high-quality programming for 22 percent to 32 percent of all centers. Barriers to obtaining information about student needs were greater for nonschool-based centers than for school-based centers. Thirty-six percent of nonschool-based centers reported lack of information as a barrier, compared to 20 percent of school-based centers. Barriers were also greater for nonschool-based centers with respect to responsiveness of school staff: 39 percent of nonschool-based centers identified lack of responsiveness as a barrier, compared to 29 percent of school-based centers.

Conclusions

Survey data and site observations indicate that 21st Century Community Learning Centers focused on reading and mathematics enrichment. Compared with the breadth of reading skills emphasized, mathematics instruction covered a narrower range of basic skills. Centers reported that 44 percent of students attended 60 days or more in the last year, which amounts to roughly 2 days per week. Elementary school students attended after-school activities for more days in the school year than did middle and high school students. About half of the centers reported using data for a variety of purposes, including program evaluation and ongoing review of programming activities. The majority of centers reported having access to state assessment data results on individual students and many reported using this and other information to inform program practice.

Although there were few differences between school-based and nonschool-based centers, school-based centers were more likely to report emphasizing higher-order skills such as asking students to make predictions about something they were reading and talking or writing about answers to questions related to something they had read. At the same time, nonschool-based centers had students read teacher-selected books more often than school-based centers did.

The findings of this report suggest three challenges that centers face in implementing their programs: (a) staff departures after graduating from school or completing a program of study, as the lack of benefits makes it difficult to retain high-quality staff; (b) a lack of up-to-date information about students' individual needs and (c) low attendance rates, the remedy for which requires more than simply having attendance policies.

The study did not directly measure instructors' knowledge or skills, but future studies could examine detailed measures of instructor knowledge to predict differences in instructional quality. Future studies could also examine the content of professional development provided for center staff. Finally, future work that examines the quality of reading programming could focus on how best to capture information on instruction in after-school programs since this study had challenges in this area. Future studies could also identify effective practices for improving attendance levels among participants.