



Research Brief

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program has called for partnerships between schools and both community-based and faith-based organizations for over a decade, as have other U.S. Department of Education initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods and the Full-Service Community Schools Program. In addition, as students need more services and school budgets are cut, educators are becoming more aware of the need to find additional support.

Both schools and partner organizations need to collaborate with the 21st CCLC staff to design a strategic approach to ensure that they develop, modify, or continue strong partnerships that benefit students. This research brief describes the benefits of partnerships and highlights some of the elements of strong high-quality partnerships, most notably relationships and evaluation.

Partnerships can be formed between 21st CCLC programs, schools and a wide variety of organizations such as businesses, local universities, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations. The 21st CCLC project director, school staff, or a local organization representative can initiate and lead a partnership. While many partnerships focus on helping students improve academically or socially, the local community can derive benefits also.

Benefits of Partnerships

Because student achievement is the primary goal for schools, many partnerships focus on improving student achievement, especially in reading and mathematics. These partnerships can enhance the regular school day to support student achievement. Yet, out-of-school time community partnerships, ones formed through the 21st CCLC program, can provide additional benefits. These programs can increase students' access to "non-traditional sources of instruction," the local community, and to projects that challenge them to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems (Smith & Van Egeren, 2008).

Beyond student achievement, partnerships can improve students' social competence and strengthen their ties to their local community. Partnerships can even benefit the community. For example, in a Denver Public Schools evaluation of an out-of-school time program approximately 90 percent of the students surveyed reported that the program improved their social interaction skills and improved their self-confidence (Denver Public Schools, 2010). A school-community partnership for middle school students showed gains in youth development of social competence (Buote & Berglund, 2010). Hands (2008) found that community partners can support schools and help improve student skills and promote civic responsibility. Benefits to the community include having responsible community members and possibly re-examining negative stereotypes of youth (MetLife Foundation, 2007).

Partnerships can also benefit school staff. To meet the many needs that face urban students, families, and teachers, a university teacher education program established a continuous presence in an urban school. The program moved into a school that served students from two housing



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projects. This direct presence enabled the program to build trust and enhance school-community collaboration. Additionally, they provided stability for teachers, parents, and the community during periods of rapid administrator turnover (Noel, 2008).

Relationships and Quality

Solid collaborations that support students and their families do not happen by chance. They require planning, coordination, and a sincere willingness by each party to understand the valuable resources collaboration offers.

High-quality partnerships between out-of-school time program providers and the regular school day teachers seem to depend on relationships. The more successful partnerships are mutually beneficial, integrate and complement their services, and create transformative relationships to support student academic success (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010; Little 2009). These kinds of relationships are intentional and crucial, as they directly support program quality and promote successful youth outcomes.

The importance of relationships is evident in quality partnerships. Bosma, Sieving, Ericson, Russ, Cavender, & Bonine (2010) identified 10 themes related to a quality partnership. These included communication, shared resources, shared decision-making, and recognition of other partners' priorities. If schools and partners do not have solid working relationships, it could be difficult to communicate, share, and consider which in turn could lead to weak partnerships.

Partnerships that include parents create another level of support for schools and students. In a study on relationships and student proficiency in mathematics Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo (2010) found that the relationship between members of the school community helped to predict math proficiency. When math related practices were better implemented by families and community partners, parents had stronger support for partnership programs. This strong support helped to predict math proficiency.

Another important relationship to consider is that with the students. While the students are the primary recipients of partnership programs, like those provided through 21st CCLC projects, students can also be more directly involved in those partnerships. In a case studies of five successful community partnerships, Lawson and colleagues (2007) observed adult roles, responsibilities, and relationships with youth that could drive youth engagement in partnership programs. In one case, one youth and one adult co-led partnership councils. In another case, youth leaders worked for the partner program. Partnership staff evaluated the youth and the youth contributed to the partnership evaluation. Yet, in another case youth served on funding allocation committees and voted on funding decisions.

Evaluating Partnerships



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To effectively understand and manage any program requires information. This is equally true when trying to understand the success of a partnership. Without data there is no way to discover how or why the partnership is actually working. Consequently, the quality of the partnership cannot be determined. Alternatively, program evaluation can support strong partnerships.

In a study of efforts to develop high-quality partnerships in over 300 U. S. schools, Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004) found that elementary schools had greater support from teachers, parents and communities than secondary schools. Moreover, the well-supported schools that evaluated their programs reported higher- quality partnerships.

Evaluation can involve calculating basic statistics such as averages or frequencies and discussing their importance. Other evaluation approaches, such as conducting an experiment on a new program are more complex. Nevertheless, all evaluations require data. McCombs, Orr, Bodilly, Naftel, Constant, Scherer, & Gershwin (2010) studied how out- of-school time program providers and policymakers used management information systems. In all of the cities studied, the researchers found that the information systems provided data that the cities used to understand their programs and participants. Examples of data included out-of-school time enrollment and attendance as well as student demographics.

Another important finding from McCombs and colleagues (2010) was that management information systems could be used to manage contracts which enabled cities to focus on program quality. They also found that different cities had different types of data-sharing agreements. Some shared reports while others linked data systems. All agreements helped representatives from different agencies coordinate their efforts.

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