



21st Century Community Learning Centers
Lessons From the Field:
Serving All Students, Including Students With Disabilities



Topic Guide 9

Addressing Individual Needs and Engaging All Learners

After reading this guide, you'll be able to...

- ✓ Identify individual student needs, strengths and interests.
- ✓ Plan differentiated supports for the 21st CCLC environment.
- ✓ Incorporate strategies that engage all learners.

Tools in this guide include...

- ✓ An action planning checklist, with links to selected resources.

Meeting Individual Student Needs: Where to Start

What does this particular student need, at this moment, in this environment? What adjustments can we make to our program structure, environment and activities to give this student an opportunity to participate as fully as possible? What individual supports can we offer? What options or choices can we provide for various activities?

When 21st CCLC practitioners ask these questions, they are well on their way to creating an inclusive program — one that addresses the needs of all students by respecting the needs, interests and strengths of each individual. Making sure each child is included in a meaningful way requires intent, planning and follow-through. Helpful steps include getting to know students individually; talking with their families, teachers and others who work with them; and learning through trial and observation what works best. Simply knowing a child's diagnosis, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, speech or language impairment, specific learning disability, or something else, does not provide enough information to address individual needs.



YOU FOR YOUTH

All *Lessons From the Field* guides on inclusion, as well as other professional learning and technical assistance tools for 21st CCLCs, are available on the U.S. Department of Education's You for Youth (Y4Y) website at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

“We are constantly looking for specific techniques,” says Maridel Perdomo, Surround Care Director at Gardner Pilot Academy in Boston, “but in reality the only way that we can truly help students is through observations and coming up with a specific solution for a specific child. One size does not fit all.”

For students with IEPs or Section 504 plans, those documents can provide valuable information on modifications that take individual needs and abilities into account. Just keep in mind that they are written for an academic setting, and some elements may not apply to the 21st CCLC environment.

Providing Differentiated Supports for the 21st CCLC Context

In deciding which supports are appropriate for students with disabilities, educators usually consider content (what is being taught), process (how it is taught) and products (how students demonstrate their learning). For 21st CCLCs, there is a fourth consideration that should not be overlooked: context.¹ When practitioners consider all four factors and alter an activity or environment to ensure that a particular student can participate, they are providing “differentiated supports.”

Sometimes a support that is needed during the school day is not necessary in the 21st CCLC environment, and vice versa. No matter how well a 21st CCLC program is aligned with the school day, the two settings differ in important ways. For example, students might be expected to stay mostly in their seats during the school day, but move from one activity station to another during afterschool. A student who needs written

DEFINITION

What Are Differentiated Supports?

In the context of 21st CCLC programs, differentiated supports are intentional changes to activities or environments for the purpose of ensuring that a particular student can participate. Support can be differentiated according to context (e.g., a student might need an aide during the school day but not in a 21st CCLC program) or individual need (e.g., a student who is overwhelmed by group activities might be able to participate if there’s an option of doing all or part of the activity alone or in a smaller group).

Learn More About IEPs and Section 504 Plans

See topic guide 2, “Legal Foundations of Inclusion: What You Need to Know,” for an overview of the federal legislation associated with IEPs and Section 504 plans. It is available on the Department’s You for Youth website at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

instructions for schoolwork might not need them for afterschool activities where he gets verbal reminders from others in his group.

A story from the Hayward Unified School District in California illustrates why it’s important to keep the 21st CCLC environment in mind when differentiating supports: There, a student with special needs had an aide during the school day, but successfully participated in the Youth Enrichment Program after school without the aide for three years. In his final year in the program, his school-day teachers started reducing his time with the classroom aide, thanks in part to his successful experience in afterschool. Jan Mermin, state coordinator in Rhode Island, says “Often, an aide is more of a hindrance than a help in the program environment. If an aide is overly involved and doing too much, it highlights the difference between that student and others, hinders their engagement, and affects their enrichment experience.”

Look on the next page for a table with five contextual factors to consider when designing differentiated supports in 21st CCLC environments. It includes examples of strategies you can use for each factor.

Schools can be a resource for helping to differentiate support in the afterschool context — and vice versa. (Topic guide 7, “Working With Schools and Districts to Support Inclusion,” has examples of models that support student needs across settings.) Some 21st CCLC programs form professional learning communities that meet weekly to plan and differentiate instruction to support all learners, including those with special needs. An effective California model, called the Coordination of Services Team (COST), consists of afterschool

Contextual Factor	Examples of Differentiated Support
Physical Space Accessibility, organization, materials	Adjust the layout of a room to make it accessible for students who use a walker or wheelchair.
Expectations Student behavior and participation	Provide individual explanations of rules and give extra time to comply, especially if the student has difficulty processing language.
Demands on the Student Independence, socialization, attention, planning and other executive functions	<p>Provide verbal, visual or physical assistance to students during a game, as needed.</p> <p>Help students find a comfortable role in an activity that may be uncomfortable. For example, if playing Capture the Flag, approach the student who prefers quiet activities ahead of time and suggest that he or she point at the person who has the flag rather than run with the group.</p>
Type and Goals of Activity Academic, physical/athletic, recreation, leisure, social, individual student vs. whole group	Plan a mix of activities — e.g., active, quiet, music-based, social, outdoor. Some students learn best from activities that require them to move or use their bodies, while others need time to process ideas and may prefer quiet, independent activities.
Natural Supports Size of groups, ratio of students to adults, peer relationships and friendships	Pair students who have complementary strengths.

and school-day staff who meet on a regular basis and discuss the needs of individual students across both environments. In the Hayward Unified School District Youth Enrichment Program site, the COST team discussed support for a student who needed an aide during the school day, but did not need that support during the afterschool program.

Considering Individual Needs and Strengths

An inclusive 21st CCLC environment is one that helps each student feel safe and valued as an individual. This doesn't happen if the focus is primarily on the student's diagnosis or on barriers to participation. Disability rights advocate Keith Jones makes the point that students want to be viewed first as persons, not as their diagnoses or as problems to be solved.



Story From the Field

The Coordination of Services Team “Wades in the Water”

Christopher Ibarra, Site Coordinator, Girls Inc., San Leandro, California

A fifth-grader who had been in our program for years had Asperger’s syndrome, which can make social situations feel intense or uncomfortable. This student’s school-day teacher was having a hard time engaging her in group work, so she asked for input from our Coordination of Services Team (COST). We shared a technique we call “wade in the water.” It’s based on the idea that if children are afraid to get in the water, you can “get their feet wet,” and as their comfort level increases, they will venture farther into the water until they’re splashing around in the ocean. We had used this technique successfully to help this particular student participate in group work. First, she’d work alone on an aspect of the project that other members of the group wouldn’t be working on. A few minutes later, another student (a friend) joined her. Then others would join. Over time, the student became increasingly comfortable working in groups, as long as the activity was scaffolded. Eventually, she was able to do a great many things during the school day using this type of procedure. This experience is a reminder that afterschool coordinators and staff can provide helpful input on ways to support student success.

Interacting with children as unique individuals not only helps them feel valued; it also helps your 21st CCLC program gain information you can use to design differentiated supports — variations in program activities, processes, or products — that will enable students with disabilities to participate in the 21st CCLC environment. You and your team can use systemic as well as informal approaches to gather information about an individual child.

Using Strategies That Engage All Learners

Engaging all learners in program activities requires intentional design and high-quality delivery. Characteristics of high-quality delivery that promotes learning are well-organized lessons or activities, materials that are adapted to optimally challenge youth, and opportunities for active learning.²

Story From the Field

Seeing the Individual Student

Keith Jones, National Speaker and Disability Rights Advocate

I don’t wake up every day and think “I have CP” [cerebral palsy]. I just go about my day. What I expect from you is that you see me as a fully functioning human, a valued member of the afterschool community. That is what students with disabilities want and need. People can get caught up in technicalities and focus too much on the minutiae of how to do modifications or accommodations. But children are concerned with their disabilities only when they interact with people who are uncomfortable and make it an issue. Some programs might say, “I’m not so sure our program is the right fit for your son or daughter.” But if you chose this work, you are someone who sees the value in child development and understands that you can have a positive impact — so why should this change if you are interacting with children who need accommodations? When I hear teachers say, “I haven’t been trained to handle those kids,” it says volumes about how they see students with disabilities.

Think About It

What Strategies Can Help 21st CCLC Practitioners Understand Children as Individuals?

What if your program directors and site coordinators designed a process that program staff could use to learn more about each child with a disability who enters the program? What if the process included concrete suggestions about sources of information and what to look for (see below)? How might an organized approach affect staff members' confidence and their capacity to differentiate support? What can state coordinators and program directors do to initiate such a process and make it part of practitioners' "tool kit" for understanding and supporting children as individuals?

Information Sources

Child: Even kindergarten-age children can talk about what they like, what they have trouble doing, and what helps when they have trouble.

Family: Learn how the child copes outside of school.

School-day staff: From teachers, therapists and counselors, learn about school-day supports and when they're needed.

Support staff: Student aides and others who interact with the child can share helpful information and insights.

IEPs and Section 504 plans: These documents include information and observations about the child's interests, needs and strengths.

What to Look For

Strengths and interests: Favorite activities, books, characters, shows; what makes the child laugh.

Areas of support: Least favorite activities; things that are difficult; times when child needs help; things that are scary or unpleasant.

Modifications: Changes made in policies, practices or procedures in order to help the student get involved, calm down, figure something out, or try their best.

Communication supports: Preferred method, such as words, gestures, or pictures; how the child gets his or her needs met; how the child asks for help; how the child interacts with others.

Assistive technology: Adaptive equipment; communication devices; mobility supports.

Medical needs: Medical needs support plan, emergency action plan, documentation from physician.

The three strategies discussed below — project-based learning, universal design for learning, and play — can promote active learning and participation for all. Just keep in mind that using these strategies doesn't guarantee engagement; program goals and individual student needs are important considerations.

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is a student-directed learning strategy by which young learners explore community-related topics of high interest to them through in-depth learning experiences lasting more than three days.

This approach naturally incorporates creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration (the 4 C's of 21st century learning). Research on project-based learning has shown benefits in increased attendance, growth in self-reliance and improved attitudes toward learning.

Project-based learning is already an important strategy for many 21st CCLC programs. The Wareham CARE program in Massachusetts uses it for a variety of enrichment activities that include students with disabilities, including step dance, computer programming with MIT's online Scratch project, a "Hands in the Dirt" gardening/environmental club, and Fit Math. The program at St. Elizabeth School in Oakland, California, uses project-based learning to engage its diverse community in multicultural activities that help students celebrate similarities and respect differences. For example, students selected a country or

culture to investigate; explored that country's traditions, food, clothing and everyday life; and showcased their learning by presenting songs, skits, dances and other work products to parents and community members during a culminating event.

A short training course for practitioners and additional information about project-based learning is available on the You for Youth website (<http://y4y.ed.gov>).

Universal Design for Learning

Universal design for learning is an approach to creating curriculum and materials that can be accessed by all students, with and without disabilities. Its key features are (1) a variety of presentation methods; (2) multiple means of engaging, challenging and motivating students; and (3) flexible ways for students with differing abilities to demonstrate their learning.

Story From the Field

Differentiating Project-Based Learning Content and Activities

Carolyn Rocheleau, Coordinator of Special Programs, Lowell Public Schools, Massachusetts

The Environmental Adventures learning project, part of the Lowell Public Schools Compass Program, had a lot going for it. Students were intrigued by the idea of environmental adventures, and community partners provided science experts who were passionate and knowledgeable about the local environment. But something wasn't "clicking" with the students, and the project started to fizzle. That's when special education science teacher Donna Newcomb joined the team. Her role was to bridge the gap between the environmental experts and the students. She did so by differentiating the content and delivery so that students with a variety of backgrounds and abilities were able to access the information and engage in hands-on activities. Environmental Adventures gathered steam, and the students were ready when an opportunity for project-based learning presented itself: A sewage treatment plant in nearby Hooksett, New Hampshire, mistakenly released millions of treatment disks into the Merrimack River. The event fueled student-led discussions, based on what they had been learning, and prompted a student-led project: Within a week of the accident, the Environmental Adventures group was out on the river, armed with gloves, goggles and trash bags, picking up hundreds of dime-size treatment disks. The students were energized by their hands-on experiences, and a sense of purpose swept through the group. They were recognized by the local paper for their efforts and leadership. As they discussed their project work, their expertise was also recognized by their school-day teachers and peers. The experience connected students of all ability levels with environmental science, with one another, and with their adult supports in a meaningful way, solidifying interests and friendships that will endure beyond their time at the Compass Program.

Story From the Field

The Hidden Curriculum: Accessing the Unwritten Rules of Social Skills

Stephen Hinkle, M.Ed., National Speaker and Disability Rights Advocate

In elementary school, I remember going into an assembly for a concert. I didn't know when to laugh. I didn't know when to clap. I didn't know when to sing out when the other kids did. I wasn't able to pick up on such things vicariously, by watching others. That kind of knowledge is part of the "hidden" or nonvisible curriculum. It includes things like understanding the rules of a game, manners and etiquette, social rules for various environments, how to join an unstructured activity or informal discussion, and how to be a friend. The 21st CCLC environment presents many opportunities to help students develop these kinds of knowledge and skills through recreation, play, the arts, theater, dance, sports and so forth. But it's important to realize that some students will need more coaching, modeling and guidance than others to access the unwritten or hidden curriculum of social understanding and social skills.

At Historic Scott School in Utah, where students from refugee families speak different languages, the 21st CCLC program uses universal design to accommodate the needs of English learners. For example, game rules are presented visually in pictures or by staff and youth acting them out. This strategy also helps students with reading disabilities understand the rules.

Information and resources on using this strategy to support inclusion are available from the National Center on Universal Design for Learning at <http://www.udlcenter.org/>.

Play

Play is important to every child's social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. Play can take many forms, including structured and improvised activities, games, pretend, creative efforts and recreation. All 21st CCLC programs can provide opportunities for play, creativity and recreation.

For most children, play comes naturally; however, not all children know or understand the implicit and explicit rules of play. For example, children who don't realize that the group they're in has nonverbally established an order for taking turns might "cut someone off" in line without realizing it's a violation of the group's social norm. Program staff will need to determine when it is



necessary to take an active role in facilitating play. This could mean using scenarios and role-play to make sure all children understand the "rules" of play, and explicitly teaching norms such as taking turns and providing opportunities for guided practice.

Notes

¹ S. A. Parsons, S. L. Dodman, and S. Cohen Burrowbridge, "Broadening the View of Differentiated Instruction," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2013): 38-42.

² J. Baldwin Grossman, J. Goldsmith, J. Sheldon, and A. Arbreton, "Assessing Afterschool Settings," *New Directions for Youth Development*, 121 (2009): 89-108.

Addressing Individual Needs and Engaging All Learners

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (With Selected Resources)

Focus on Individual Strengths, Needs and Interests

- **Get to know each child as an individual.** Identify needs, strengths and interests. Resist preconceived notions about a particular disability, and focus on what is needed for this particular student, at this moment, in this environment. For example, students with disabilities who are English learners might need extra support. WestEd’s *Strategies to Identify and Support English Learners With Learning Disabilities* includes links to five state manuals on this topic. Available at http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/sites/default/files/resources/EL_SWD_online_508.pdf.
- **Consider five contextual factors for differentiating support:** Physical space, expectations, demands on the student, type and goals of activity, and natural supports.
- **Identify key partners among school and afterschool staff.** Work with these partners and other support personnel, such as school counselors or academic coaches, to plan modifications.
- **Discuss differentiated support during IEP meetings.** Decide which supports make sense in which context. Share strategies that work in one environment, and talk about how they can be applied in a different environment.
- **See You for Youth’s Click & Go, “Align for Success: Creating an Intentionally Designed Program”** for a mini-lesson, podcast, and customizable tools for designing activities that meet students’ needs and program goals. Available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

Project-Based Learning

- **Find out what youth care about** by using surveys, guided discussions or activities that let students explore various topics and places in your community. Work with students to plan projects in areas of interest.
- **Build varying levels of participation into projects.** Provide options for individual and group work.
- **See the You for Youth website** (<https://y4y.ed.gov>) for a professional development course on project-based learning, created especially for 21st CCLC staff.

Universal Design for Learning

- **Present information in a variety of ways.** As you explain the steps in a task or rules in a game, you could also show drawings or pictures that illustrate each step or rule.
- **Create role-play scenarios** so that students can practice skills such as explaining the rules of a soccer game.
- **Label areas and materials** with pictures and words for students who are learning English or who have difficulty with auditory directions.
- **Build movement into activities.** For example, invite students to “act out” a dodge ball rule, or to demonstrate a dance step in slow motion.

Continued on next page

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (continued)

Play, Creativity and Recreation

- **Use direct instruction** to teach social and recreation skills such as how to form teams, take turns and talk to other children:
 - **Demonstrate** how to play the game.
 - **Include a practice round** so all students can practice before the real game starts.
 - **Let the student watch** while you narrate what is happening.
 - **Create a scripted story** with details about what the student should do during specific social interactions or games.
 - **Role-play** with the student before he or she enters a social situation.
 - **Model** what to do during a specific situation, and debrief with the student afterwards.
- **Balance the types of play opportunities** for well-rounded development — active play, social play, creative play, free play and digital play (i.e., time to explore digital media by choosing from a purposefully selected menu of options). For online games and applications to help students with learning challenges develop particular skills, see LearningWorks for Kids at <http://learningworksforkids.com/about/>.
- **Offer options such as healthy snacks** (which can provide mental and physical energy), raps (unstructured social time), naps (relaxation and “chill out” time) and running laps around the room or playground (gross motor activities).



YOU FOR YOUTH

Interested in checklists on other inclusion topics? All *Lessons From the Field* topical guides on inclusion contain checklists like this one. The guides are available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

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