



A Compendium on Expanded Learning

This article is one of more than 40 in an upcoming Compendium on the opportunities and potential of expanded learning opportunities and the importance of afterschool and summer programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers. With support from the C. S. Mott Foundation and under the leadership of executive editor Terry K. Peterson, PhD, the Compendium comprises eight sections with articles authored by thought leaders, policy officials, researchers, practitioners and other professionals in the field. Articles from the Compendium are available for download from the new website **Expanded Learning & Afterschool: Opportunities for Student Success** at www.expandinglearning.org

Inspired Programming Driving Student Success: A Look at Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers

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When a 21st Century program is done right,
it is often the very best thing in a child's life.

This credo, oft-repeated in Florida, clearly defines the importance of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers to our nation's school children. Florida is working hard to make this belief a reality for 80,000 young people and their families in hundreds of sites across the state.

The success of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and the afterschool and summer programs they fund, does not happen by accident across a state. They need to have three critical components:

- *inspired programming,*
- *well-structured and diverse program offerings, and*
- *results-oriented focus.*

Inspired Programming

The key to the success of Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers is *inspired programming*. There is a major emphasis on providing students with fun, hands-on, engaged learning experiences that are tied to the regular school day. The effectiveness of Florida's programs depends on these four simple elements:

- *Fun: Students should find the experience interesting and enjoyable.*
- *Hands-on: Students should physically participate in activities.*
- *Engaged learning: Students should be mentally involved in activities.*
- *Tie-in: Connecting afterschool activities to regular school day lessons makes activities relevant and more memorable.*

Two simple concepts have been consistently emphasized during professional development sessions with grantees:

1. "Teaching within the margins" was born out of the common frustration of school-day teachers who, *due to constraints of the school day, were rarely able to engage in the hands-on learning activities suggested in the margins of their textbooks*. By encouraging grantees to seek out teacher editions of classroom textbooks and identify these extension activities, "teaching within the margins" ties 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool programs to the regular day with fun activities that students enjoy. This additional exposure to information helps them learn more about the subject matter.
2. All program activities must have an academic component. Grantees are asked to design activities that intentionally relate to academic principles. If the activity is playing basketball, for example, then students are learning statistics. If students have an opportunity to work with animals, they should identify biological principles. If students build robots, they do so with the goal of solving tasks and practicing engineering concepts. The state's grantees recognize that although it takes more time to create quality, daily lesson plans in an afterschool program, in the end students embrace these meaningful experiences, thus learning more and enjoying the program more.

Well-Structured, Diverse Programming

Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers are among the most well-structured and programmatically diverse out-of-school programs for students attending Title I, school-wide program-eligible schools. Part of that structure includes minimum time requirements set by the state. Every 21st Century Community Learning Centers program in Florida must offer services for 36 weeks and a minimum of 12 hours per week. This requirement provides students with ample opportunities to engage in math, reading, and science enrichment, as well as a wide array of fine arts education, physical recreation, character building, service learning, tutoring, entrepreneurial education, and other personal enrichment activities not always available during the regular school day.

Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers also recognize that *communities* are at the core of successful programs. Half of the state's 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs are operated by community- or faith-based organizations that make a point of reaching out to the surrounding community to procure business partnerships, expertise in enrichment areas, and best practice recommendations. These community-based partners include Boys and Girls Clubs, local YMCAs, churches and faith-based coalitions, cities unaffiliated with school districts, and other organizations that have decided to become stakeholders and active participants in the academic and personal welfare of some of Florida's most needy children.

Results-Oriented Focus

To enhance accountability and data-driven best practices, Florida uses extensive data tracking and monitoring procedures. Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program requires all subgrantees to submit monthly attendance numbers to the Florida Department of Education, and the Department plans site visits, program monitoring, and technical assistance accordingly. State leadership uses this information, as well as the requisite data collected through the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS), to ensure that programs operate as intended.

Data collected through PPICS demonstrates the continuing success of Florida's programs. In the 2007–08 program year, 78% of regularly participating 21st Century Community Learning Centers students statewide either maintained or showed growth in math, and 79% maintained or showed growth in reading, as determined by report card grades. Furthermore, 75% of Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers students demonstrated improvement in submitting homework on time—a crucial skill needed for academic success in the regular school day (Learning Points Associates, 2009).

While these numbers represent the entire state, exemplary programs boast even greater achievements, especially when compared to peers from the same school who did not attend afterschool programs. For example, one program met all of its academic objectives in the 2010–11 program year when, on average, 84% of attending middle school students maintained or demonstrated improvement in math, 94% in language arts, and 85% in science. These students attend schools in which peers perform at 59% proficiency in math, 62% in reading, and 40% in science on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, demonstrating the need for focused and engaged attention to academics in afterschool (Silver & Albert, 2011).

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The fun, hands-on academic enrichment activities in Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, planned and taught by certified teachers, clearly affect these scores. Moreover, studies show that students who regularly attend afterschool programs improve their regular school-day attendance and participation (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.); For example, PPICS data shows that 80% of students demonstrated an increase in class participation in the 2007–08 school year (Learning Points Associates, 2009). Because students must be present in the regular school day in order to participate in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, they absorb more lessons that are later reinforced after school. This additional time in the classroom—learning with peers and from a certified teacher—also positively affects student achievement and relationships.

Strategies and Expectations for a Successful Statewide Program

The state of Florida employs the following strategies and expectations to support the efforts of local school and community groups to provide inspired programming, deliver well-structured and diverse program offerings and activities, and focus on the following results:

- *strong professional development,*
- *student investment and engagement,*
- *effective evaluation of grant objectives, and*
- *partnership development and advocacy.*

Strong Professional Development

Excellent afterschool programs depend largely on the talents and abilities of staff and leaders. Program leadership must employ staff who will be able to develop positive relationships with afterschool participants of all ages and grade levels. Strong professional development makes program staff aware of the impact of their decisions, the way they think about the program and participants, and how they handle challenges. Excellent professional development is based on the established needs of administrators, teachers, and other staff and should involve training in programmatic curricula, student safety, and youth development principles.

In addition, all of Florida's subgrantees are required to send at least three representatives to the annual Florida Afterschool Conference. During this weeklong event, project directors, site coordinators, and teachers are given opportunities to visit a 21st Century Community Learning Centers site, attend professional development sessions, learn more about state requirements and procedures, and present best practices and ideas at roundtables hosted by program staff.

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A Winning Formula for Engaging Students and Improving Lives

What would it be like to go around the world in 60 days? Students attending Midway Safe Harbor find out by using their math skills to calculate costs and exchange rates and then by researching the culture of each of the countries. This is Midway's formula: an hour of academics and an hour of enrichment centered on the same theme. And in 2010–11, the majority—68% of regular program participants or more—either improved or maintained their grades in reading and math.

Midway Safe Harbor, in partnership with the Boys & Girls Club of Central Florida, brings a community struggling with high poverty and crime together to provide safe, enriching learning opportunities for kids. The program, located in Sanford, Florida, transforms school lessons into highly engaging activities, making sure that the students are not only getting the academic knowledge the school district says they need but are also getting the kinds of learning opportunities they themselves want. For example, programs available to younger students focus on improving literacy while older students have access to credit retrieval courses, helping them graduate on time.

Program evaluation plans should be built from well-developed program objectives, should carefully select performance indicators and outcome measures, and should focus on maximizing student academic progress and personal development.

Student Investment and Engagement

While individuals who are committed to and engaged with the program are essential for its success, without effective student investment, some programs become just another drop-in afterschool care service. Evidence suggests a correlation between frequent attendance in structured afterschool programs and positive outcomes in and out of school (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.). Based on 21st Century Community Learning Centers program surveys, students who participate in structured, engaging afterschool programs attend school more regularly and improve behavior and academic achievement (Learning Points Associates, 2009). Providing free, exceptional opportunities to improve academic achievement undoubtedly encourages parents to send their children to 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. However, the best way to ensure student investment is to provide fun, hands-on, high-interest activities taught by concerned, informed, and engaging adults who are passionate about the success of their students.

Effective Evaluation of Grant Objectives

A strong evaluation plan helps ensure that 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs make continuous progress towards achieving proposed objectives for participating students and parents. Program evaluation plans should be built from well-developed program objectives, should carefully select performance indicators and outcome measures, and should focus on maximizing student academic progress and personal development. Afterschool programs should not only use the evaluation tools to collect data and measure the effectiveness of the program, but focus on evaluation as a tool of self-improvement. In Florida, programs are required to assess progress toward grant objectives twice a year. They must also demonstrate programmatic changes based on the results of such evaluations. Therefore, formative assessments are used to improve current program activities and strategies, while summative assessments inform the construction of continuation applications and help tailor next year's program.

Partnership Development and Advocacy

As more attention is focused on the needs of youth development, community leaders, policymakers, and practitioners are finding ways to increase support for more afterschool programs of a higher caliber. Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers work closely with statewide advocacy organizations like the Florida Afterschool Network and the Florida After School Alliance to develop afterschool quality standards, promote and provide professional development for afterschool staff, and advocate on behalf of afterschool students.

The Florida Afterschool Conference is just one example of the need for and potential impact of community partners on a statewide level. The convention is a joint venture organized by the Florida After School Alliance and 21st Century Community Learning Centers state leadership and is sponsored by afterschool advocates throughout Florida, including the Florida After School Alliance, the Florida Afterschool Network, the Florida Alliance of the Boys & Girls Clubs, and county-based afterschool advocacy organizations.

These relationships—coupled with the other strategies and practices outlined in this report—have helped to make sure that 20% of Florida's children attend afterschool programs. While this rate is impressive, especially considering the national rate is estimated at 15%, the Afterschool Alliance (2011) notes that “state leaders can do much more to ensure that Florida's youth have the benefit of access to quality afterschool offerings as demand continues to grow in the state”.



Conclusion

Afterschool time can be a valuable tool in augmenting the education of our nation's children. Inspired by a commitment to fun, hands-on, engaged learning; enabled by multiple community partnerships; and driven by results-oriented accountability, Florida's 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs continue to thrive and enrich the lives of more than 80,000 children and families throughout the state. Florida's next step—and perhaps the next step for 21st Century Community Learning Centers nationwide—must be to encourage state and national leaders to see the excellent practice and promise of expanded learning and afterschool programs, to advocate for afterschool opportunities, and to help ensure that more children can receive the high quality out-of-school programming already practiced at Florida's sites.



Resources

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About the Authors

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Lani Lingo has been the director of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program at the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Family and Community Outreach, since 2006. During her tenure as state director, Ms. Lingo has championed the inclusion of STEM and now STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) initiatives, the integration of academic subjects, and project- or problem-based learning in afterschool programs.

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For more information on this subject, as well as additional articles from the Compendium, please visit:

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