

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) awarded 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grants to the first cohort of 32 projects. Grantees served students who attend schools identified as in need of improvement under Title 1, Part A (Improving Basic Programs Operated by LEAs), and/or have high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students. These projects funded up to five centers that represented 136 afterschool programs in 215 participating elementary, middle, and high school campuses. The projects receive funding for 3 years and continuation funding may be available to eligible projects for another 2 years. To date, four cycles of grants have been awarded to a total of 590 community learning centers.

In 2006, TEA contracted the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and its subcontractor Academic Information Management (AIM) to evaluate Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 cohorts of 21st CCLC grantees in their second year of implementation. The evaluation study was designed to provide qualitative data that would contribute to a larger quantitative study of the grant program being conducted by TEA. SEDL proposed to identify and profile promising 21st CCLC projects across Texas and to examine common characteristics across the afterschool programs they implemented. The study was designed to replicate a large-scale study conducted by the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning (the National Partnership), which is led by SEDL, and commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).

To determine the sample for the study, SEDL identified 12 “promising” grantees based on expert recommendations, annual performance report (APR) data, and student performance data associated with projects. During the spring of 2006, SEDL’s National Partnership staff visited 1–2 centers for each grantee and collected data through site-visit interviews, surveys, and observations. Members of the site-visit team prepared summary reports that described each grantee’s organizational structure and processes as well as key program strategies and characteristics. Using the site-visit summary reports and related survey results, SEDL evaluation staff developed case profiles that summarized each grantee’s afterschool program. SEDL’s evaluation approach and the resulting 12 case profiles were described and presented in a report titled *The Evaluation of Texas 21st Century Community Learning Center Projects: Case Study Report* (SEDL, 2006).

This report summarizes findings from SEDL’s cross-case analyses of interview, focus group, APR, and survey data gathered for the study. The purpose of the cross-case analysis was to identify common programmatic practices across promising grantees that TEA can share with local education agencies and community-based organizations seeking to establish or improve their afterschool programs and practices. The evaluation team identified common characteristics across the *grantees* (also referred to as *projects*) by observing the *afterschool programs* implemented by 1–2 of their grant-supported *centers* (also referred to as *center sites*). This evaluation, therefore, was at the center-site level looking at programmatic activities and results are reported in terms of common characteristics of *afterschool programs* observed at the center sites of the identified, promising grantees.

Across the promising grantees, evaluators found common characteristics in terms of program structure and process, academic opportunities, and support systems. These include the following:

- 1. Strong leadership with shared decision making:** All of the afterschool programs observed for this study used a decision-making process that was collaborative and shared, involving people who play multiple roles with the program. Site coordinators played a key role in the decision-making structure and generally had a fair amount of autonomy in designing and overseeing center sites to meet local needs. Curricular decisions routinely relied on input from instructional staff. Finally, principals were reportedly included in the decision-making process by most, if not all, of the grantees.
- 2. Strong relationships with their corresponding day schools:** All of the observed afterschool programs maintained very close ties with their day school counterparts. Several factors were especially important across the all programs in achieving successful bridging between the two. First, day school and afterschool centers frequently shared common staff. Second, strong ties between day and afterschool programs were maintained through an intentional alignment of goals and curriculum. Finally, because the afterschool curriculum was aligned with day school curriculum, the majority of it was reported to be, or assumed to be, standards-based.
- 3. A variety of academic and enrichment instructional practices:** In these programs, academic assistance focused primarily on reading and math, with a secondary emphasis on science learning. The majority of the observed programs offered homework help or tutoring followed by academic instruction and enrichment opportunities. Some had set days for content instruction and others designated hours per day. Many programs emphasized a balance of academic, enrichment, and social development instruction within most of their activities. Common instructional practices observed across all of the grantee centers highlighted the use of engaging students through hands-on learning experiences, purposeful pairings of students, and integrating content learning with other academic disciplines, with “real world” experiences, and with activities designed to engage students in fun and interesting ways.
- 4. Positive, engaging afterschool climate with strong staff, student, and parent relationships:** A striking feature among the programs was that all appeared to be successful in creating a positive, engaging afterschool climate. The context in which afterschool activities occurred at all centers was consistently described using terms such as “supportive,” “relaxed,” “caring,” “respectful,” “safe,” “positive,” and “nurturing.” Relationships between staff and students at all of the center sites were very positive. Afterschool teachers reported having more personal and casual relations with students than was possible in day school classes. Students were observed interacting very comfortably with staff about both classroom-related and personal issues.
- 5. Strong community connections and partnerships:** The majority of grantees used a combination of day school teachers who are generally responsible for academic instruction and college students or community members who tend to oversee homework

assistance, tutoring, and the enrichment activities. In several cases, the afterschool programs partnered with community-based organizations and relied on the support of volunteers to provide components of the afterschool programs. Community partners for the observed grantees included local Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA, parks and recreation departments, chapters of the Texas Council for Drug and Alcohol Abuse, universities, church groups, and businesses. In some cases, grantees have established advisory boards to keep parents and the community involved in planning and decision making.

6. **Strategies for parental engagement and awareness:** Many of the programs provided parents with opportunities for meaningful engagement with the afterschool program. Although parental volunteerism was reportedly low across all of the observed centers, many programs implemented strategies to keep parents informed of, aware of, and interacting with the afterschool activities. For the most part, communications with parents occurred daily when they arrived to pick up their children from the afterschool center. Parental communications also occurred by telephone and through newsletters. The majority of programs provided parents with weekly or monthly newsletters and invited parents to attend special events. In some cases, parent education classes were offered in English as a Second Language (ESL) and technology.
7. **Internal or external processes to gather evaluation data:** All of the programs had some sort of structure in place for collecting evaluation data. Enrollment and attendance were monitored at every center site for the purposes of grant reporting and program planning. Some programs surveyed parents and teachers for satisfaction and interest in enrichment topics. External evaluations were reportedly occurring by four of the grantees using independent consultants or school district evaluators. However, details about these evaluations and their results were not well-known.

Overall, the cross-case analysis yielded results that suggest that common practices across afterschool programs included strong leadership that relies on shared or collaborative input from staff, the inclusion of community members and organizations in providing program activities, and concerted efforts to keep parents informed of program offerings and students' progress. Furthermore, both staff and students reported the blending of academic, enrichment, and recreational activities as providing learning opportunities in ways that are fun and engaging for students. This is achieved, in part, through the positive and more casual relationships between staff and students in the afterschool programs.

Although SEDL's evaluation was not designed to contrast the features of high-performing programs with features of typical or low-performing programs, the common characteristics identified and presented in this report are viewed to be consistent with promising practices identified through other research efforts nationally. These study findings can serve as a guide to new and struggling afterschool programs about features that may be most important when developing or refining an afterschool program. Further research, however, is needed to illuminate the particular practices and approaches adopted by those afterschool programs that achieve the greatest developmental gains for students.