Parent and Family Engagement

ISBE 21st CCLC Statewide Evaluation
Site Visit Report
December 2018

Introduction

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) implements the U.S. Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (21st CCLC), funding afterschool programs across the state that provide access to academic resources and supports, opportunities for programs and services such as youth development, arts and recreation, counseling and social-emotional learning, and technology education. Programs also provide families with access and opportunities to educational and personal development services.

EDC Education Development Center

Education Development Center (EDC) has served as the program evaluator for the statewide program since 2013. EDC's evaluation aims to provide ISBE with relevant data and information on the progress of the program and its grantees toward meeting the state's program objectives. To this end, EDC conducts site visits to a selection of grantees each year to learn about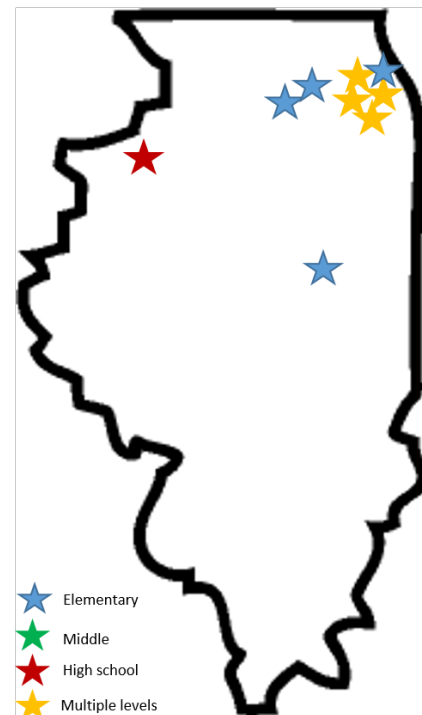 the range of programs and the contexts in which these programs occur. EDC designs site visits to explore a specific 21st CCLC programming topic or issue with 6-12 grantees that are exemplars or otherwise potentially instructive to the 21st CCLC program.

About this report

This report focuses on **parent and family engagement at 21st CCLC sites**. Parent and family engagement is one of the statewide program objectives for the Illinois' 21st CCLC program, and EDC sought to capture information about program offerings for parents and families and to gather feedback on how to improve the experience for future grantees when it comes to planning for parent and family-related activities.

This report is based upon the analysis of visits to 9 sites between October 2017 and June 2018. Sites visited offered parent and family programming and were selected to represent grade level diversity and diversity of program focus. The analysis includes 9 observation reports and 15 interviews with staff related to the programs. See Appendix A for details on the grantees and sites visited.

Figure 1. Site visits by level

- Elementary
- Middle
- High school
- Multiple levels

This report discusses key themes that emerged with respect to: (1) types of parent and family programming, (2) goals for parent and family offerings, (3) benefits of engaging parents and families, and (4) challenges to parent and family involvement.

Parent and Family Engagement Program Design

Types of programming

Grantees focus on both connecting parents to students' program experiences and building the skills and interests of parents.

Per the goals of the 21st CCLC program, sites serve children and families that are considered "in the greatest need," such as new immigrants and English language learners, Hispanic and African-American families, and families of low socio-economic status (students receiving free and reduced lunch). Of those interviewed for this report, several sites noted that the majority of parents are primarily Hispanic and Spanish speaking. Some sites also noted that many of their parents are single mothers. Under the umbrella of a common goal of reaching families, grantees offer a range of opportunities to engage their students' parents and families within the work of the 21st CCLC program. Programs and activities offered for parents and families typically fell into one of three program types:

1. Opportunities for parents to experience student programming: Staff interviewed expressed interest in engaging parents and families in experiencing student programming firsthand and building students' and their parents' connections to the program. Examples of these types of opportunities include:

- ✪ Open house events (e.g., orientations to programming, parents shadowing students and participating in their activities, staff sharing updates)
- ✪ Celebrations, showcases, and performance events demonstrating students' activities in the programs
- ✪ Family events/activities (e.g., cooking classes, movie nights, field trips, game nights)

This type of activity was also observed during site visits conducted by EDC staff. For example, one site visit included the observation of student performances where over 50 parents, family

"We're doing something new this year. We're trying to get the parents involved, and actually go to the classes that the kids go to, so they see what the kids are involved at, in our program… In the past, what we have done is kind of had an open in the gym, where we set up stations that have demonstrations of what we've done. And that was an okay little snippet, but I felt like the parents didn't really get into what goes on here… I'm hoping it's going to be successful, where the parents actually get to go to the class, and are with the teachers, interacting with them, and seeing their kids interact with other kids." - Site Coordinator

members and younger siblings attended. To accommodate such high attendance, the event was hosted in the school auditorium. After the performance, dinner was served for parents and families in the school cafeteria.

2. Programming designed directly for parents: Many of the parents that were interviewed described participating in program activities that for parents specifically and aimed to build their skills or interests. Some grantees detailed skill-building specific to supporting their children's education while others described skill-building such as adult education classes. Parents expressed that this type of programming was valuable because it created a sense of community for them as well as helped them to develop additional skills. Examples of classes and activities offered specifically for parents include:

- ✪ General Educational Diploma (GED), English as a Second Language (ESL), other adult education classes
- ✪ FAFSA and college application support workshops
- ✪ Adult arts and crafts skills (e.g. jewelry, knitting, cooking)
- ✪ Exercise classes
- ✪ Technology workshops
- ✪ Workshops on students' school/education (e.g., Common Core Standards, prep for parent/teacher conferences, how to support learning over the summer, social-emotional learning, bullying.)

This sense of community was particularly observed during a site visit where over 15 parents, mostly mothers, brought coffee and snacks and engaged in conversations while participating in a knitting activity. Participants shared and discussed their knitting projects with noticeable pride and joy.

3. Opportunities to volunteer: Several interviewed staff talked about encouraging and welcoming parents to volunteer during programming provided to students. Some examples that staff cited included helping with managing tables during activities or events, getting students ready for performances, participating in field trips, or helping with clean-up after the completion of activities. In particular, one site talked about how parents are required to volunteer within the school for 16 hours throughout the school year. Thus, volunteering with the afterschool program counted towards

"They can even just come in the program and help...so there's a million things for them to do. They get credit for any of that. It's a matter of being in the school...just being able to be in the school kind of changes their perspective of what it means to talk to teachers, or be in the school."- Site Coordinator

those hours; when interviewed, parents described this as one way they engage with the program. Parents volunteers were also observed during one of the site visits for a family event. Parents were stationed at different tables during the family event helping with providing snacks, talking to other parents and engaging with attending students. Overall, volunteering was noted as an important activity for several sites, as they found this an effective way of getting parents to involved.

Goals for parent and family offerings

Grantees saw parent programming as a way to build relationships with parents and help parents feel comfortable with the program and the school.

"It really is helping families understand public school settings… The main thing is communicating with families, and helping them learn what our program, and what the school day too, is all about." - Project Director

While 21st CCLC grantees generally have clear and well-articulated goals for student programming, goals for parent programming may not seem initially explicit or obvious. During staff interviews, however, two primary underlying goals for parent and family programming included building relationships between parents and the program and helping parents become more comfortable within the school setting.

"It's a matter of once I build a relationship, they feel more obligated to come to things. And they feel more obligated to be here because we have that relationship…" - Resource Coordinator

Grantees viewed parent programming as a means for building relationships. Building relationships was key for several interviewed staff, as this helped build trust between the program and parents and families. These relationships also help with establishing a line of communication that is personable and provides useful feedback on the programming being offered not only to students, but also to their parents and families. One site described how building that relationship with parents is a stepping-stone to achieving other goals such as involvement in family activities and skill-building opportunities.

Grantees were also intentional in providing parent programming as a way of helping parents and families become more engaged and comfortable with the school setting. One grantee described their efforts to empower parents to ask questions and be part of the conversation at the school as opposed to simply viewing school staff as authority figures. Grantees shared how parents sometimes perceive the afterschool program as more accessible and friendly compared to the actual school. Multiple sites described providing safe space for parents to express themselves, share concerns, and connect with staff and other parents, with the goal for that sense of community to transfer to other interactions with the school.

"I think when I first got here, I relied very much on surveys and trying to engage with parents that way. But I found out very fast that I wasn't getting quality information, and I think our biggest pull with parents was them seeing us and knowing I'm a real person." - Site Coordinator

Benefits of engaging parents and families

Parents feel like they learn to interact with their children in new ways and feel more a part of their children's education.

Through participation in the 21st CCLC programs, parents feel like they are a part of their children's education, especially since many cannot attend school related functions during the day. All of the parents interviewed spoke highly about programming for their children, while several grantees reported that parents engaged in their programs indicated their programs are providing parents a place where they feel like they "belong." For some grantees, this included helping parents create social networks among other parents and families; for others, they did this by helping parents become more comfortable with school or "school-type" staff.

Additionally, grantees saw parents benefiting from learning to interact with their children in different ways through facilitated activities or parent-oriented workshops. Through these activities, parents learned skills like how to help their children with their homework or how to regulate their children's behavior. A couple of sites described programming explicitly designed to help parents be better equipped to support their child's education, by supporting parents in engaging with their child's school-day teacher and by building skills and capacity to guide and support their child's learning. Examples of these types of activities include:

Common Core standards informational session: One site offered an informational session that focused on the Common Core standards right before report card pick-ups, so parents could learn about the standards and how they were graded and reported. This session also provided parents with guided resources to help them understand the report card, and help them develop questions to ask during parent/teacher conferences.

"We always want to give [parents] the responsibility. The fact that they might not understand everything their children are learning in school doesn't take the responsibility away from them… So we have a whole document that we gave to parents just like a template, you know, these are the questions even though you're not happy with the grade that your child received say in math, these are some of the questions that you can ask. And one of the questions is: how can I as a parent help at home?" - Site Coordinator

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Curriculum/Academic content: One site described that parents expressed that they did not feel like they could help their kids with their homework when they did not know the content/curriculum themselves. In response, the grantee offered math night, science night, etc., with activities tailored to parents who wanted to understand what their kids were learning during the school day. At the time of the site visit, the site had only been able offer this a few times, in part because it required the support of school day teachers (and unpaid time).

Social-emotional programming: Another site offered workshops to explain and reinforce Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) concepts that the child receives at school. Parents were trained so that they could model those concepts and strategies at home, to provide more consistency for the child. Workshops addressed topics such as brain development, bullying, and relationships. Some programs also described helping parents build their own social-emotional skills and support networks, so that parents would be in a better position to engage with their child at home.

End-of-school session on summer learning: One site described a parent workshop where they reviewed resources provided throughout the city that help support summer learning. They handed out flyers from the library (in English and Spanish), and also distributed activities parents can do at home over the summer (math, science), and gave out books.

"So, we're working with the parents on self-awareness. So, their own self-awareness and teaching them to give themselves a timeout when they're angry or upset. And then self-regulation is the other, so we've been focusing on those two standards with the parents, and a lot of them are now saying, 'Oh, now I understand why my child does this at home.'" - Site Coordinator

Challenges for parent and family involvement

Providing accessible and relevant programming

Focusing on relationship-building with parents and soliciting their input proved to be key to overcoming challenges in engaging them in the program.

Grantees noted several challenges to engaging parents, such as parents' work schedules and limited funding to do parent programming in addition to student programming. Parents of students in 21st CCLC programs often have multiple jobs or competing responsibilities, work varying schedules, and face childcare and transportation issues. Additionally, some programs reported various social context issues such as parents having limited exposure or comfort with programs like theirs, and with school settings in general. Finding times to host activities when all parents can make it was an ongoing challenge reported by several program staff.

Echoing program staff, some parents interviewed felt that specific parent activities were limited. For example, one parent did not know about program offerings and another parent stated that it was difficult to participate because the timing of the activities conflicted with her work schedule. Instead, she would like to see program offerings on the weekends because that worked with her work schedule. Other parents interviewed, however, stated that participating in the 21st CCLC program's

"Programs are offered in the mornings or during the day since that's when it's convenient for parents. Most programs are offered at the school for convenience and because parents don't have to worry about daycare." - Program Staff

parent and family offerings was easy because the activities are offered at a convenient time. Clearly, it is a challenge to meet the wide range of needs and availability of parents and families.

To address these challenges, staff cited several strategies they have employed to help parents more easily engage in their programs and offerings. Sites describe offering programs and activities at a variety of times based on the availability of their parents instead of directly afterschool or during regularly student program times (e.g., weekends, evenings, before school). Program staff indicated that proactive communication with parents and soliciting parent input were central to their success with engaging parents and families.

Communicating with parents and families:
Grantees reported employing multiple communication strategies to engage parents, such as calling, texting, and interacting with them face-to-face. Specific strategies included emails and newsletters to share updates and texting and calling parents to remind them of activities and events. Many sites offer recruitment materials and program handouts (as well as program activities) in Spanish. One site described tracking the parents who are not coming to events, so that staff can reach out to them and find out why they may not be attending (e.g., scheduling conflicts, transportation issues, lack of childcare, or other factors). The staff then tries to make adjustments so more parents can attend in the future.

"There's a new program that we are getting going for the second session called Remind. It's a way that parents can send a quick text message to a certain number that has a code, and our coordinators can communicate quickly. And hopefully, accurately, so that they can just look at their phone and see, oh, we have a parent involvement night tonight. Just a reminder instead of the old notes going home." - Site Coordinator

Soliciting input on programming: Many sites describe communication with parents and families as two-way, not just programs pushing out information about activities and events. This two-way communication is viewed as a form of relationship building for programs and helps provide program staff with feedback and insights on programming needs and planning. Grantees reported using surveys to gather feedback on programming. Some sites use surveys after particular activities, and others administer pre/post surveys for the school year. However, parent

"We do a lot of one-on-one. As the resource coordinator, and also as the parent coordinator, that's a big part of our work is doing one-on-ones, a lot of conversation, a lot of listening to what the adults, parents of this school, and the community, want to see." - Resource Coordinator

surveys can be challenging. One site shared that the timing of surveys for needs assessments and feedback can be challenging. Another site noted that while they had relied on surveys initially, they found the quality of information minimally useful, so they now rely more on face-to-face conversations about how things are going and gathering parents' interests. Most parents interviewed during site visits stated that they have been asked in person about what activities they would like to see offered. These conversations may happen more formally or informally such as at program drop-

off or pickup. Finally, some sites have advisory boards that include parents along with administrators, program partners, etc. Advisory boards may be for the overall organization, or specifically for the 21st CCLC program.

"We just try to make it as personable as possible, because the more [formal] it is, the less engaged they are. So yes, I try to engage personally. It's in-person, that's the best way to do it, but we do periodically do surveys just to check-in with parents and see like, 'This went well last year, do you still want this?' Or, 'Here's some opportunities in the future that we're interested in hosting. Would you be interested in coming?' But more or less, we just try to be present. Like being physically present is the best way to get information." - Site Coordinator

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Staff professional development

Professional development related to parent engagement tends to be limited for most grantees.

Professional development provided to staff around parent engagement varied greatly from site to site, with most sites providing minimal formal training to staff that specifically addressed this topic. The most common approaches to professional development in support of parent and family engagement included mentoring from supervisors, sharing strategies with colleagues, or on-the-job training. Professional development typically focused on learning common methods to engage with parents or build parent relationships. Formal parent-related professional development offerings were related to the needs of the specific program (e.g., Junior Achievement) or were provided by the district or school as a part of their overall professional development offerings. Given that parent and family engagement is frequency cited as a challenge for 21st CCLC programs, it may be that additional professional development, support, and resources are warranted.

"Thankfully I also have [the program coordinator] that guides me a lot. She has taught me so much… seeing her engage with parents, [she] definitely has been a role model and has definitely taught me how to engage with parents and communicate properly." – Group Leader

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Conclusion

While engaging students and supporting their academic and social-emotional learning may be the central focus of 21st CCLC programs, engaging parents and families is an objective of the Illinois' 21st CCLC program, and many grantees regard parent and family engagement as a key to success for their program. It is clear that family and parent engagement programming and activities takes a wide range of shapes and sizes across sites. Analyses of the site visits offer several key themes for this work:

- ✪ **Parents want to be involved and engaged in the programs and in their children's education.** Even if their schedules, distance, or life demands make it difficult to be regularly involved, grantees felt like parents and families wanted to be engaged in their students' 21st CCLC program. The job of the program was to minimize the barriers in terms of logistics, communication, and offerings in order to make parents feel welcomed and able to be engaged.

- ✪ **Building relationships with families is central to engaging parents.** Most sites felt like the more regular, varied, creative and personal their communications could be, the more likely they would be to reach more parents. Many staff work to build one-on-one relationships with parents when possible and even build informal ways to interact and solicit feedback in order to engage more regularly and meaningfully with parents.

- ✪ **There is not one best way to engage parents and families in 21st CCLC programs.** Grantees use several approaches both for engaging parents in supporting their children's development and education firsthand and for engaging parents in building their own skills and knowledge. For many grantees, the variety of activities and types of engagement created opportunities to connect with as many families as possible. Grantees sought to actively understand the evolving needs and availability of the target parents and families and to offer relevant programming.

- ✪ **The 21st CCLC program can help bridge the gap and build connections to the traditional school-day.** Grantees see helping parents – particularly those how may not speak much English or have much experience navigating formal school settings – become more comfortable within the formal school setting as a major benefit of their programs. Activities can provide a way for parents to simply spend more time in the building, and provide opportunities to build relationships with those that work in the building. Many programs provide information and support to help parents engage with school-day teachers and understand their children's school-day learning.

Connections with state standards

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) developed the Family Engagement Framework Guide for school districts and schools to use in developing and expanding school-family partners to support student learning and healthy development. The guide lists four principles for family engagement, and associated standards, illustrated in the figure below. Considering the findings presented in this report, 21st CCLC grantee efforts align with and support several aspects of ISBE's Family

Engagement Framework. Most notably, 21st CCLC parent and family engagement efforts contribute to building a welcoming and supportive environment, enhance communication, and include parents in decision-making.

Grantees repeatedly described their role in *building a welcoming and support environment*. As noted within this report, building and fostering a relationship with parents was a goal of several grantees when it came to parent programming.

- ✪ Program staff have worked towards building trust with parents by being present in the school, making a point of interacting and communicating with parents face-to-face and providing parents with opportunities to support their child's education and social-emotional development.
- ✪ Programs frequently facilitate activities and provide opportunities for students to share their accomplishments with parents and families through performances, showcases, and family nights.
- ✪ There was also evidence of grantees working towards being responsive to parent needs through surveys or in-person conversations to gather feedback on what is offered to both them and their children.

Enhanced communication is another principle of the framework that was apparent through the themes presented in this report. Grantees described employing multiple means of communication to engage parents, such as calling, texting, and interacting with them face-to-face.

- ✪ Efforts were made to email and mail newsletters as a way of sharing updates and calling and texting parents to remind them of activities and events.
- ✪ Additionally, many sites offered program materials in Spanish as a large number of students were from Spanish speaking backgrounds.
- ✪ Some sites described providing activities and supports to help parents understand, engage with, and support their children's education, particularly with respect to report cards and parent-teacher conferences.

It was also evident that grantees attempt to *engage parents in decision-making*. As previously mentioned, grantees aim to gather input from parents in an effort to provide them with programming that is relevant, useful and interesting.

- ✪ Grantees work towards empowering parents, especially when it came to being involved and present within the school setting.

Parent and family engagement is a priority for education at large, for both traditional schooling and for out-of-school time. Findings from these site visits focused on learning about parent and family engagement efforts of 21st CCLC grantees, and offer insight into the role that these programs play in the larger educational ecosystem. Evidence indicates that many grantees are making concerted and creative efforts to reach parents and support them in supporting their children.

Illinois State Board of Education Principles for Family Engagement[1]
(Blue bold text indicates evidence that program supports standard provided through site visits.)

Develop a family engagement system	Build a welcoming and supportive environment	Enhance communication	Include parents in decision-making
Standards Summary:	Standards Summary:	Standards Summary:	Standards Summary:
• Includes a shared vision that drives policies and practices • Connects to district and school improvement process • Coordinates and integrates into existing structures and processes • Families' socio-cultural, linguistic, and educational needs are incorporated into improvement plans • Provides support and guidance from leaders from development to implementation • Allocates/reallocates resources • Collects and utilizes data • Builds capacity • Partners with families • Collaborates with community organizations	• **Acknowledges a shared responsibility for learning and healthy development of students** • **Establishes relational trust** • **Reaches out to families to support student learning and healthy development** • **Responds to student and family needs** • **Effectively engages families from diverse backgrounds** • Builds on family assets (strength-based) • **Shares student accomplishments with his/her family**	• **Promotes ongoing meaningful two-way exchange of information** • Ensures communication is clear and constructive • **Commits to making sure communication is accessible to all and in the languages of families** • **Provides various approaches in which communication is relayed to families** • Provides information pertaining to parental rights • **Communicates about how families can enhance learning and healthy development, including information about their students' and schools' progress** • Communicates district, school, and classroom policies and practices	• **Empowers parents to be involved** • Solicits input from families includes parents in the district/school continuous improvement process • Jointly develops and reviews programming for families to support learning and healthy development • Encourages parents to participate in problem-solving discussions related to their child

[1]Available at https://www.isbe.net/Documents/fe-guide.pdf

Appendix A: Guiding questions and sites visited

EDC visited one program site for each grant, for a total of 9 site visits (table 1). The following four questions guided these site visits including the structure of both the observations and interviews:

1. What are the goals for parent/family engagement in 21st CCLC programs?
   a. In what ways are parents/families involved in the afterschool programming?
   b. How does the afterschool program communicate with parents?

2. What activities/resources are offered to parents/families?
   a. In what ways does the afterschool program solicit input about programming offered from parents/families? What else would they like to see offered?

3. What, if any, opportunities are offered to parents to help them be involved in their children's education?

4. What are some successes and challenges of parent involvement in the afterschool program?

Table 1: Sites visited for this report

Site description	Grades served	Observed activities
1. Suburban	1 – 5th	Recycle art, art painting, soccer, coding, brain games, pets 101 and origami.
2. Small town	9th – 12th	Night school.
3. Urban school	Pk, K – 8th	Knitting class.
4. Suburban	K – 5th	Parent Cafe.
5. Urban	K – 5th	Family Night.
6. Urban	K – 8th	Technology Workshop.
7. Urban	K – 5th	Parent Reading Activity (Kindergarten/1st Grade, 2nd Grade Classroom).
8. Urban	K – 12th	Student Performance.
9. Urban.	PK, K – 8th	Monthly Family Night.