Transforming Schools into 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Schools and community-based organizations, businesses, and others are increasingly encouraged to partner on behalf of students and families. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in January 2002, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P. L. 107-110), has additional implications for these partnerships. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program was reauthorized as Title IV, Part B, of the No Child Left Behind Act. This program is designed to develop community learning centers that increase learning opportunities and enrichment support to students, families, and community members and help underperforming students meet academic standards in core subjects such as reading and math.

The legislation prioritizes 21st CCLCs that involve local education agencies (that is, school districts, schools, and so forth) and at least one partnering organization. Partners may include local youth development organizations, settlement houses, community centers, child care organizations, faith-based organizations, businesses, colleges and universities, and others. Historically, school buildings have been transformed into 21st CCLCs, although the reauthorization also allows community-based organizations to serve in this role. Academic assistance, youth development, and family literacy and support activities are provided during nonschool hours, including before and after school, on weekends, and during the summer.

The 21st CCLC program encourages schools and their partners to plan and implement programs that benefit the educational, health, social, recreational, and cultural needs of the community. More than 6,800 rural and inner-city public schools in 1,420 communities across the United States are operating 21st CCLCs (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The average grant award is about $500,000, typically supporting four centers (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). One billion dollars were appropriated for fiscal year 2002, and 2.5 billion dollars have been authorized for 2007 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

21st CCLCs Goals

Goals for 21st CCLCs are clear. Programs must demonstrate educational and social benefits among participants. Expectations include increasing the percentage of students...
meeting or exceeding state and local academic standards in reading and math, as well as decreasing and reducing truancy, suspensions, and related discipline referrals (Little, Traub, & Horsch, 2002). Grants for 21st CCLCs are targeted for schools eligible for schoolwide programs under Title I or schools with a high percentage of low-income students (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Priorities also include outreach to schools identified by performance on state proficiency tests as in need of improvement in core subject areas (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). These programs are particularly helpful in high-need rural and urban communities, which often underperform and lack resources for additional programming and supports.

21st CCLC Activities and Programs

The three main program areas in 21st CCLCs are academic enrichment activities for children and youths attending low-performing schools, youth development activities, and family literacy and support programs for families and community members (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Some potential activities include

- remedial education activities and academic enrichment learning programs (particularly in the core areas of reading and math)
- mathematics and science education activities
- arts and music education activities
- entrepreneurial education programs
- tutoring services (including those provided by older volunteers)
- homework assistance
- mentoring programs
- substance use prevention
- character education
- counseling
- programs that provide activities for limited English proficient students and their families that emphasize language skills and academic achievement
- social and recreational activities
- telecommunications and technology education programs for individuals of all ages
- expanded library service hours
- parent education classes and support groups
- family literacy supports.

Communities across the country are carefully planning and implementing innovative 21st CCLC programs that meet the ever-growing needs of their students, families, and local community members. Academic remediation, support, and enrichment are staples of 21st CCLCs. One-on-one or small-group tutoring programs provide focused academic assistance for students. Proficiency preparation programs target fourth and sixth graders to prepare them for vital local and statewide tests. Science clubs allow students to participate in additional laboratory experiments that expand on class curriculum and materials. Drop-in homework clubs operate before and after school, giving students immediate, easily accessible supports. ESL classes and reading clubs target students with alternative language needs. Extended library hours provide students and families access to materials during the out-of-school hours. Career exploration programs, job training programs, and student internships foster school-to-work transitions.

21st CCLCs’ programs are designed in response to local needs. Input is solicited from teachers, students, parents and guardians, and
Transportation is typically provided, allowing the safe return of students to their homes after school.

Sports, recreation, and the arts programs are key strategies that attract students and families to 21st CCLCs. Pick-up basketball, organized sport leagues, drawing programs, pottery classes, and drama clubs are offered. Many 21st CCLCs use these “fun” activities as incentives to encourage academic performance and success (Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, Fallara, & Furano, 2002). For instance, one 21st CCLC middle school implemented a youth soccer program that targets students with ESL needs. Participation in the soccer program is contingent on enrollment and participation in school tutoring and reading programs. Academic progress among student players is tracked and monitored weekly by the coach. Parents, guardians, and family members are transported to soccer matches on the weekends to promote family involvement in their children’s lives and the school (personal communication with B. O’Neal, site manager, Salt Lake City Schools, Utah, January 3, 2003).

Many 21st CCLCs design activities to address multiple nonacademic barriers to learning. Groups are held to address student grief and loss issues, anger management problems, and self-esteem concerns. Substance use, gang activity, teenage pregnancy, and violence prevention programs are implemented. Interventions targeting students who are truant or at risk of dropout or have been suspended or expelled are implemented. Health and nutrition courses are provided, and participants receive healthy snacks and hot meals in the evenings. Also, school social workers, counselors, and advocates/trackers meet individually and in small groups with students on their caseload rather than taking students out of their classes during the regular school day. Leadership clubs, special interest programs, character education, and gender-specific groups foster belonging, attachment, and school commitment. Mentoring programs develop long-term relationships with caring adults in the community.

21st CCLCs are designed to be family- and community-centered. Morning coffee hours and “Breakfast with Dads” programs encourage parent and guardian involvement. Book clubs, GED programs, ESL classes, job training and preparation, university credit courses, and basic reading instruction are provided to support family literacy and continuing education (Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, & Barkdull, 2002). Parent and guardian education classes and support programs, family health clinics, and resource and referral networks are integral components that facilitate wraparound supports. Some 21st CCLCs offer special classes such as Web design, karate and tai chi, and stained glass design, allowing children and parents or guardians to...
participate in the activities together. Programs are open to all community members (including elderly people or retirees) and are not limited to parents and guardians of students at the school. In many cases babysitting and child care are provided free to encourage parental or guardian involvement and promote family support.

Partnerships, also called community collaborations, coalitions, or councils, often are designed to build on other needs in the school, its feeder pattern, and the neighborhood (see Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004). Members include parents and guardians, children and youths, teachers and school administrators, and representatives from local businesses, nonprofit organizations, social services agencies, and local government. Community strengths and resources are emphasized, and gaps in services are identified. The partnership brainstorms about how to address unmet needs and works together strategically to bring additional programs and supports to the school community. In 21st CCLCs the healthy development and academic achievement of students becomes a community issue.

Implications for Schools and School Social Workers

With this new legislation and encouraging national partnership agendas, such as community schools and full-service schools (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Flaxman, 2001), schools across the nation are transforming into community learning centers. School doors are open during nonschool hours providing services and supports to all members of the community. Likewise, community organizations are adopting similar strategies and focusing on academic outcomes and literacy. They are reaching out to schools and creating strategies that build on school curriculums. New roles are being created for school social workers, other school professionals, and the community. The social work profession must respond to this important trend.

Foremost, school social workers must provide leadership and advocacy related to expanded partnerships, allowing schools and those who work in or in partnership with them to see the value added from working together. Social workers, trained in systems and ecological theory, can be key leaders in 21st CCLCs. We serve in important facilitative roles designed to strategically build these community partnerships. Our jobs may become ones where we strive to bring additional services and supports to the school, further complementing current, and often depleted, school resources with the various assets in the community. Relationship building will be a key strategy, and school social workers are skilled in this competency.

School social worker roles will continue to evolve in other ways when 21st CCLCs and other partnerships are in place, because school social workers often serve as the vital connectors and bridge builders between the school day and the out-of-school time. We serve in multiple roles. Referral systems will be created in the schools, ensuring that students and families who need the supports most are connected to the 21st CCLCs. Feedback mechanisms can be developed, promoting the optimal integration of the school day activities with the after-school programs. Interprofessional teams can be created, allowing student and family services to be provided based on the needs of the students and families.
needs to be addressed through integrated service delivery strategies. And specific groups, classes, and interventions can be provided (and potentially facilitated by the school social worker), addressing individual and group needs among students and their families beyond the regular school day. Indeed, there are other yet-to-be-designed roles for us.

In conclusion, the 21st CCLC program encourages schools to partner with outside agencies and organizations to address the educational, health, social, recreational, and cultural needs of the entire community. Across the country academic enrichment, youth development, and family literacy and support activities are being implemented beyond the typical school day. This trend, which transforms schools, emphasizes lifelong learning, and prioritizes community partnerships, will have immense implications for schools and those who work in them. School social workers, having been trained in cross-systems theory, are serving, and will continue to serve, as key leaders in this evolving work. It is clear: As school communities are transformed, so will the role of the school social worker be transformed.

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References
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