

EVALUATION OF 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING YOUR STORY

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Why are quality evaluations important to my 21st CCLC?

Federal and State policy guidelines contain expectations that 21st CCLC grantees design and implement evaluation strategies. These policy expectations notwithstanding, the state of 21st CCLC evaluation is uneven across the more than 200 funded centers in Ohio. Some centers have well-developed evaluation strategies in place while others do a bare-minimum evaluation process. The consequences of this unevenness in evaluation are that 1) local centers doing bare-minimum evaluation operate in the absence of data that can drive 21st CCLC improvements, and 2) state leadership is at a distinct disadvantage in meeting its Federal requirements for 21st CCLC policy and accountabilities.

There are three critical reasons for a 21st CCLC grantee to design and implement a comprehensive evaluation strategy. These reasons are listed in order of importance to the grantee:

- Good evaluation data is indispensable to improving your 21st CCLC design
- Good evaluation data will help tell your story for sustainability planning
- Good evaluation data will help you meet funding reporting requirements

21ST CCLC EVALUATION STRATEGY DESIGN

The design of an effective 21st CCLC evaluation strategy can be broken down into four components. These components flow in a straightforward manner starting with the critical need for well-designed center models to procedures that ensure evaluation data links back to the center for continuous improvement decision-making. The importance of having evaluation be integrated to an overall management strategy cannot be understated. If evaluation is seen as an add-on to management, it becomes marginalized and minimally useful.

The Building Blocks of 21st CCLC Evaluation

1. *Use sound, evidence-based strategies in your center and intervention design*
 - Evidence-based design helps you to be clear about what it is you are doing, why you are doing it, and what impacts you expect
 - Use logic models to ensure consistency and flow of the center and interventions
2. *Develop a simple, realistic measurement strategy*
 - Measure the right thing using sound measures and procedures—make sure measures match the intention of your center and interventions
 - Identify the comparisons you will use to judge progress or change (e.g., simple pre-post, time-series)
3. *Develop a data collection, management, and analysis capacity*
 - Collect data carefully
 - Be electronic—use databases, spreadsheets, or statistical packages to manage and analyze your evaluation data
 - Produce simple, understandable reports for management decision-making and key stakeholders
4. *Link the results of your evaluation strategies to decisions and actions*
 - Be accountable for the right reason— to improve your center and interventions

The OSU College of Social Work partners with the Ohio Department of Education to provide technical assistance and support to 21st CCLC grantees in Ohio. For more information, please contact Dawn Anderson-Butcher; anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu and/or Diane Schneider Farmer; diane.schneider-farmer@ode.state.oh.us).

What are the current federal requirements for 21st CCLC evaluations?

All Federal programs are required to develop and collect accountability information. The legislation that created this requirement is called the Government Performance Requirement Act and measures tied to the requirement are often called GPRA measures. The 21st CCLC GPRA measures are youth progress on achievement tests, grades, homework completion, class participation, attendance, and appropriate classroom behavior. The State administrative agent (ODE) is required to ensure the collection of these data from local grantees on a regular basis using a web-based data collection system called 21st CCLC Profile & Performance Information Collection System (PPICS). All 21st CCLC grantees should be sure that these Federal requirements are addressed in the design of their evaluation strategies.

A Minimum 21st CCLC Evaluation Data Set

One helpful way to begin thinking about an evaluation strategy is to consider the kinds of information needed to answer the three evaluation questions. The following list presents potential measures that might drive evaluation thinking and design.

Question One—Did we do what we said we would do?

- Start with a thorough description of the 21st CCLC context and content focusing on the fit between the center as implemented with the center as proposed in the application (attend to things like staff composition and credentials, site location, hours and schedule, center content and activities, links to the community, and links to the school day)
- Examine youth and family demographics to ensure that you are serving the right youth and their families (e.g., grade in school, age, gender, family composition, free/reduced lunch status)
- Examine center attendance to ensure that youth are getting the right dosage (e.g., number of days attending, percent of school population attending)
- Examine parent/guardian participation and support to ensure you are getting good levels of parent/guardian support for the center (number of parents/guardians supporting and participating in developing and implementing the center, number of parents/guardians involved the learning lives of their youth)
- Examine community participation and support to ensure active community involvement in the center (number of community partners supporting and participating in developing and implementing the center)

An effective evaluation strategy will be indispensable to addressing three basic questions about your center and interventions

- Did we do what we said we were going to do? (this question addresses process and fidelity)
- Did we do things well? (this question addresses quality)
- Did we make a difference to youth and their families? (this question addresses the outcomes of your center and interventions)

Question Two—Did we do it well?

- Address center quality as perceived by youth, parents/guardians, classroom teachers, 21st CCLC staff, and community stakeholders by asking about key dimensions of quality such as availability, accessibility, and operating hours of center, safety, staff credentials and competence, center communication, reliability of center and staff, courtesy of staff, etc.

Question Three—Did it make a difference to youth and their families?

- For academics track youth growth or change on such things as regular reading and math assessments, achievement tests (GPRA), grades (GPRA), homework completion (GPRA), and class participation (GPRA)
- For youth development track growth or change on such things as youth-staff relationships, youth attitudes towards school and academics, youth academic self-efficacy, and school behavioral indicators like attendance and appropriate classroom behavior (GPRA)
- For parent/guardian support for youth academic and social development track such things as level of parent/guardian support for reading and math activity and homework, development of positive school attitudes, encouragement of attendance and classroom behavior