21st Century Community Learning Centers: Texas Afterschool Centers on Education

2017–18 Executive Summary

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List of Acronyms

21st CCLC	21st Century Community Learning Centers
AIR	American Institutes for Research
ANOVA	analysis of variance
APT-O	Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Observation Tool
CTE	career and technical education
ED	U.S. Department of Education
EL	English learners
ES	Executive Summary
EOC	end-of-course
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESL	English as a second language
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
HSE	High school equivalency
HLM	hierarchical linear modeling
KPI	key performance indicator
LEAG	Local Evaluation Advisory Group
LESI	Local Evaluation Support Initiative
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NIOST	National Institute on Out-of-School Time
NYSAN	New York State Association of Neuropsychology
PD	professional development
PEIMS	Public Education Information Management System
PQA	program quality assessment
PSM	propensity score matching
RFA	Request for Applications
SAYO	Survey of Academic Youth Outcomes
SACERS	School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale
SAPQA	School-Age Program Quality Assessment
STAAR	State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
TAPR	Texas Academic Performance Report
TEA	Texas Education Agency
TEC	Texas Education Code
Texas ACE	Texas Afterschool Centers on Education
Tx21st	Texas 21st Student Tracking System
YPQA	Youth Program Quality Assessment

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Executive Summary

Since 2002, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has provided funding through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program to support the provision of afterschool and summer learning opportunities in low-income communities. The program is funded by Title IV, Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as renewed by the Every Student Succeeds Act, which provides grant funding to states to support "academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools" (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2018). Since the grant program launched in Texas in 2003–04, hundreds of grantees and thousands of community learning centers, also known as Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (Texas ACE), across Texas have been funded.[1] This evaluation report presents statewide program evaluation findings pertaining to Texas ACE programs funded as part of grant Cycles 8–9. It focuses on the program's operation and impact on student outcomes for the 2017–18 programming period. TEA typically awards 21st CCLC grants for a 5-year period. In any given year, two cycles are in operation at different years of their grants. This report focuses primarily on the final year of Cycle 8 and the second year of Cycle 9. In addition, one chapter also explains work done on a local evaluation initiative in 2018–19 for Cycles 9 and 10 grantees (Table Executive Summary [ES].1).

Table ES.1. 21st Century Community Learning Centers Cycles 8–10 Grantees, by Grant Years Represented in This Evaluation Report

Grant year	Cycle 8	Cycle 9	Cycle 10	Notes
2013–14	Year 1	—	—	
2014–15	Year 2	—	—	
2015–16	Year 3	—	—	
2016–17	Year 4	Year 1	—	
2017–18	Year 5	Year 2		Extant and site visit data covered in report
2018–19	—	Year 3	Year 1	Local Evaluation Support Initiative (LESI) period covered in report
2019–20	—	Year 4	Year 2	
2020–21	—	Year 5	Year 3	

Note. The period covered in this report includes the following: Cycle 8: Year 5, Cycle 9: Years 2 and 3, and Cycle 10: Year 1 (for the LESI only).

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), in collaboration with the Gibson Consulting Group and the Diehl Consulting Group, undertook the Texas ACE evaluation for the years described. The design of the evaluation of the Texas 21st CCLC program was meant to address six objectives:[2]

[1] "The term "community learning center" means an entity that—
(A) assists students to meet the challenging State academic standards by providing the students with academic enrichment activities and a broad array of other activities (such as programs and activities described in subsection (a)(2)) during nonschool hours or periods when school is not in session (such as before and after school or during summer recess) that—
(i) reinforce and complement the regular academic programs of the schools attended by the students served; and
(ii) are targeted to the students' academic needs and aligned with the instruction students receive during the school day; and
(B) offers families of students served by such center opportunities for active and meaningful engagement in their children's education, including opportunities for literacy and related educational development" (ED, 2015, p. 234).

[2] These six objectives summarize those specified in TEA's Request for Proposals: Evaluation of the Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program (released in 2016).

- **Objective 1.** *Conduct an evaluation of the implementation of the Texas ACE program statewide.* This part of the evaluation involved providing a descriptive profile of Texas ACE program implementation based on administrative data captured in the state's tracking system (i.e., Texas 21st Student Tracking System [Tx21st]) and information on program design and delivery obtained from site visits conducted at a sample of programs.
- **Objective 2.** *Conduct an evaluation of the impact of the Texas ACE program on a series of school-related outcomes.* This part of the evaluation involved using a quasi-experimental design to explore how youth participating in Texas ACE at various levels of attendance performed on key outcomes relative to similar youth not participating in Texas ACE programming. This objective included an analysis of how different center characteristics and practices may relate to the achievement of different youth outcomes.
- **Objectives 3–5.** *Explore how the impact of the Texas ACE program may relate to different approaches to design and delivery and synthesize that information to identify potential best practices to share with the Texas ACE community more broadly.*[3] To address these objectives, administrative and youth survey data were analyzed data from a sample of Cycle 9 Texas ACE that were sorted into higher and lower implementing centers according to a set of key performance indicators (KPIs). Differences by these center designations were analyzed by engagement, motivation, and interest for youth participating in center programming. The analysis also used data obtained from the youth experience and end-of-session surveys to examine the connections between youth experiences and program quality related to positive youth development, student motivation, connections between quality programming and youth experiences, and youth program impacts and key programming experiences.
- **Objective 6.** *Provide support and assistance to Texas ACE grantees and centers on how to undertake effective and meaningful local evaluation activities.* This part of the evaluation involved the design and implementation of the LESI, which involved guiding a sample of centers through an intentional process of local evaluation design and implementation using the Texas ACE Local Evaluation Guide and Toolkit as a framework.

Analyses conducted to support each objective used the following data sources: (a) Texas ACE program characteristics from Tx21st data, (b) information about students served by the program and the schools they attend based on data collected from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), (c) State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness® (STAAR®) Reading and Mathematics for students in Grades 3–8 and end-of-course (EOC) assessments for students in high school, and (d) 2014 National Center for Education Statistics locale classification boundaries. Additional information about grantees and centers was gathered from interviews, focus groups, and observations conducted during on-site data collection activities during site visits conducted by the state evaluation team in spring 2018. Additional student and activity leader surveys also were collected at these centers. The following sections highlight each chapter associated with the evaluation objectives.

Research Questions

The following research questions, organized by chapters that addressed the evaluation objectives mentioned earlier, guided the collection and analysis of data related to the findings outlined in this report:

- Chapter 2: What are the primary characteristics of Texas ACE programs?
- Chapter 3: Based on site visit data, how do higher and lower implementing centers vary in terms of key program elements associated with Texas ACE implementation?
- Chapter 4

[3] Objective 5 specifically refers to best practice briefs based on various data gathered during data collection and from information gleaned while working with Texas ACE programs through the LESI. The briefs are stand-alone, separate handouts not part of the current evaluation report but are cited in this report summary to emphasize their role as part of a broad strategy to inform centers of lessons learned during the evaluation years in question.

  - To what extent are students participating in Texas ACE programs having experiences that are associated with positive youth development?
  - How are students' experiences in Texas ACE programs related to their motivation to attend programming?
  - How are students' experiences in Texas ACE programs related to measures of program quality?
  - How are students' experiences in Texas ACE programs related to how students report benefitting from participation in programming?
- Chapter 5
  - What effect does the program have on students attending regularly during the school year relative to similar students attending the same schools who did not participate in programming?
  - What effect does the program have on students attending regularly across the span of two school years relative to similar students attending the same schools who did not participate in programming?
  - What center-level characteristics are significantly related to center-level effect sizes pertaining to school-related outcomes among students participating in the program?[4]
- Chapter 6
  - What is the status of efforts to support the local evaluation efforts of Texas ACE grantees?
  - What was learned by developing and deploying local evaluation tools and processes?
  - What steps are being taken to help codify local evaluation tools and processes?

Chapter 6 also discusses the approach taken to implement a local evaluation approach with a set of 31 centers in 2018–19 from Cycles 9 and 10, as well the process used to update the Texas ACE Local Evaluation Guidelines and Toolkit.

The following summary highlights the analyses for each chapter and subsequent research question(s).

Summary Evaluation Findings

Chapter 2: Grantee and Center Characteristics

This chapter's objective was to provide a descriptive overview of youth who participated in Texas ACE in 2017–18 in Cycles 8 and 9. Topics examined included grantee and center reported programming objectives, an analysis of grant cycles by grantee and center, grant management, youth served by Texas ACE, an examination of student participation in Texas ACE program activities during the school year and summer programming periods, and an understanding of staffing patterns at the centers.

Programming Objectives. Site visits at 20 centers operated by Texas ACE indicated that the primary program objectives are to address students' academic needs through tutoring and homework help, provide engaging enrichment opportunities, facilitate family and parent involvement, and build student social and emotional knowledge and skills.

Texas ACE Operations. The analysis found that 460 unique centers provided various programs in the 2017–18 programming period (see Table ES.2). The 34 Cycle 8 grantees managed 209 centers, whereas 32 grantees supported by the Cycle 9 grant managed 251 centers.

[4] In this report, the word *significant* refers to statistical significance when the null hypothesis (i.e., the chance explanation) can be rejected so that no relationship exists between variables, and any observed relationship is only a function of chance (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, 2010). The level of significance, or the probability that a Type I error (i.e., rejecting a true null hypothesis) will occur, used in this report is typically reported at the .05 and .01 levels.

Table ES.2. Texas Afterschool Centers on Education Grantees and Centers by Cycle, 2017–18 Programming Period

Grant cycle	Number of grantees	Number of centers
Cycle 8	34	209
Cycle 9	32	251
Both cycles	56	460

Source. Tx21st Student Tracking System (Tx21st) data for 2017–18.
Note. These numbers only reflect grantees with attendance data in the Tx21st. Grantees in each cycle do not sum to the total because some grantees received grants in both cycles for different sets of centers.

Grant Management. Grantees funded in Cycles 8 and 9 differed substantially in terms of the number of centers funded through each Texas ACE grant. Approximately 41% of the Cycle 8 grantees operated between one and five centers compared with just 25% of the Cycle 9 grantees. In contrast, 59% of the Cycle 8 grantees ran six or more centers compared with 75% of the Cycle 9 grantees.

A wide variety of organizations are eligible to apply for and receive Texas ACE grants. However, the vast majority of grants associated with the 2017–18 programming period were awarded to districts and regional educational entities (88% for both Cycles 8 and 9 grantees).[5] This category of Texas ACE grantees includes districts, charter schools, regional education agencies, and other city or county government entities.

Youth Served by Texas ACE. The number of students served through Texas ACE was analyzed for the 2017–18 programming period, with almost 114,000 students served by Texas ACE. Approximately 50% of the students served in Texas ACE programs in 2017–18 were in elementary school, 32% of the students were in middle school, and 18% of the students were in high school. English learners (ELs) comprised 23% of the participants, nearly two thirds of the students were identified as at risk for dropping out of school (62%), and 64% of the students were categorized as economically disadvantaged. Eight percent of the students attending Texas ACE programs were identified to receive special education services. Hispanic students comprised the largest share of students served by Texas ACE (67%) in 2017–18, followed by Black students (16%), White students (14%), and other racial/ethnic groups (3%). Most Texas ACE students who took the Algebra I EOC examination achieved a passing standard (86%) compared with slightly more than half of the students who passed the English I EOC examination (57%).

More than half of the students who participated in Cycle 8 and more than one third of the students who participated in Cycle 9 during the 2017–18 programming period attended the program for less than 45 days, whereas less than one third of the students from either cycle attended between 45 and 90 days. A higher proportion of students participating in Cycle 9 centers (21%) attended for 120 days or more compared with Cycle 8 students (12%).

Approximately eight of every 10 students who participated in Texas ACE during the 2017–18 programming period attended the regular school year (fall and spring) program only. Less than one third of Texas ACE students in both Cycles 8 and 9 participated in programming during the summer, and those who attended summer programming attended for an average of 14 days for both Cycles 8 and 9.

[5] Texas has 20 regional education service centers in the state that support local districts to attain and fulfill the mission, goals, and objectives set forth by TEA (n.d.). Texas Education Code (TEC) §2.8002 states that: “Regional education service centers shall:
(1) assist school districts in improving student performance in each region of the system;
(2) enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically; and
(3) implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the commissioner” (TEC, 2020).

Youth Programs and Activities. During the 2017–18 programming period, students participating in Texas ACE spent most of their time in one of three activities: academic enrichment (29%), recreation (26%), or homework help (22%). In examining the subject areas that youth spent their time in, 63% was spent attending reading-related activities, and 58% was dedicated to mathematics-related activities. Students also spent substantial amounts of time in activities classified as science or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), 50% and 49%, respectively. Tx21st data for summer participation in programming also was analyzed and compared with the school year, revealing a similar pattern. Differences also emerged by grade levels on time spent in activities and subject areas while participating in Texas ACE. These differences often emerged between elementary to middle and high school programs.

Across Cycles 8 and 9 grantees, the majority of centers relied on the use of school-day teachers (44% and 38%, respectively). Centers across both cycles also relied on other staff (18% and 19%, respectively), college and high school students (13% in both cycles), center administrators (8% and 9%, respectively), youth development workers (4% and 7%, respectively), volunteers from the community (2% and 3%, respectively), or other employees (8% and 13%, respectively) to provide Texas ACE programming.

Chapter 3: Texas ACE Program Implementation

The primary goal of Chapter 3 was to explore which center characteristics and approaches to program design and delivery were associated with positive student outcomes. This task was done by analyzing interview, focus group, survey, and observation data from a sample of centers funded in Cycle 9 visited by members of the statewide evaluation team in spring 2018 to support the identification of promising approaches and practices.

AIR selected the sample in a way to highlight both higher implementing and lower implementing centers. The goal was to maximize the contrast between these two categories of centers to more easily identify practices and approaches found in the higher implementing centers that may be lacking or absent in the lower implementing centers. Twenty centers were selected and visited in spring 2018: 10 higher implementing centers and 10 lower implementing centers. The sample included 12 elementary schools, five middle schools, and three high schools.

A key attribute of higher implementing centers was setting a goal for increasing student interest in and comfort with learning. None of the lower implementing centers identified this as a goal. In addition, a larger percentage of higher implementing centers (60%) had providing a safe learning environment as a goal compared with lower implementing centers (30%).

Higher implementing centers also displayed a more central focus on parental involvement and family engagement, particularly in providing parents and adult family members with opportunities to participate in personally beneficial learning opportunities, such English as a second language (ESL) and High school equivalency (HSE) classes.

- Ninety percent of the higher implementing centers offered ESL classes to parents and family members compared with just 20% of the lower implementing centers. Interviewees at higher implementing centers shared that ESL classes helped create a stronger bond between parents and the school and improved wage-earning capacity by building English skills.
- Fifty percent of the higher implementing centers offered parents and family members HSE classes, but only 10% of other centers did so. HSE classes are typically offered through partnerships with community partners.

Advisory board members also played a more prominent role in providing general guidance and feedback (70% vs. 40%), operations (90% vs. 70%), planning and organization (60% vs. 40%), and programming (80% vs. 60%) at higher implementing centers compared with their peers at lower implementing centers:

- Forms of operational assistance provided by advisory boards noted at both higher and lower implementing centers included being involved in the review of program data (50% vs. 30%) and coordinating program spending (50% vs. 20%). Twenty percent of the higher implementing center

advisory boards also provided support by discussing alignment of programming with the regular school day.

- At higher implementing centers, advisory board members tended to be more involved in planning and organization by building community awareness of Texas ACE (60%) compared with their counterparts at lower implementing centers (30%).
- Advisory boards at higher implementing centers provided more guidance and feedback on programming, resources, and/or policies (70% vs. 60%) and reviewing and monitoring program goals and status (60% vs. 10%) compared with advisory boards in lower implementing centers.

Higher implementing centers also were more apt to use various forms of data to support program improvement efforts, including findings from local evaluation efforts. When program leaders were asked to share what they saw as features of a high-quality Texas ACE program, leaders at 80% of the higher implementing centers discussed how the periodic review of program data (e.g., program evaluation data, observational data collected from walk-throughs of afterschool sessions) was a key element of high-quality afterschool programs. Only 50% of the leaders at lower implementing centers shared that this is a feature of high-quality programs. These leaders focused more on effective communication between staff as a high-quality feature.

In addition, although 90% of the centers across both implementation levels used observational and walk-through data to monitor performance, twice as many higher implementing centers used external evaluators (40% vs. 20%), and higher implementing centers were more likely to use research-based program quality assessments or observational rubrics (40% vs. 10%) than lower implementing centers.

Chapter 4: Program Quality and Youth Experiences in Programming

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the extent to which students reported having experiences while participating in Texas ACE that past research has shown are associated with positive youth development. Based on responses to the youth experience and end-of-session surveys, students described most commonly experiencing positive relationships with activity leaders, engagement in programming, and feelings of positive affect when participating in programming. In addition, feelings that what they were doing in programming was relevant and that they were learning something or getting better at something also were relatively common experiences among students participating in Texas ACE. However, students were less apt to report having opportunities to experience a sense of agency through voice and choice; positive perceptions of other youth in the program; and experiencing challenge while participating in Texas ACE activities. Each experience could be an area where Texas ACE programs could potentially improve in further providing participating students with programmatic experiences linked to positive youth development.

This chapter also examined the relationship between quality criteria outlined in the program quality assessment (PQA) and portions of the Assessment of Program Practices Observation (APT-O) Tool, which are two common quality assessment tools used in the field of afterschool, and youth experiences in programming. Students attending centers with the highest PQA scores were more likely to report having more frequent opportunities for agency, having better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program, and experiencing more engagement and challenge while participating in programming compared with students in centers scoring lower on the PQA. In addition, the relationships between PQA scores and positive youth experiences in programming seemed to be stronger in programs serving middle school students.

Students attending centers that adopted more practices described on the verbal communication scale of the APT-O (e.g., staff encourage youth to verbally elaborate on their ideas; staff encourage all youth to participate in conservations/discussions) demonstrated more positive results on all the youth experience constructs examined. The practices described on this scale may warrant closer examination to see if additional steps would help centers better implement these types of practices in their own programs.

Moreover, certain types of youth experiences were associated with certain ways in which students indicated benefitting from program participation. More opportunities to experience a sense of agency, better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program, and feelings of being engaged in program activities were all associated with students indicating that the program helped them with their confidence and feel better about themselves. Students also were more apt to indicate that they had learned things that will be important for their future when they reported more agency opportunities and better relationships with their Texas ACE activity leaders.

Chapter 5: Impact on Texas ACE Program on Youth Outcomes

Funding for Texas ACE programs supports the academic development of participating students and promotes behaviors that will contribute to school-day success. It was hypothesized that the more students participate in programming as measured by days of attendance, the more likely they will benefit from their participation in programming. This hypothesis was tested in a series of effectiveness analyses conducted to assess how student participation in Texas ACE at different levels (e.g., less than 45 days, 45–59 days) during the 2017–18 programming period was related to youth improvement on a series of school-related outcomes relative to similar students not participating in Texas ACE. Results from these analyses were generally mixed.

The hypothesized relationship between program attendance and student outcomes seemed to be most supported by evidence of a consistent, positive relationship between participation in Texas ACE, school-day attendance, and the earning of career and technical education (CTE) credits. However, the differences observed between students participating in Texas ACE and similar students not participating in the program were rather small. For example, in terms of school-day attendance, Texas ACE participants attended between .54 and 3.42 more school days compared with similar youth in the comparison group.

For both disciplinary incidents and student performance on the STAAR Mathematics assessment, lower levels of participation in Texas ACE were first associated with a significant, undesirable effect (i.e., more disciplinary incidents and lower STAAR Mathematics scores among Texas ACE participants) when compared with similar students not participating in Texas ACE. However, this result changed as participation in Texas ACE increased, ultimately resulting in a significant and desirable association between higher levels of program participation and performance on these outcomes. This was particularly the case for students participating in Texas ACE for 120 days or more, who had a disciplinary incident rate that was 21% lower than for similar nonparticipating youth.

In terms of academic achievement, mostly a negative relationship occurred between participation in Texas ACE and STAAR Mathematics and Reading assessment scores, although most differences between students participating in Texas ACE and those students who did not enroll in programming were relatively small. However, participation in Texas ACE had a statistically significant positive association with STAAR Mathematics achievement when students participated in programming for 120 days or more. Students participating in Texas ACE at this level scored 4 scale score points higher, on average, on the STAAR Mathematics assessment.

Finally, a notable difference was observed between results from the single-year effectiveness analysis and those associated with students who participated in Texas ACE for 60 days or more across two programming years (2016–17 and 2017–18) on the grade-level promotion outcome. When examining pooled effect estimates related to different program attendance bands for 1 year of program participation, no significant differences were found between students participating in Texas ACE and similar students not enrolled in the program. However, when participation in Texas ACE was considered across two programming years at the 60 days or more threshold, students participating in Texas ACE had a nearly 42% higher chance of promotion to the next grade level relative to nonparticipating youth. Some important grade-level differences were noted here as well, with negative effects on grade-level promotion associated with students in elementary grade levels and positive effects associated with students in middle and high school.

Generally, it is not clear exactly how useful this set of analyses was in helping the program discover actionable results pertaining to the relationship between different levels of attendance in the program and the associated effect on the domain of school-related outcomes under consideration. When positive effects were consistently found, which was the case with school-day attendance and the earning of CTE credits, the effects were rather small. The same was true about the positive effects observed in relation to STAAR Mathematics when students reached the threshold of participating in the program for 120 days or more or even the consistent negative effects associated with STAAR Reading results. As such, TEA may want to evaluate the underlying benefit of examining program effects across several attendance bands relative to the cost in undertaking those analyses in the future.

In terms of a positive association between participating in Texas ACE and student outcomes, more promise appears to be associated with students participating in for 60 days or more across two programming years. Thus, two types of analyses may warrant replication in the future.

The first pertains to identifying centers with a positive effect on student outcomes when calculating center-level effect estimates. In this sense, steps were taken to examine program effects specifically in centers found to have a positive effect on student outcomes. When the effects in this subset of centers were examined specifically, the average effect size increased when examining students who participated in programming for 60 days or more in just the 2017–18 programming period compared with students who participated in programming at this threshold in the 2016–17 and 2017–18 programming periods. For the latter group, students participating in Texas ACE across the 2 years at this level scored an average of 29 scale score points higher on the STAAR Mathematics assessment and 25 scale score points higher on the STAAR Reading assessment than matched students not participating in Texas ACE. After 1 year of participation in programming at the 60 days or more threshold, these average differences were approximately 10 scale score points for each assessment in centers found to have a positive association between Texas ACE attendance and STAAR assessment scores. In this sense, these results may suggest that students participating in centers shown to have a positive effect on STAAR Reading and STAAR Mathematics scores demonstrate more growth on these assessments the more they participate in Texas ACE.

A similar trend also was found in relation to disciplinary incidents, where students attending Texas ACE programming for 60 days or more during the 2017–18 programming period in centers demonstrating fewer disciplinary incidents averaged an 11% lower chance of incurring an incident relative to similar students not participating in Texas ACE. When examining 2 years of Texas ACE program participation at the 60 days or more threshold, this chance declined further to a 17% lower chance of an incident occurring.

This type of potential growth in a positive program effect across multiple years of sustained program participation represents the type of outcome one would hope to see when participating in the program. These findings likely warrant additional exploration in preparation of a subsequent report to further unpack what may be happening in these centers specifically that may be supporting the achievement of these outcomes.

In addition, many center characteristics were related to positive student outcomes when examining students participating in Texas ACE for 60 days or more in both the 2016–17 and 2017–18 programming periods, including the following:

- Centers that demonstrated high average program attendance
- Centers largely staffed by school-day teachers
- Centers providing more frequent opportunities for participants to experience a sense of agency
- Centers with a greater proportion of participants indicating that the program helped them feel good about themselves or with their confidence
- Centers classified as higher implementing based on KPI data

- Centers with greater adoption of mathematics and verbal communication practices described on the APT-O

Based on these results, it is recommended that analyses undertaken in the next report focus on further exploring if these relationships hold true more broadly across multiple samples. The goal in undertaking these analyses would be to assess how each characteristic may be related to the types of approaches to Texas ACE program design and delivery highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4. For example, in Chapter 4, steps were taken to describe how students who reported more opportunities to experience a sense of agency and better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program were more apt to indicate that the program helped them with their confidence and feel better about themselves, both of which were connected to the school-related outcomes examined in this section of the report. In this sense, there may be an opportunity to further describe a sequence of practices, youth experiences, and school-related outcomes when conducting analyses for the next report that builds from this set of findings.

Chapter 6: Local Evaluation Summary

One of the guiding objectives of the statewide evaluation of the Texas 21st CCLC program is to provide support and assistance to Texas ACE grantees and centers on how to engage in effective and meaningful local evaluation activities. To accomplish this objective, the statewide evaluation team began work in the first 2 years of the evaluation to develop and refine resources and guidelines to assist grantees in engaging in local evaluation efforts for continuous improvement.

Local Program Evaluation Concept. In 2018–19, AIR and the Diehl Consulting Group continued the work started in the 2017–18 evaluation year to reimagine the local evaluation support that TEA provides for Texas ACE. In 2017–18, a new Local Evaluation Guide and accompanying Local Evaluation Toolkit, which replaced the original Texas ACE Independent Evaluation Guide, were produced. The guide walks centers step-by-step through how to plan and conduct an evaluation, while also providing a toolkit of templates, tools, and measures to support implementation of the new guide. A goal for Year 2 of the local evaluation work included updating the Local Evaluation Guide and Toolkit to reflect additional input from Texas ACE and stakeholders after having had time to absorb and implement concepts and tools from both resources. To aid the updating process, the statewide evaluation team reengaged a Local Evaluation Advisory Group consisting of key Texas ACE stakeholders that served as a platform for obtaining stakeholder input for the development of the guide and the creation of the toolkit in the first year of the initiative. In addition, the initiative convened 31 centers from 19 grantees represented in the LESI to work directly with AIR in applying the newly developed tools and share feedback to further refine the tools and plan for future statewide requirements related to local program evaluation.

Meaningful Local Evaluation Key Principles. The purpose of this local evaluation effort is to support centers' capacity to engage in and conduct relevant, meaningful local evaluations that direct program improvement and support sustainability in a tangible way. The vision for this work was based on several key principles that drove the development and use of meaningful local evaluations:

- Collaborative processes
- Intentional program design
- Assessment of implementation
- Locally informed and accessible measures
- Focus on center capacity

Local Evaluation Support Initiative. LESI was conceptualized as an opportunity to test new local evaluation approaches that could support further development before statewide rollout to grantees. In the first year of the pilot, only Cycle 9 centers were invited to participate (a maximum of 32 centers) if they met the requirements related to the capacity to participate in the process and met all expectations. For the second year of implementation, LESI participation was open to a maximum of 32 centers that also

met a similar set of criteria for Cycles 9 and 10 centers. Nineteen grantees and 31 centers agreed to participate and complete the entire process.

A benefit of participating in the LESI is that centers could receive feedback related to components of the Local Evaluation Guide and Toolkit that they were implementing by the statewide evaluation team. The feedback was to assist centers to improve the quality, detail, and relevance for each evaluation component.

Perspectives and feedback were gathered both formally and informally from LESI participants through a reflection survey and e-mail communications. Six themes emerged from the participants about the success or challenges of the initiative:

- **Collaboration.** Participants expressed finding success and seeing great value in the amount of collaboration occurring as part of the local evaluation and quality assessment processes.
- **Logic Models.** Participants commonly mentioned both success and challenges related to developing and implementing logic models. Feedback from the participants suggested a need for additional training on logic models.
- **Time.** Another common theme was the challenge of finding sufficient time for centers to engage with quality in the required LESI activities.
- **New Centers/Staff Challenges.** New programs or newly staffed sites mentioned the challenge of having to both establish Texas ACE programming and absorb the concepts of local evaluation.
- **Webinars.** Several participants offered feedback connected to webinar content and delivery. Survey respondents indicated that the webinars were helpful in improving local evaluation planning and understanding the quality assessment process by going through examples. Areas of improvement include breaking up the content and shorter webinars.
- **Value.** Perhaps some of the most emphasized parts about the value of the process was expressed in two parts: seeing the big picture and resources.

The statewide evaluation team used a different approach to LESI for the 2019–20 academic year. The idea was to work with fewer centers but more frequently, using more of a coaching approach to test whether a more intensive coaching approach resulted in deeper understanding and implementation by centers. Another change in the 2019–20 academic year was to produce short tutorial training videos related to key concepts from the Texas ACE Local Evaluation Guide and Toolkit. The evaluation tutorials were designed to be made available to centers statewide as a companion to the guide and toolkit, not just the LESI participants. This approach allows for centers to engage in asynchronous professional development related to local evaluation, hopefully drawing in a broader set of centers to engage with the evaluation key principles as part of their continuous improvement process.

Chapter 7: Summary of Findings and Recommendations

A key theme represented in most chapters in this report was an effort to identify characteristics, approaches, and practices employed by Texas ACE that related to both positive youth experiences while participating in programming and the domain of school-related outcomes. Overall, the findings outlined in the report suggest three primary conclusions.

Sustained attendance in Texas ACE is especially important in terms of supporting desired student outcomes, particularly across multiple programming years. In this report, the issue of attendance in Texas ACE was examined in three primary ways. First, the association between program attendance and student outcomes was examined by exploring how different levels of Texas ACE attendance during the 2017–18 programming period were related to student outcomes when comparing Texas ACE participants with similar students not participating in Texas ACE. The Texas ACE attendance bands were as follows: less than 45 days, 45–59 days, 60–89 days, 90–119 days, and 120 days or more. The goal of these analyses was to identify key attendance thresholds that may be important for participating students to reach if a desired school-related outcome is more likely to be achieved.

This set of analyses focused on average effects across all students enrolled in programming in 2017–18 meeting these attendance thresholds. Results from these analyses were generally mixed, as described in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Thus, the evaluation team then took steps to isolate those centers found to have a positive effect on student outcomes, both for students attending 60 days or more during the 2017–18 programming period and those attending 60 days or more during the 2016–17 and 2017–18 programming periods. Key findings from these analyses are as follows:

- The percentage of centers found to have a positive effect on student outcomes varied considerably from one outcome to the next, ranging from only 39% of the centers with a positive effect on STAAR Reading scores to 96% of the centers having a positive effect on school-day attendance.
- When examining centers with a positive effect on a given student outcome, there were some instances where performance on a given outcome appeared to continue to improve across multiple years of participation in the program. These results may suggest that students may continue to derive benefits from sustained participation in the program in select centers. This was the case in relation to the STAAR assessment scores and disciplinary incidents.

These findings related to the STAAR assessments and disciplinary incidents are important and suggest two hypotheses that likely warrant further consideration in the future.

- There is potentially a subset of centers designing and delivering programming in a way that supports the achievement of desired outcome, and more can be learned about effective practices by studying these centers specifically.
- There are certain student outcomes where sustained enrollment in Texas ACE may be cumulative in the sense that students benefit the more they participate in programming across programming years.

Exploring each hypothesis would seem especially valuable to learn more about how positive outcomes can be achieved and the role sustained participation in programming plays in this process.

There appears to be a pathway from select program practices to key youth experiences in programming to positive youth outcomes. In the past 15 years, the afterschool field has come to rely on quality improvement processes anchored in formal quality assessment tools (e.g., the PQA, the APT-O) to help afterschool programs better understand the practices and approaches that result in developmentally appropriate learning environments for participating youth. When conducting visits to the 20 higher and lower implementing centers selected for inclusion in the site visit sample, Texas ACE programming was observed and scored using the PQA and the APT-O to provide a measure of how well programs were implementing research-supported practices.

As highlighted in Chapter 4, steps were taken to explore how quality scores derived from the PQA and APT-O related to student-reported experiences in programming that have been connected with positive student outcomes in other studies. Key findings emerging from these analyses included the following:

- Students attending centers with the highest PQA scores were more likely to report having more frequent opportunities for agency, having better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program, and experiencing more engagement and challenge while participating in programming. In addition, the relationship between PQA scores and youth experiences in programming seemed to be stronger in programs serving middle school students, where higher PQA scores also were associated with greater perceptions of what they were doing was relevant, higher scores pertaining to positive affect, and a greater expression on the part of students that they had learned something or gotten better at something as a result of participating in programming.
- Even more consistent associations were found between scales from the APT-O and student experiences in programming. This was particularly the case in relation to the verbal communication scale, which was positively associated with each youth experiences scale examined. Each practice appearing on the verbal communications scale reflects the social dimension of learning and the

importance of creating environments characterized by the space needed for these types of interactions to take place in a meaningful and substantive way. The social environment associated with learning activities plays a critical role in shaping students' academic, behavioral, and motivational outcomes (Allen & Bowles, 2013; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002; Wentzel, 2002). Similar but not quite as consistent results were found in relation to the written communication scale of the APT-O.

Certain types of youth experiences also were associated with certain ways in which students indicated benefitting from program participation. More opportunities to experience a sense of agency, better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program, and feelings of being engaged in program activities were all associated with students indicating that the program helped them with their confidence and to feel better about themselves.

These are rather important findings because each of the ways that students indicated benefitting from programming were positively related to center-level effect sizes calculated in relation to a series of school-related outcomes described in greater detail in Chapter 5. More specifically, centers with a greater proportion of Texas ACE participants indicating that the program helped them feel good about themselves or with their confidence were positively associated with STAAR Mathematics assessment scores, STAAR Reading scores, fewer disciplinary incidents, and greater school-day attendance.

Based on this sequence of results, there is some evidence of a pathway from select program practices to key youth experiences in programming to positive youth outcomes that looks akin to the following:

- Higher PQA and APT-O scores were associated with better youth-reported experiences in programming.
- Certain types of youth experiences in programming, notably more opportunities to experience a sense of agency, better relationships with activity leaders and other youth in the program, and feelings of being engaged in program activities were all associated with students indicating that the program helped them with their confidence and feel better about themselves.
- When a greater proportion of Texas ACE participants indicated that the program helped them feel good about themselves or with their confidence, centers were more apt to demonstrate larger effect sizes in relation to STAAR Mathematics and Reading assessment scores, fewer disciplinary incidents, and greater school-day attendance.

This sequence of significant relationships connecting program quality to positive youth experiences in programming to larger effects related to school-related outcomes should be considered of particular interest to program stakeholders. If anything, this sequence of events may provide an initial template to guide the formation of the evaluation plan for the next report, where these relationships can be examined in greater detail across multiple samples.

Some additional practices adopted by higher implementing centers warrant further examination in the future. A key part of this report was identifying those characteristics, practices, and approaches that seem to distinguish the higher implementing centers included the site visit sample from the lower implementing centers. As described in Chapter 3, most of these differences pertained to

- demonstrating a more central focus on cultivating youth engagement, motivation, and interest in learning;
- parental involvement and family engagement;
- advisory boards that played a more active role in supporting various aspects of program implementation; and
- using various forms of data to support program improvement efforts, including findings from local evaluation efforts.

There is a need to further understand how these distinguishing attributes associated with higher implementing centers potentially influence how centers design and deliver developmentally appropriate and impactful programming.

In addition, the LESI was designed to better support the ability of centers to collect and use data to support program improvement efforts as part of their local evaluation efforts. Activities undertaken by the evaluation team during the 2018-19 school year involved refinement of the local evaluation guide, development and rollout of the local evaluation toolkit, and engaging a subset of centers through a process of designing and conducting local evaluation activities to maximize the collection and use of data relevant to supporting local program improvement efforts. Efforts in the 2019-20 school year will serve to develop a series of training and support materials that can be used after the end of the evaluation to allow for the adoption of practices described through LESI across the Texas ACE community more broadly.

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