

Ohio 21st Century Community Learning Centers Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

2019-20 & 2020-21 Academic Years

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Introduction

When Governor Mike DeWine ordered closures of K-12 schools in March 2020 due to the rapidly-spreading COVID-19 virus, Ohio's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs) had to find new ways to provide after-school and summer learning programs during a global pandemic.¹ As a result, 21st CCLC staff provided enhanced supports to help students and families navigate this new reality of virtual and hybrid education.

Report Purpose & Summary

This report highlights key findings from the local 21st CCLCs End-of-Year reports for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. The 21st CCLC statewide evaluation team at the University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center reviewed and analyzed qualitative data provided in the local 21st CCLCs End-of-Year reports. Codes were created and analyzed thematically to identify innovative practices and barriers encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 21st CCLCs and their school partners experienced numerous barriers, including learning to use new technology and adjusting to changing health guidelines and district policies. 21st CCLC programs also experienced substantial difficulties in collecting evaluation data during the pandemic, such as low survey response rates and limited focus group participation, and inconsistencies in the availability of student outcome data. Student attendance rates in 21st CCLC programs were much lower than prior years, exacerbated by shifts between virtual, hybrid, and in-person formats in response to the pandemic conditions. Program staff lamented the impact of lost instructional time on students' academic and social-emotional development, but remained committed to providing high-quality programming and meeting federal requirements to the extent possible in light of these challenges.

Key findings from this analysis identified many creative strategies 21st CCLC program staff implemented to provide out-of-school time support for students and families during the pandemic:



Provided a variety of enrichment activities to students



Utilized virtual platforms to provide academic supports for students



Expanded & refined ways to reach families



Developed unique ways to promote family engagement



Prioritized supporting the mental health needs of students and families

¹ Ohio Department of Education (2020, March 25). *21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school programs: Coronavirus update*. [Link](#).

Keeping Students Engaged in Virtual Learning Supporting literacy, mathematics, and college and career readiness

21st CCLCs provide evidence-based strategies in literacy and mathematics as well as college and career readiness for older students. Program activities are designed to excite students about learning, support social-emotional development, reduce school absenteeism, and improve classroom outcomes. Recognizing virtual learning requires a new approach, 21st CCLC staff adopted online activities to promote student engagement and achievement.

Examples of virtual activities to support student learning & engagement include:










- Online programming to provide academic instruction (e.g., math and reading "Power Hours")
- Virtual tutoring or homework help
- Pen-pal mentoring program with younger elementary students
- Virtual college trips
- Online programming to support college & career readiness (e.g., College Now)
- Virtual arts programming (e.g., painting activity "worry stones" with materials provided)
- Subscription box kits that were delivered to student homes (e.g., Green Kid Crafts, Little Global Citizen)
- Virtual physical education programming (e.g., providing workout videos, designated "Workout Wednesdays")
- Weekly TikTok challenges
- Online clubs facilitated by teachers (e.g., cooking club, STEM clubs)
- Virtual field trips (e.g., to NASA, the White House, or Disney World)

"I like the global citizen box and the green crafts box, too. I like how my tutor lets me listen to music when I do my iReady because it lets me work faster, plus I am having fun."

- Student survey response, 2020-21 EOY report

Especially at the start of the pandemic, 21st CCLC staff, families, and students struggled with new virtual platforms, internet connectivity, and technology. Some staff experienced fatigue trying to implement programs virtually while learning new technological skills. Many students worked hard to meet academic demands and virtual instruction. To address these issues, 21st CCLC staff learned to adapt activities through many different online tools and platforms.

Examples of virtual programs & platforms used to engage students include:

-  **Facebook:** Virtual schooling and activities such as science experiments, story times, and craft/DIY videos
-  **TikTok:** Facilitating competitions to promote family engagement
-  **Art Hub:** Drawing and art tutorials
-  **Kahoot:** Online game-based learning
-  **Khan Academy:** Providing academic enrichment activities
-  **School-based remote learning webpages:** One-stop website to share relevant resources and activities
-  **Zoom:** Facilitating virtual group discussions, small group sessions or instruction using "breakout rooms"
-  **YouTube:** Teachers recording lesson plans for students to watch
-  **Google Classrooms:** Uploading interactive weekly videos
- **ClassDojo:** Facilitating communication with parents
- **i-Ready:** Online math and reading learning platforms
- **INFOhio:** Digital library providing opportunities for virtual research

"I have several students who don't know their way around the keyboard. They're trying to write a paragraph for class, and they're so caught up in the technical aspect of entering the information that they're not able to think it through. I think that's a gap we have to figure out how to bridge."

- 21st CCLC program staff member when describing challenges with virtual instruction, 2020-21 EOY report

Staying connected with students and families

While families were scattered and isolated due to the pandemic, programs prioritized consistent communication. 21st CCLC staff collaborated with classroom teachers to offer additional support managing online learning and homework. Staff also started using virtual platforms more frequently to offer face time instead of just phone calls. Some programs organized parent listening groups to learn about needs and connect families with resources. In many cases, these new methods of communication were found to strengthen the connection between program staff and families.

"It was great having someone watching out to make sure assignments were being found and getting them submitted."
- Parent response to online programming, 2019-20 EOY report

"Throughout the school year, staff became much more proactive in their efforts to connect with families and students... Program staff and teachers learned not to rely solely on email communications, which could get lost in the high volume of emails received; they learned they needed to meet parents in locations and ways that worked for the parents. The level of responsiveness strengthened the relationships staff had built with families."
- 21st CCLC program evaluator's description of lessons learned, 2020-21 EOY report

Porch Drop Offs

Delivering items directly to homes was another strategy that helped maintain ties with families and address their needs. 21st CCLC programs delivered items such as food, academic enrichment activities, school supplies, and "swag bags." Some programs partnered with other local organizations to provide these drop-offs, especially for food items that many families relied on. Notes or small gifts also helped isolated families feel more connected.

"The supplies have been a big help, as well as sometimes the teachers would have little gifts for the students, and the kid would always be happy to see that, so it brightens his mood."
- Parent focus group response, 2020-21 EOY report

Family Fun Activities

Knowing families were isolated at home, 21st CCLC programs organized virtual family nights with games, movies, guest speakers, and academic activities. To encourage participation, some programs provided prizes or dropped off supplies or food in advance. Some programs also described in-person activities they provided to students and families, especially during the spring of 2021 when they felt they could offer safe outdoor experiences. Examples included drive-in movie nights, arts programming, hiking at local parks, or attending outdoor sports events.

"We hold virtual program via WebEx daily. We deliver iPads and lesson materials so that program can be as hands on as possible. We also provide snacks and host family events at local fun places."
- Reflections from a 21st CCLC Site Coordinator, 2020-21 EOY report

Supporting the Mental Health of Students & Families

As every aspect of life was disrupted by the pandemic, 21st CCLC programs worked to help reduce stress and support the mental health of students and families by providing social-emotional learning activities such as virtual mindfulness and self-care sessions. Some programs partnered with school counselors and other organizations to develop social-emotional toolkits to deliver to students. One program implemented the Teaching Tolerance curriculum "to address issues of cultural identity, bullying, race, and diversity." In addition, many programs facilitated virtual referrals to connect families with tailored mental health resources, and some provided virtual programming, such as the Triple P Positive Parenting Program, which also included parent self-care kits (such as relaxation and mindfulness activities).

Recommendations for the Future of 21st CCLC Programs

Most national, state, and district data demonstrate that students experienced significant learning challenges during the height of the pandemic due to circumstances beyond anyone's control.² Most 21st CCLC programs reported similar results for the students they were able to serve, but it is clear that the program staff were dedicated to trying to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and found creative opportunities to keep students and families engaged. Recommendations that emerged from the 2019-20 and 2020-21 EOY reports include practices that could continue to help programs accomplish their goals beyond the pandemic, including:

- ✓ Establish personal relationships with families through the regular use of informal communication.
- ✓ Continue to use a variety of virtual educational resources that engage students' interests and incorporate student voice in decision-making for program activities.
- ✓ Share educational resources and lessons learned among 21st CCLC programs.
- ✓ Continue to support the physical, social, emotional, and developmental needs of students and families through wellness check-ins, social-emotional learning activities, mental health programs, or resource referrals.
- ✓ Explore family interest and capacity to engage in virtual and/or hybrid programming.
- ✓ Consider expanding a trauma-informed approach as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and caused additional community and family traumas.²

"Although the district Covid response and protocols had an impact on student progress and therefore the [21st CCLC] program, by all accounts, [the program] made attempts to work within the guidelines to provide students with a quality experience."

- 21st CCLC program evaluator's description within executive summary, 2020-21 EOY report

Summary of Data Sources, Methods, & Limitations

21st CCLC programs are required to track program implementation, progress, and outcomes and to submit annual End-of-Year (EOY) evaluation reports to summarize their local evaluation. All data shared in this report are from the available 2019-20 and 2020-21 EOY reports. Although 2019-20 EOY reports were available for nearly all 21st CCLC programs, only a subset of 2020-21 EOY reports were available. Of note, most EOY reports did not include extensive descriptions of program implementation.

The qualitative analysis of the 2019-20 EOY reports was limited from the time of the school closures (March 2020) until the end of the school year, while 2020-21 EOY report analyses spanned the 2020-21 year. In addition, 21st CCLC programs experienced many barriers to collecting evaluation data during the pandemic, such as difficulties collecting survey and focus group data as well as limited availability of student outcome data. Results should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

² Ohio Department of Education (2022, March 9). *Data insights: How the pandemic is affecting the 2020-2021 school year*. [Link](#).

About the authors



The University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center (UCESC) currently serves as the statewide evaluator for Ohio's 21st Century Community Learning Center program and has served as an independent evaluator for hundreds of projects in Ohio and nationally since its founding in 1996. The UCESC team of specialists has expertise in statistics, measurement, assessment, and qualitative research methods within the fields of education and public health.

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