



Expanding
minds
and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success*. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

Kristin Nafziger

Project Director, Edvance Research, Inc.

Candace M. Ferguson

21st CCLC State Coordinator, Texas

Education Agency

Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE): Achieving Positive Results and Preparing Texas Students for College and the Workforce

The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) program is one of the largest statewide afterschool programs in the country, serving over 180,000 students at nearly 1,000 sites. The ACE program is administered by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and is funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative of the U.S. Department of Education.

A recent evaluation of the ACE-21st Century Community Learning Centers¹ found the following when program participants were compared to nonparticipants:

- *ACE program participation for students in grades 9–10 was associated with higher scores in reading/English language arts and mathematics on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).*
- *ACE program participants in grades 6–12 had fewer disciplinary incidents than nonparticipating students.*
- *Participation of students in grades 4–11 was associated with fewer school day absences.*
- *ACE participants in grades 7–11 who attended 30 days or more and participants in grades 4–5 and 7–11 attending 60 days or more had an increased likelihood of grade promotion. For high school students attending 60 days or more, there was a 97% chance of being promoted to the next grade level.*

1. TEA released updated evaluation results in the 4th quarter of 2012. For access to those findings please see http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2908&menu_id=949.

When comparing high attenders (students who attended 60 days or more) and low attenders (students who attended 30–59 days) in ACE programs, participants in grades 4–12 attending 60 days or more of programming had higher levels of TAKS scores in reading/English language arts and mathematics, fewer disciplinary incidents, fewer school day absences, and an enhanced likelihood (23–40%) of grade promotion.

The evaluation also revealed the following:

- *Program quality matters. Centers implementing higher-quality practices were correlated with greater reductions in disciplinary referrals and higher rates of grade promotion than programs less apt to implement these practices.*
- *Connections with other organizations and agencies within the community greatly enhance afterschool centers programming options.*

ACE Program Background

The federal funding that currently supports ACE actually began in 1994 as small, federally operated pilot program created under the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative grew strategically and significantly, such that in 2002 the initiative was transferred to the states to lead and coordinate.

Texas wisely used this transfer to establish the ACE program in 2002. Since 2008, ACE has evolved significantly in the wake of a major strategic overhaul that year that was designed to revamp its quality and identity and strengthen its focus. What follows are the resulting strategies and actions that were undertaken to develop a much stronger statewide infrastructure and support system for high standards and continuous improvement of afterschool learning across the state.

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Needs Assessment as a Driver of Strategic Changes and Improvements

The overall goal of the ACE program is to have all students graduate from high school prepared for college and the workforce. To achieve this goal, ACE's objectives are to improve academic performance, attendance, behavior, promotion rates, and graduation rates.

It is important to highlight here that the ACE program evaluation finding cited earlier in this article reveals that TEA is making significant progress towards achieving these five objectives. The restructuring and reform efforts described below have created the conditions for achieving success.

After establishing a common goal and set of objectives for the ACE program through the initial phase of the strategic planning effort, TEA began to restructure the program to provide program staff the tools and resources needed to develop a sustainable afterschool program. In collaboration with its program enhancement and quality assurance contractor, Edvance Research, Inc., TEA conducted a comprehensive review of program processes and procedures, as well as a needs assessment with grantee and center leaders. Based on this combined information, TEA implemented many significant changes in the program.

Through the needs assessment, TEA learned that many grantees had never been formally trained in project management, data and financial management, or human resources. TEA knew that to restructure the program, it was critical that grantees be properly trained, given the necessary resources and tools, and held accountable for managing their resources effectively and meeting performance measures. Regardless of the grant size or geographical locations, each grantee would be held to the same statewide standards, yielding a consistent set of performance expectations.

Stronger Local Programming Through More Rigorous Requirements and New Tools

As of 2008, TEA required a full-time project director for each local ACE grantee and full-time site coordinators for each center included in the grant. (Note: ACE grantees may operate multiple sites or centers.) By 2011, a family engagement specialist position was added to the list of required position for grantees. These positions are critical to the success of the local centers.

Yet, having these individuals physically present was not enough. In partnership with TEA, Edvance developed training tools and resources focused on assisting grantees in

- *meeting state and federal grant requirements,*
- *providing timely and accurate reporting to TEA,*
- *implementing appropriate fiscal controls, and*
- *conducting an external evaluation.*

To implement these tools and resources successfully, TEA worked with Edvance to develop a well-defined “blueprint” for program implementation. This blueprint was intended to help grantees and prospective grant applicants understand ACE program requirements and provide links to useful tools and information about best practices. The blueprint contains five categories of activities and program requirements:

- 1.** Planning
- 2.** Resourcing
- 3.** Implementing
- 4.** Managing
- 5.** Enduring

To support the implementation of the blueprint, TEA created an assessment system to track the status of each grantee's compliance with federal and state requirements and research-based practices. The assessment system includes a self-assessment tool that is completed by each grantee in the fall, a desk review of the grantee's approved grant application along with annual program reports submitted to TEA, and site visits.

TEA provides regional technical assistance consultants to support all ACE grantees, including

- *conducting the annual ACE program assessment (described above) to determine needs for technical assistance based on grant requirements and research based best practices,*
- *providing ongoing technical assistance based on need, and*
- *conducting monthly data and spending analyses.*

Additionally, ACE program staff have an array of online tools available to them via a learning portal that houses webinars, podcasts, and tutorials.

Through the implementation of these new monitoring and technical assistance processes, ACE students, parents, and communities have benefited through an increased retention of project directors; improved grant spending; and on-time, accurate data reporting.

The Future of ACE

The ACE program continues to identify opportunities to assist students in achieving academic success, particularly with a newly developed statewide standardized assessment that is aligned to the state's college and career ready standards. TEA is focusing on ways to improve planning, partnerships, evaluation results, training tools, and other quality-enhancement resources—and these efforts are reaping important benefits for students. In fact, the recently released ACE evaluation results (2012) found that implementing higher-quality practices is correlated, for example, with greater reductions in disciplinary referrals and higher rates of grade promotion than programs that are less apt to implement these practices (Naftzger et al., 2012).

Through the implementation of these new monitoring and technical assistance processes, ACE students, parents, and communities have benefited through an increased retention of project directors; improved grant spending; and on-time, accurate data reporting.

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Expanding Partnerships

TEA encourages grantees and project directors to seek out potential partnerships with local organizations and businesses. The recent ACE evaluation (2012) found that connections with other organizations and agencies within the community greatly enhance afterschool centers programming options (Naftzger et al., 2012).

One recent major initiative was to increase family engagement activities within the local ACE programs. ACE partnered with Skillpoint Alliance, a nonprofit organization that creates partnerships between industry, education, and the community that support the life success of individual students while meeting employers' needs for a qualified

workforce. In a demonstration project, ACE offered 10 scholarship opportunities to interested parents of afterschool students in the Bastrop area to apply and participate in Skillpoint Alliance's Gateway Health Care program to be trained as certified nurse aides. Nine family members of ACE students graduated from the 3-week program in the spring of 2012, and five graduates received jobs within 1 week of passing their state exam. This project not only engaged parents in the program but also provided them the opportunity to advance their own careers and the economic outlook for their families.

Use of Evaluation Data and Information for Continuous Improvement

As mandated by the federal statute, TEA must conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of its programs and activities funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Also, individual grantees must conduct a local/independent evaluation of their programs to assess progress toward achieving TEA's goal and objectives.

The current statewide evaluation, *Statewide Assessment of 21st CCLC Programs: Innovative Strategies, Student Behaviors, & Student Success*, was awarded to the American Institutes for Research. The focus of the evaluation is twofold:

- *Assess the local ACE program operations, student participation, and student achievement outcomes.*
- *Identify and describe innovative strategies and approaches implemented by successful centers.*

Preliminary evaluation findings have guided TEA in the ongoing development of program guidelines, goals, allowable activities, and other related programmatic decisions.

In 2010, TEA enhanced the independent evaluation requirements for local ACE grantees. These evaluations guide the type and level of support provided by each regional technical assistance center, as well as assist grantees to further refine and improve their programs.

While TEA reviews these evaluations on an annual basis, the technical assistant providers monitor the status of the evaluation process monthly and assist grantees with any issues that surface to ensure an annual evaluation is completed.

Tailoring Training and Resources to Meet Local Needs

The statewide and local ACE grantee evaluations also assist in identifying training needs. Based on these findings, TEA and Edvance have structured training efforts to focus on such areas as intentional programming, needs assessment, and family engagement. The delivery of these training sessions have been designed to incorporate a blended learning approach, allowing grantees, project directors, and site coordinators the opportunity to learn in face-to-face, online, and self-paced environments.

One of the ACE grantees, Taylor Independent School District, has embraced intentional programming training. Taylor’s site coordinators participated in both the pilot training and a full 2-day training. Since the training, the coordinators have been meeting weekly to develop activities based on student voice and academic need. Each activity is designed around achieving a “SMART” goal (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) for increasing student performance. Coordinators have engaged in discussions across sites and grade levels to develop activities that are aligned with the school day and that are both rigorous and engaging.

Texas ACE grantees are also focused on offering more STEM activities. At the 2012 federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers Summer Institute, five Texas grantees were featured as part of the STEM Showcase. Grantees from Austin, Fort Worth, Manor, Taylor, and the University of Texas at Tyler Ingenuity Center demonstrated activities related to career exploration, robotics, gaming, and integrating the arts to move from STEM to STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math). These grantees have developed partnerships with community-based programs, including local Parks and Wildlife, Girlstart, and local entrepreneur groups, to give students more hands-on opportunities to increase their knowledge of and interest in STEM careers.

Conclusion

The Afterschool Centers on Education Program—the Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers program—has had a substantial positive impact on the student performance of hundreds of thousands of students across Texas over the past few years. Through these expanded learning opportunities provided after school and during the summer in almost 1,000 sites across the state, TEA is making significant strides toward accomplishing its goal for all Texas students to graduate high school prepared for college and the workforce. TEA has used strategic planning, evaluation, and various other tools and strategies to strengthen and enhance the Afterschool Centers on Education Program, yielding solid and demonstrable student results.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristin Nafziger is a founding partner of Edvance Research, Inc. and serves as executive vice president for emerging practices. In this position she is responsible for identifying and keeping educators informed about new evidence-based programs and practices that show promising results. As part of her role at Edvance, Nafziger leads the technical assistance and quality assurance project for the Texas Education Agency to support the ACE program. Edvance Research is a women and minority, employee-owned firm headquartered in San Antonio, Texas, with offices in Austin, Texas (www.edvanceresearch.com).

Candace M. Ferguson is the state coordinator for the Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC)/Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) Program, administered by the Texas Education Agency and funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative administered by the U.S. Department of Education (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=3546&menu_id=814). Ferguson has over 12 years of experience in state, local, and nonprofit sectors, a majority of which have been spent working with disadvantaged and at-risk youth. She worked as an afterschool site coordinator with the YMCA, a juvenile probation and parole officer supervising a variety of youth, and a grants monitor for the Office of the Governor's Criminal Justice Division.

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