



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.

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Providing Rich Academic and Learning Supports Through New Hampshire's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Initiative

Let's put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.

- Sitting Bull

The New Hampshire 21st Century Community Learning Centers program currently serves 24 communities and more than 10,000 youth across the state. Evaluation data show that individual programs serve significant populations of at-risk students who can benefit from the rich academic and social supports provided by these programs. In particular, 55% of enrolled students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 16% are eligible for special education services, 8% are Limited English Proficient (LEP), and 32% and 40% perform below proficient on the state reading and mathematics assessment, respectively. These percentages all exceed statewide averages.

In evaluation surveys (Russell & Woods, 2012), principals overwhelmingly report that the 21st Century Community Learning Centers contributed to

- *improved social skills for students (97%);*
- *improved literacy skills (90%); and*
- *improved math skills (86%).*

Evaluation findings (Russell and Woods, 2012) also revealed that students reported

- *high levels of satisfaction with the program,*
- *high levels of satisfaction with engagement in learning,*
- *high levels of satisfaction with the positive interactions with staff and their peers in programs, and*
- *high levels of satisfaction with an emphasis on skill-and mastery-focused activities.*

The strength of New Hampshire's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program lies in the quality and dedication of its local program sites and its ability to function cohesively towards common goals and shared outcomes.

Through a close-knit and well-networked set of program grantees, New Hampshire has created a foundation and support structure to meet the needs of children and their families across the state, as well as to maximize resources and opportunities for educational innovation through expanding learning time after school and during the summers. Two specific ways that New Hampshire is accomplishing this include building a collaborative community and constructing statewide data collection systems for program improvement.

Building a Community

The strength of New Hampshire's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program lies in the quality and dedication of its local program sites and its ability to function cohesively towards common goals and shared outcomes. Recognized by its peers nationwide as consisting of a remarkably well-networked and cohesive group of local grantees, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program in New Hampshire is founded on a community of shared interest and aspirations and is grounded in a strong belief that the potential for greatness is far greater when implementation begins from a place of shared strength. This core principle resonates at each level—among staff at each site and among sites across the state—thus creating opportunities for shared learning,

collaborative problem solving, and a team-based approach to creating high quality afterschool opportunities for youth, families, and communities. Building this community of shared interest and strength has been accomplished intentionally over the past 10 years through the implementation of deliberate strategies and actions.

At the state level, local program directors meet bimonthly with 21st Century Community Learning Centers state coordinators to launch initiatives, receive information, network, and share challenges and opportunities regarding their individual and statewide programs. Meetings often begin with a protocol facilitated by an experienced program director to encourage sharing and building personal and professional connections among the participants. Directors are often invited formally or informally to discuss the various processes, approaches, and resolutions they have developed in response to cross-cutting challenges or issues. As a result, they come

to know each other's strengths and are comfortable looking to each other for support. This opens the door for a variety of grassroots support strategies including mentorships, peer site visits, and regional collaboration for professional development and advocacy events, such as Lights On Afterschool—a nationwide effort led by the Afterschool Alliance to build understanding and support for quality afterschool programs.

A formalized network of site coordinators has been established to create a platform for those managing day-to-day operations to connect. This group, facilitated by one of the current 21st Century Community Learning Centers program directors, meets regularly, up to five times per year. The agenda includes professional development training, as well as opportunities to share and distribute program resources, strategies for resolving day-to-day program challenges, and curriculum ideas. Both the format and the topics are generated internally, based on the self-identified needs of the participants. Additionally, the site coordinator network hosts an annual showcase highlighting successful clubs and program strategies. Though optional, each of these meetings attracts over half of the site coordinators who state that these are a highly valued resource.

This kind of networking and capacity-building also occurs at a multistate/regional level. New Hampshire's state coordinators are members of the New England regional network that meets quarterly to share successes and resources, strategize around shared challenges, and identify opportunities to collaborate on common goals and initiatives. These meetings have established strong relationships of support in which the coordinators serve as resources for each other, both in and outside of these formal meetings to address their needs and challenges. The regional structure also provides a venue to share policies, strategies, and initiatives, including, for example, evaluation strategies, competition processes, and opportunities for innovation. It also generates opportunities to collaborate on professional development, funding opportunities, and regional partnerships with external stakeholders.

Collaborative Leadership

New Hampshire's success in building a community of best practice among its 21st Century Community Learning Centers sites is not solely a product of collegial relationships and partnering. Rather, it also involves a process of collaborative leadership in which the members share a vision and responsibility for improving the work.

We like roundtables at conferences because we learn so much from each other.

- 21st Century
Community Learning
Centers Coordinator

New Hampshire's Record of Successes

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Anytime-Anywhere Learning: High level partnerships lead to education reform

Anytime-Anywhere Learning is a keystone for education reform in New Hampshire. In 2005 the State Board of Education established mastery of course competencies as the standard for earning high school credit, rather than mere seat time. The board also included the flexible use of time and place in the state's School Approval Standards, which allowed for extended learning opportunities to become an alternate pathway for credit toward graduation for high school students. Subsequently, in 2006, New Hampshire was awarded a Supporting Student Success grant through the National Governor's Association and Council of Chief State School Officers with C.S. Mott Foundation funding. This grant supported the formation of high-level partnerships to implement extended learning opportunities. Building on this collaboration among the Governor's Office, the New Hampshire Department of Education, and PlusTime New Hampshire (the state's afterschool network), Supporting Students Success Through Extended Learning Opportunities was launched as a 3-year pilot program at four high schools in 2007 with funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. These sites, in turn, shared their knowledge and expertise with newly designated 21st Century Community Learning Centers high school sites, as well as other high schools throughout the state. The 21st Century Community Learning Center program application for new funding now includes extended learning opportunities as an option at funded high school sites.

... the State Board of Education is proposing that it be a requirement, not an option, for all high schools to offer extended learning opportunities to their students.

Building on the successes of this pilot, the State Board of Education is proposing that it be a requirement, not an option, for all high schools to offer extended learning opportunities to their students. Students throughout New Hampshire would be able to earn credit towards graduation via individual or group competency-based learning opportunities designed in collaboration with community partners and highly qualified teachers. These activities could include designing and implementing a research study with the local hospital, developing a marketing plan for the neighborhood farm stand, or teaching a dance class for the local preschoolers.

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New Hampshire's summer conference

It is through this collaborative style that the state's 21st Century Community Learning Centers annual summer conference is planned. Each year a group of 6–8 program directors volunteer to work with the state coordinators to identify the content and structure the conference. From identifying topic areas and recruiting presenters to coordinating the schedule and conference format, the directors are heavily involved in ensuring that the conference meets the needs of their school and community administrators, their peers, and their direct staff.

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Local program directors as a statewide asset

Local program directors have become an asset statewide in helping address larger education reform issues. Directors actively participate on state-level advisory committees pertaining to the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program and the other education-related issues, including evaluation and data systems, the Child and Adult Care Food Program Advisory Council, New Hampshire Children's Alliance, and Extended Day. These professionals serve not only as representatives, giving voice to the interests and potential impacts on their programs, but also serve as key problem solvers and strategists. Their creative thinking, out-of-the box ideas, and on-the-ground experience provide insight and motivation for a new level of innovation. Through this process they are developing increased professional capacity and are honing their leadership skills.

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Program improvement

One of the most important resources in program improvement and growth is the ability to use data to inform the strategies, policies, and practices. This capacity is being developed in a three-pronged approach:

- 1. Evaluation design.** A new statewide evaluation with an external evaluator was launched in the spring of 2012. The new evaluation system was designed to streamline data collection and increase consistency across programs. Survey data previously captured at the local level has been integrated into the statewide evaluation, allowing programs to compare their progress with state-level aggregates while minimizing duplication of effort. Additionally, capitalizing on existing state-level online data collection systems has significantly expanded local capacity by eliminating time consuming data entry and providing immediate access to results.

Maintaining a collaborative approach, the state coordinators and program directors have come together in an effort to identify what data is currently being collected, where, and how; how existing data systems interact; and what information can be extrapolated. The goal has been to identify the resources and opportunities currently available for programs to assess their impact and to think critically about how to use this data to map out a path of continued progress and increased youth outcomes.

- 2. Constructing statewide data collection systems.** Efforts to integrate 21st Century Community Learning Centers program information into existing data systems have increased significantly. In addition to developing a process to upload 21st Century Community Learning Centers participation data into the state Department of Education's data warehouse, programs have increased use of the national PPICs¹ and New Hampshire's own Performance Pathways. The aim has been to extract meaningful data and reports that can be used both internally, to support program development and quality, and also to be able to share program successes with stakeholders in a way that clearly demonstrates the impact and value added to the community.

- 3. Program improvement.** This new system also links to existing educational data sources, allowing for deeper and more meaningful analysis of the social and academic impacts of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers at both the state and local levels and across a variety of programmatic and demographic characteristics. As a result, this evaluation not only enhances the ability of the state and local programs to assess program successes and identify opportunities for improvement but also establishes a unified system that streamlines data collection, minimizes data burden, and capitalizes on existing systems to maximize the availability of data at the state and local level.

Conclusion

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program in New Hampshire has all the essential elements of successful expanded learning programs—providing enriching programming to youth during high-risk hours, a focus on increased academic success, and targeted professional development for afterschool professionals. Yet, what makes New Hampshire’s efforts distinctive are strong networking, collaborative leadership, capacity-building, and an evaluation design linked to the development of state-level data collection systems that can be mined to inform improved program development.

Because of these successes, more young people are receiving more quality learning opportunities, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative is also regarded as an important state asset by serving as a learning lab and resource for other efforts to improve educational outcomes for many more children and youth across New Hampshire.

A man is called selfish not for pursuing his own good, but for neglecting his neighbor's.
- Richard Whately

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christina MacDonald is a state coordinator for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program in New Hampshire. A former teacher, she is dedicated to supporting local programs in their quest for high quality, sustainable learning opportunities that meet youth needs and cultivate a passion for life-long learning.

Suzanne Birdsall has worked at the New Hampshire Department of Education administering the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program since 2002. Prior to this she was an elementary school teacher and founded a nonprofit afterschool enrichment program. Her vision for afterschool includes engaging cohesive groups of afterschool professionals to create fun, relevant, and invigorating opportunities to New Hampshire’s youth.

REFERENCES

Russell, C., & Woods, Y. (2012). *Evaluation of the New Hampshire 21st Century Community Learning Centers: Findings from the 2011–12 school year*. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates.

1. According to the PPICS website (<http://ppics.learningpt.org>), “The purpose of this system is to collect basic information about 21st CCLC programs across the United States. PPICS was created in 2003 at the commission of the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The system was built to help ED track 21st CCLC programming following the transition from federal to state administration, which took place in 2001. Each year, PPICS is used to collect program data from some 3,000 21st CCLC grants covering close to 9,000 centers serving 1.5 million student attendees.”