



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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Quality Improvement and Successes for 21st Century Community Learning Centers in Minnesota

During the 2010–11 school year, in 98 centers throughout Minnesota, 21,000 youth—many of whom were struggling in school or at risk—had opportunities to catch up, keep up, and get ahead through 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

While all 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide activities designed to address the academic needs of the students they serve, they also attend to the physical, social, and emotional needs of participants. As research has shown, youth programs designed to support social and emotional development can have a positive impact on academic performance and improved behavior (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

The Minnesota Department of Education has administered the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative since 2002 with federal funds authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001. Across the state, 21st Century Community Learning Centers use school-community partnerships to offer afterschool, before-school, and summer learning opportunities for students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools.

For those working on 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar expanded learning initiatives in Minnesota, a collective focus on three elements—quality improvement, innovation, and results—is deemed essential to success. This article will discuss the state's efforts and progress associated with each of these core elements.

Promoting Quality and Innovation

A network of strategic partners, including the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the University of Minnesota's Extension Center for Youth Development, provides technical assistance, training, and coaching to 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantees as they assess their programs and implement quality improvement plans.

By prioritizing a comprehensive program model, in combination with an integrated quality assessment and improvement plan, MDE pushes applicants to create youth-centered environments designed to meet the unique needs of the youth in their community.

Starting in 2006, MDE has engaged in a partnership with the Extension Center for Youth Development to offer a technical assistance program called Quality Matters. Over the course of a year, participants in Quality Matters receive training, resource materials, and hands-on support to create and sustain environments that are positive places for young people to learn and develop.

In addition to participation in training and technical assistance, all 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantees are required to include a line item in their annual budget to support ongoing quality assessment and improvement efforts. Grantees must also provide a summary of the results of their quality assessments, as well as a summary of their quality improvement plans on their annual reports to MDE. These requirements ensure that quality assessment and improvement are fully integrated in all programs.

MDE promotes innovation by setting high expectations for 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantees. This begins with the grant application. All applicants must describe how their proposed program will meet the academic, physical, social, and emotional needs of participants. By prioritizing a comprehensive program model, in combination with an integrated quality assessment and improvement plan, MDE pushes applicants to create youth-centered environments designed to meet the unique needs of the youth in their community.

Another way MDE promotes innovation is by setting high expectations for grantees to retain program participants. According to research, young people have larger gains across multiple outcomes if they are able to participate frequently and over a sustained period of time (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2007). Grantees are challenged to develop interesting, engaging learning opportunities that will attract and retain participants. MDE and its partners provide training and technical assistance to grantees to infuse best practices that support retention, including school-community partnerships, family engagement (Little et al., 2007) and leadership opportunities for young people (Deschenes et al., 2010).

Innovative, Effective 21st Century Community Learning Centers

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Division of Indian Work, American Indian Math Project, Minneapolis

The American Indian Math Project (AIMP) is a program run by the Division of Indian Work in partnership with Anishinabe Academy, a public magnet school in South Minneapolis focused on Native American culture and language. Each component of the program is designed to help participants become productive adults by supporting their academic, social, and family connections. To achieve this, AIMP applies a comprehensive, case-management approach to the program with three key components: tutoring 4 days a week, family nights providing academic enrichment at least once a month, and recreational activities at least twice a month.

The program has been highly successful. In 2010–11, 64% of participants improved their math grades, and all of the fifth-grade participants were either approaching or achieving the math standards. Of the sixth through eighth graders served, 40% had end-of-year grades of a C or higher. Additionally, teacher survey data submitted for the same year to the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Profile and Performance Information Collection System showed that over half of the students made improvements in academic performance (63%), turned in homework on time (62%), completed their homework to the teachers' satisfaction (58%), and behaved well in class (52%) (American Indian Math Project, 2011).

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Beacons Program, Minneapolis

Minneapolis is one of six cities participating in the national Beacons Network, turning schools into youth centers during the afterschool and summer hours. Each year, Beacons serves over 2,500 young people and their families at eight centers in the city. Each center works to increase academic achievement, school connectedness, the capacity for productive adulthood, and opportunities for youth leadership and community engagement by offering a wide variety of programs including service learning, leadership training, character and social skills development, arts and cultural enrichment, sports and recreation, mentoring, and tutoring.

The Minneapolis Beacons program has had a positive impact on the academic performance of its participants. Youth who participated more than 90 days were twice as likely as nonparticipants to be proficient in reading, based on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment results (Minneapolis Beacons Network, 2011). Over 70% of regular attendees had improved academic performance or participation in class (72%), according to teacher survey data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Profile and Performance Information Collection System for 2010–11.

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Encore, Columbia Heights Public Schools, Colonial Heights

Columbia Heights is a suburban Minneapolis community with a rapidly changing population. Columbia Heights Public Schools has used its 21st Century Community Learning Centers, called ENCORE, to help meet the needs of a growing body of students with limited English proficiency. The ENCORE program provides a unique mix of activities focused on the arts, as well as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). ENCORE participants have shown significant gains, both academically and socially. During the 2010–11 school year, 82% of students reported that they learned new things and 67% of students stated that the program helped them do better in school (ENCORE, 2011). Students reported that the program helped them feel good about themselves (89%), get along with others (75%), imagine life as a grownup (68%), talk to others when upset (64%), and make healthy choices (62%). Academically, students also had great gains. The majority of participants scored at or above grade level in reading (65%) and math (70%). Students who attended 30 days or more had the best performance, with 80% at grade level or higher in reading, 90% at grade level or higher in math, and 73% at grade level or higher in both subjects. English language learners were the mostly likely to show improvement and had the greatest gains in comparison to other students (ENCORE, 2011).

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McGregor Public Schools, McGregor

Since 2002, McGregor Public Schools, a small rural school district in central Minnesota, has been home to a high quality afterschool program that has integrated youth voice as a key component of their program design. Program staff in McGregor solicit feedback through focus groups and surveys, and they also use a youth advisory board to provide input on program design and offerings. Based on the information collected, the program has revised its marketing strategies, increased program offerings, and created group clubs based on youth-identified interests.

Participating students have seen academic and social gains. One of the most successful offerings has been small-group mentoring, an activity that targets youth who have low academic achievement, poor attendance, high incidence of behavioral violations, and other indicators of risky behaviors or vulnerability. The groups meet weekly to check school progress and participate in recreational activities, enrichment, and service projects. Eighty percent of participants in small-group mentoring made gains in achievement, decreased behavioral violations, and increased attendance. The program has found the greatest academic gains have occurred with multiyear participation. After participating in the program for 2 to 3 years, many students have increased their grades to a “B” average, or a GPA of 3.00.

Improvements in Student Learning and Behavior

Data provided by grantees show that Minnesota's 21st Century Community Learning Centers are on the right track. In communities across the state, large numbers of high-need students have increased opportunities to participate and engage in learning outside of the classroom. Innovative approaches to programming, with an emphasis on personal and social development as well as academic improvement, are showing promising results. Annual performance reporting shows that regular participation in 21st Century Community Learning Centers has had a positive impact on student behaviors. In 2009–10, school day teachers reported that 68% of 21st Century Community Learning Centers regular attendees (participants who attended programming 30 days or more) improved their academic performance. Teachers also reported the following improvements in student behavior of regular attendees:

- *Completing homework satisfactorily (65%)*
- *Participating in class (65%)*
- *Turning homework in on time (61%)*
- *Being attentive in class (59%)*
- *Coming to school motivated to learn (58%)*
- *Getting along well with others (55%)*
- *Behaving well in class (53%)*
- *Attending class regularly (45%)*
- *Volunteering for extra credit or responsibility (44%)*

Conclusion

The design of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative invites local school-community partners to create learning and support opportunities to meet their students' needs. To share and encourage "what works," the Minnesota Department of Education and a coalition of strategic partners, including the University of Minnesota's Extension Center for Youth Development and the state's afterschool network, provide resources, training, and coaching to grantees as they assess their programs with an emphasis on quality improvement and innovation.

This statewide infrastructure of support and collaboration for continuous improvement, combined with innovative, local school-community programming and partnerships and a focus on results, constitutes a winning combination for quality afterschool opportunities and for the children and youth in 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

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