

Coding Data

The 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) programs offer out-of-school time activities for K-12 students in high-poverty areas. Michigan State University is conducting an evaluation of 21st CCLC program sites across Michigan in order to learn more about what types of activities and sessions are most effective in achieving the program's goals—namely, to help youth improve academically and promote positive development.

PURPOSE

The MSU research staff uses a coding process to categorize program activities and sessions based on the data that you enter into EZReports. The coding that we do provides a more comprehensive view of your program.

In this brief we explain what coding is, how activities and sessions are coded into categories and subcategories, and how to accurately describe your program's activities and sessions. The brief illustrates what we look for when we code your activities and sessions so you can ensure that your program is presented accurately in the data. It is intended to be used as a tool for you to reference as you set up your program in EZReports. We provide examples of a good activity description and session name and examples of how we categorize sessions.

WHAT IS CODED DATA USED FOR?

Coding is a valuable part of data collection because it allows information about activity sessions to be sorted into categories that can be compared, counted, and measured. The process involves sorting sessions into categories by identifying keywords and themes. The data derived from coding is used to identify:

- The types of activities offered by sites.
- The number of students attending certain types of activities.
- The number of hours a student spends in a particular type of session, such as homework help or music, and how frequently the student attends. This gives a sense of the “dosage” of a type of activity received by a student, and can be related to outcomes. More academics, for example, should be related to better academic outcomes for that student.
- The types of staff—certified teachers? volunteers?—leading the sessions.
- The types of sessions conducted by vendors and partners.
- Whether programs are offering the types of activities that they intended to or were expected to as part of the grant requirements.

We present some of this coded data back to you in the Annual Report to inform you what percentage of your students are attending what types of sessions. Your program can then use the Annual Report data to compare your session offerings across sites within your program and to the state averages to see whether your offerings are similar to what sites across the state offer.



WHAT IS AN ACTIVITY AND SESSION?

- Activity: the overall subject area; for example, math. This is data that you enter into EZReports.
- Session: the specific class being offered; for example, geometry. This is data that you enter into EZReports.

EZReports records out-of-school time activities at two levels; the first is the activity level and the second is the session level. The activity is the overall subject or content area that you offer in your program, such as math. Within that activity, you may offer several sessions or classes that focus on different aspects of the subject (for example, basic math, geometry) or different age groups (2nd grade math, 5th grade math). Even if you only offer one session of an activity, you still need to define an activity and a session in EZReports.

Each program can enter its own activity and session information.

- First, staff enter the activity name, targeted audience, description, primary category (main focus of the activity), subject area, and objectives.
- Staff then enter the session or sessions. As part of that entry they link the session to the activity. Activity information is then automatically applied to each of the sessions that are scheduled under the activity. We use the activity name, session name, and activity description to code the session into various categories and subcategories.



WHAT ARE THE CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES?

- Category: A “first sort” of activity types into general divisions, such as academics, recreation, youth development. This is what we identify based on the activity and session information that you enter into EZReports.
- Subcategory: A “second sort” of activity types into more specific divisions. Within academics, subcategories include homework help, tutoring, and traditional academics. This is what we identify based on the activity and session information that you enter into EZReports.

In other words the category is the general subject, such as academics or recreation, and the subcategory is the specific class, such as math tutoring or open gym. The MSU evaluation team originally created these categories by reviewing the activity names and descriptions and identifying recurring types of activities. Then we did a more in-depth review of the identified categories to determine specific subcategories that represented all the types of activities that fit into the broader category. Using this process we identified the 8 categories and 36 subcategories presented in Example 1.



Example 1. Activity Categories and Subcategories

<i>Category</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>
Academics	Academic Enrichment, homework help, tutoring, traditional academics, credit recovery, culture, engineering
Sports	General sports, team sports, non-team sports
Recreation	Recreation/free play, games, social activities, camp/fun days
Youth Development	Career development, character education, community service, conflict resolution, leadership development, independent living skills, mentoring, resistance skills, general youth development
Technology	Computers, video and media
Arts	Arts and crafts, music, dance, theatre, general arts
Health	Health and nutrition
Adult/parent	Adult education, ESL for parents, parenting, adult social activities

WHAT IS THE CODING PROCESS?

After EZReports has been closed for the year, the MSU evaluation team codes the sessions using the subcategories. We start by evaluating the activity name, activity description, and session name to identify the subcategory that most closely matches. In some cases, more than one subcategory will match; when that happens we identify which appears to be the main, or primary, focus of the session and which one will be secondary. For example, a session might be coded with a primary subcategory of academic enrichment and a secondary subcategory of career development if it had an activity name, description, and session name that looked like Example 2.

Example 2. Clear Primary and Secondary Activity Coding Priorities

<i>Activity Name</i>	<i>Activity Description</i>	<i>Session Name</i>
Academic Enrichment	Student will be learning the principles and practices through hands on projects and activities. Students will learn math and reasoning skills through the hands on projects which may be a student run shop, food stand or similar projects.	Student Run Snack Shop

Example 2 above was given a primary subcategory of academic enrichment because the focus of the activity was described as learning math and reasoning skills. This is an example of a disguised learning activity where students learn academic subjects through the use of projects and hands-on activities. Career development is the secondary subcategory because the activity also provides opportunities for students to develop skills to be used in the workplace, but it is not the main objective of the activity.

An accurate and detailed description of the activity is imperative for the coding process. When we see an activity name, description and session name that look like Example 3, we have a difficult time determining what is actually occurring in the session.

Example 3. Unclear Activity Description

<i>Activity Name</i>	<i>Activity Description</i>	<i>Session Name</i>
Academics	Language arts	Mrs. Smith



In this situation the session could be homework help, tutoring, or academic enrichment; however, based on the information given it is difficult to determine. When this happens we use our best judgment, but the end coding may not reflect what is actually occurring in your program. Therefore, it is important for you to be as thorough and complete as possible when providing information. For example, using Example 4 would provide a clearer idea of what is occurring in the session.

Example 4. Clear Activity Description

<i>Activity Name</i>	<i>Activity Description</i>	<i>Session Name</i>
Academics	Language arts: Students will learn language arts skills such as reading comprehension, writing and communication.	Mrs. Smith's Language Arts

It now becomes clear that the session is working on traditional academics and can be coded as such. By adding more detail to the activity description and the session name it becomes easier to code the sessions accurately.

We analyze the EZReports data using both categories and subcategories. For example, academic activities are a required part of the 21st CCLC. Therefore, it is helpful to know the percentage of students who attend any sessions that are academic in nature and how frequently they attend. In addition, different types of academic support have different outcomes; math education should be more likely to improve math outcomes than reading or physical fitness outcomes. Since we code at the subcategory level, we can also look at exactly what type of academic sessions students are attending and how often. This may be helpful in determining if more homework help sessions are necessary or if the academic enrichment activities are successful.

HOW CAN I ENSURE THAT SESSIONS ARE CODED CORRECTLY?

The following things will help greatly in ensuring that your sessions are coded correctly.

Be specific and clear when writing the activity description.

The activity description should identify in detail what is occurring in the sessions—what is happening, what students are learning, how they are learning, etc. An example of a good activity description for the subcategory “tutoring” might be: *“Students will work in small groups (ratio of 3:1) with a tutor to learn and understand academic subjects such as math, language arts or science.”*

As you can see, the activity description does not need to be long, but it needs to be specific. We would label the above description as tutoring because the description makes it very clear that the session will meet the tutoring ratio (3:1) and criteria. A description that says “students work on academic subjects with a staff member” would be ambiguous. It would be difficult to determine if this is at a ratio that qualifies as tutoring or if the session is for students to receive homework help. As a result the session would not be coded as tutoring. Specific descriptions make coding easier. They also make the program data more accurate.

The session name should reflect what is occurring in the session.

The session name should also be specific enough to identify what the session is. For example a session name of “Mrs. Smith 1st hour” does not reflect what is occurring in the session, but “Mrs. Smith 1st hour geometry” does. Be aware that giving an activity or session a name of “academic enrichment” or “enrichment” is not specific enough to code it; “enrichment” is a word that different people interpret very differently.



SUMMARY

The coding process is largely about details and evaluating the information provided to us about the sessions that are occurring in the programs. The more information that we have about the sessions and what is occurring in the session, the better we are able to code them and paint a clear picture of what is happening in your program. If we can give you more accurate data, you can make more informed decisions about your program and develop better program improvement plans.



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