

Activities and Interactions

Finding the Link between 21st CCLC and Regular Classrooms: Communicating with School-Day Staff

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION



Noam¹ defines communication in the out-of-school-time setting as the “exchange of information among school, afterschool, and community-based personnel, leading to informed understanding of each other’s activities.” Informed understanding can help promote student achievement by enabling out-of-school-time staff to design enrichment activities that complement or supplement what students learn during the school day.

In Michigan’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) programs, students considered at risk for poor academic achievement are a primary target group and may have specific individual needs. To effectively meet the needs of these students, out-of-school-time staff providing academic services must be in constant communication with school-day teachers. Instructional staff who are aware of current homework assignments can more effectively provide individual assistance to students during the homework or tutoring time of the program.

Beyond the individual needs of students, out-of-school-time staff need to be aware of the curriculum in the school and have knowledge of grade-level standards and benchmarks. If instructional staff understand what each grade level is supposed to learn during a certain time frame, they can design activities that complement those lessons.

Open lines of communication between out-of-school-time and school-day staff strengthen the relationship between the two and work for the mutual benefit of all students. A project director at one of the urban sites explained it best when she talked about the importance of success for all students:

When you have kids that are failing and with all these initiatives involved with No Child Left Behind, I think we need to even take a stronger approach to how we’re getting the message across, not only during the school day but after school with the kids and teachers.

Education is no longer something that happens to students between the hours of 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. Low-income students, particularly those at risk for poor academic performance, need opportunities to build on what they do during the school day if they are to compete successfully with their more affluent peers.



Data Sources for this Study

In this brief, we analyze specific cases from 6 Michigan 21st CCLC programs serving students at 10 sites. The cases represent different geographic regions (2 rural and 4 urban) and sites serving both elementary (n = 4) and middle schools (n = 6). Of the 10 sites, 8 were administered by public schools and 2 were administered by community-based organizations. Interviews were conducted with both the out-of-school-time staff and school-day teachers from the schools the students attended. Details of the data sources and data analysis are available in the Technical Supplement to the Communicating with School Day Staff Brief at outreach.msu.edu/cerc/21cclc.asp.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Connections with the School Day

Communication between 21st CCLC staff and school-day teachers was generally informal and episodic.

Among the 10 sites included in our in-depth study:

- No program had formal communication structures with the school-day staff.
- Most communication involved occasional informal conversation or memos placed in the teachers' mailboxes.
- One program was located outside the school building of the students it served; this program had no contact with the teachers in the school.
- Unless out-of-school-time staff were also school-day teachers, they rarely participated in school staff meetings.
- Few programs took advantage of e-mail to communicate about students or program activities.
- Both school-day teachers and site coordinators said that communication was an area that needed improvement.

In their words

A middle school site coordinator explained how he informally met with school-day staff:

Depending upon students, [I] go around to see the regular day teachers, how so and so's doing, what's he doing in class. Do they have any outstanding assignments that need to be picked up or whatever. I don't do it a tremendous amount, but I do do it.

This site coordinator had a strong relationship with school-day staff at this middle school and felt comfortable talking informally with teachers, but he did not do it on a consistent basis.

[I] go around to see the regular day teachers, how so and so's doing, what's he doing in class.
~ Site Coordinator

The communication pretty much goes one way.
~ Out-of-school-time staff

Some programs did not have strong enough relationships to informally connect with the school-day staff. Communication between out-of-school-time and school-day staff was problematic for the 21st CCLC program that was not located at the school:

The communication pretty much goes one way. If we don't go over there and actually get in their face, nothing really comes about, and we have to really kind of work on making the decision or following up ourselves. I mean, getting report cards and things like that are just like pulling teeth. It's just awful and so we really have a hard time with that.

No school staff would return e-mails or telephone calls at the school the students attended, so the out-of-school-time staff had to depend on students to bring in homework and explain assignments.

Communication between the out-of-school-time staff and the school-day staff depended on who worked in the 21st CCLC program.

- Staff who taught both in the school-day and out-of-school-time program believed that communication was already in place because they received information from both programs.
- The programs with full-time coordinators who spent most of their work time in the school had more frequent communication.
- Paraprofessionals, community volunteers, or college students who acted as instructional staff in the out-of-school-time programs had few opportunities to communicate with school-day staff because of the limited time they spent at school.

In their words

Some site coordinators found it beneficial to have school-day teachers as out-of-school-time staff. One middle school site coordinator explained how she strategically assigned her out-of-school-time teachers based on the grade levels they taught during the day:

I'm a big believer in [the view] that the teacher that assists after school will have more success than an outside individual....[All teachers] that we have right now are teachers in the building so they're able to [teach], and each teacher teaches the grade level that they teach during the day, so they know what the curriculum is. They know the kids. They know where their strengths and weaknesses are so they can better plan their lessons and tutor them based on where they're at. I've strategically placed those teachers for that reason.

However, using school-day teachers as staff in the out-of-school-time program did not necessarily ensure strong links to curriculum or knowledge of individual student needs.

- Limited time made it difficult for programs to communicate with teachers to find out how to assist them.
- Teachers who provided out-of-school-time instruction did not necessarily work with the same students they had during the day; therefore, they did not know those students' strengths and weaknesses and would have benefited from contact with the students' teachers.



...And then by the time they're done teaching, the teachers are already gone or they're at professional development or other obligations. So it's hard to communicate, I think, on a daily basis.

~ Site coordinator

- Teachers in out-of-school-time programs often taught different grade levels or multiple content areas, particularly in middle and high school programs.
- Some sites felt students should not have the same teachers after school because they might need to hear another perspective. One middle school site coordinator chose to rotate the students in six-week schedules so that they did not have the same out-of-school-time staff member all year long.

In their words

Project directors, site coordinators, and teachers all discussed how logistically difficult it was to find time to meet with teachers to discuss what was happening in their classrooms or how to best meet the needs of individual students. An elementary site coordinator explained the challenges common across all sites:

It's just hard to make those connections because we are running all day and it's in the morning, planning and preparing for the day...And then by the time they're done teaching, the teachers are already gone or they're at professional development or other obligations. So it's hard to communicate, I think, on a daily basis. I would love to consistently be able to communicate with the teachers every day. Do you need help getting some academic work ready? What do you need me to do? But because this is such a large building, and I'm always in demand, it's very difficult.

If teachers have different students after school than they have during the day, then they need to be aware of the needs of those students. If they are teaching a different content area or grade level than what they teach during the day, the teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the requirements of that content area or grade level.

Relationship Between the Schools and 21st CCLC Programs

School-day teachers who did not teach in the program were not aware of its purpose and goals.

- School-day teachers generally supported the programs as providers of extra academic support and a safe place to go after school, but did not know the program goals.
- School-day teachers were not aware of which of their students participated in the 21st CCLC. Some thought that having a roster of students would help them increase their communication with the out-of-school-time staff.
- Teachers who worked in the out-of-school-time programs did not communicate with other school-day teachers about the program during the work day.

In their words

Teachers had a general understanding of what the out-of-school-time programs offered to students. One elementary school teacher summarized it this way:

I think the goals of the program are to target the at-risk students, which in our area, we have many of them, and basically to supplement and enrich what's happening in classrooms.

The teacher, however, qualified her remarks by stating that she was not positive what activities were actually happening in the out-of-school-time program.

School-day teachers who taught in the out-of-school-time program were sometimes unclear about the goals and felt a tension between the push for academic support and providing students with a safe place to go after school.

- Even within programs, communication about the purpose and intentions of 21st CCLC was unclear.
- Teachers working in the program had different perspectives on its purpose and goals.

In their words

The following dialogue between two teachers who taught in both the school-day and out-of-school-time program reflects the lack of clarity about program goals. This exchange took place after the teachers were asked what they thought the goals of the program were:

Teacher 1: To engage students after school, I would say, in enrichment activities.

Teacher 2: [Do you mean] the official or the realistic?

Teacher 1: Yeah, I mean, I think that's the goal 'cause there's a big MEAP push before the MEAP to get scores up and kids reviewing.

Teacher 2: They should be doing academics, but I think unofficially, it's just to give the kids a place to be after school.

If the programs do not have a clear focus and cannot communicate the goals and outcomes of the program to the building principal and teachers, then the programs will be unlikely to gain the support of the school-day staff. The connection between what students learn in the school day and out-of-school-time will be severely limited.

Generally, the out-of-school-time staff were aware of the challenges that communicating with the school-day staff posed but were uncertain about how to overcome them.

- Project directors, site coordinators, and teachers all seemed to think that communication could be improved to build better support for the students that the 21st CCLC programs served.



Well, we've tried lots of ways to get information from the schools... We don't get it very often.
~ Program Director

In their words

One program director discussed the efforts of the out-of-school-time program to make curricular connections with the school:

Well, we've tried lots of ways to get information from the schools... We ask teachers to tell us monthly what they're teaching. Doesn't come from everybody by far. We've asked teachers to give us what types of homework we should be looking for for particular groups.... We've asked for simple things like spelling sheets and that kind of thing. We don't get it very often.

In this same program, teachers said communication was a weakness and one said memos were the only visible form of communication.

One program used "lead teachers" to serve as a resource to other staff and community providers and to communicate with teachers about the needs of individual students:

At least they know we have an afterschool program. From time to time, I've talked to the staff about [the program]. But that's definitely an area I can improve on.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Staff of the 21st CCLC programs in the study understood the importance of communicating with the school-day staff, and when it was brought to their attention, school-day teachers also saw the benefits of the program. Despite the challenges associated with communicating between an out-of-school-time program and a school-day program, many steps can be taken to increase the communication between the parties to create a more beneficial learning experience for all 21st CCLC attendees.

Encourage structured, regular communication with school-day staff.

- Site coordinators and/or project directors meet with the building principal at the beginning of the school year to establish a partnership and to discuss how the principal can help support the program.
- Include out-of-school-time staff, such as the site coordinator and/or staff who provide academic support, in all school staff meetings and in-service training.
- Implement formal communication processes between the 21st CCLC program and the school day staff. Memos and e-mails concerning out-of-school-time activities are sent out at least biweekly.
- Site coordinators visit classrooms to understand what is expected of students and to become a visible presence to all teachers and staff in the building.
- School-day teachers inform out-of-school-time staff of their grade level standards, benchmarks, and lesson plans to help the program plan activities that support the school-day learning and provide better homework assistance.

- Establish a process for dialogue with school-day teachers regarding specific needs of individual students, particularly those that seem to struggle during the day.
- Use homework logs or other methods to communicate about the daily homework needs of each student.

Develop out-of-school-time staffing patterns that support strong connections to the school day.

- Hire highly qualified, full-time site coordinators whenever possible (a requirement for newly funded Michigan 21st CCLC programs). The full-time position allows site coordinators to spend time at the schools interacting with students and teachers in their classrooms along with planning and coordinating activities.
- Hire school-day teachers as part-time site coordinators, if a full-time position is not possible, but do not expect this teacher to teach in the out-of-school-time program. Instead, the school-day teacher serves as a resource for the teachers and as a liaison for other organizations working at the center.
- Train all out-of-school-time instructional staff on delivering instructional activities that enrich and build upon what students learn during the school day. After school is an ideal time to work on experiential and project-based learning and help students gain more in-depth knowledge about the topics they are taught in school.
- Provide students with opportunities to explore the topics that interest them most.
- Provide out-of-school-time staff with opportunities for interaction with one another to discuss successes and challenges at their respective sites. These sessions should be hosted by the program director or academic coordinator.
- Provide opportunities for out-of-school-time staff to interact with school-day teachers—host a get-together, etc.



The 21st CCLC program is designed to benefit students most in need of assistance. The out-of-school-time and school-day staff need to work together to ensure that each child is receiving the most valuable help possible. For some students, the extra time will help them complete their homework. For others, enrichment activities will help them grow through experiential learning opportunities. Closer partnerships with open lines of communication will enable 21st CCLC programs to provide supplementary activities that enhance students' development and increase their academic achievement.

ENDNOTE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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