Why Youth Choose to Participate in 21st CCLC After-school Programs

Participating in after-school programs can help youth to improve academically and promote positive development, especially among low-achieving students attending low-performing schools. However, not all students attend by their own choice; many attend either because their parents want them to or because they are referred by school personnel. Because 21st CCLC programs emphasize improving academic performance, students may view the program as an extension of the school day and be less interested in attending than if programs are seen as emphasizing recreation or youth development. Thus, knowing what factors engage youth has the potential to help programs to attract and retain more students.

WHY IS VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

We know from research that youth who are free to choose whether to participate are more engaged in programs. They are more satisfied with the experience and feel more competent and self-motivated. When asked about their reasons for choosing to participate, most students say they come to learn new skills, get academic help, or be with friends. Programs are more likely to attract participants if they have activities that are related to young people's interests and staff who engage with their students and provide a supportive environment. A peer culture that is friendly and supportive is also important.

Racial/ethnic factors may affect participation rates and satisfaction with after-school experiences. Research in schools tells us that children who are in the minority racial or ethnic group in the school (regardless of whether that "minority" is white, black, or some other ethnic/racial group) experience more bullying. In addition, research shows that students tend to form relationships more easily with peers and teachers from their own racial/ethnic group. These same factors may influence their choices about participating in after-school programs.

WHY DO MICHIGAN YOUTH PARTICIPATE IN 21ST CCLC PROGRAMS?

We wondered whether some of the factors we identified from research explained students' choices about participation in Michigan's 21st CCLC after-school programs. Most of these programs serve primarily low-income students in low-performing schools. Using data from student satisfaction surveys and annual report forms submitted by programs, we explored why students participate in 21st CCLC programs and what factors influence their participation.

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Who participated in the study?

In the 2005-2006 program year 2,256 students at 117 program sites completed the program satisfaction surveys. The typical student completing the survey was in 6th grade, with the youngest students in 4th grade and the oldest in 12th grade. More girls than boys participated. The majority of the students overall were African American, reflecting the urban focus of the program. About one-third were White, 4% were Hispanic, and 4% were Arab American. Most attended regularly—62 days, on average—but we found that generally students who attended more were less satisfied with participating. Students rated the program in a number of areas, including staff support, opportunities for youth governance, peer relations, academic support, staff fairness in how they treated students, and the student's enjoyment of the program.

Which youth were more likely to participate voluntarily in 21st CCLC programs?

Overall, 71% of the students taking the survey said they participated by choice and the majority reported being satisfied with their program. However, they also reported feeling that staff were often unfair and that the activities offered were not challenging enough.

Across all sites, girls and older students more often said they participated by choice. Not surprisingly, those who found the activities more enjoyable were more likely to participate voluntarily. However, even after controlling for their overall satisfaction with the program, we found that students were more likely to choose to participate if they found the activities to be challenging.

Do racial and ethnic factors influence students' decisions about participating? If so, what are the factors that make a difference?

We measured the racial/ethnic makeup and cultural responsiveness of each program site. Cultural responsiveness was based on whether or not programs had staff that were of the same ethnic background and spoke the same language as most students in the group, and whether the program developed activities tailored to specific groups who attended the program. The program sites differed in the amount of racial or ethnic diversity they had, with some being relatively diverse and others having very little diversity.

We found that race and cultural factors did make a difference in choices about participation. Students were more likely to be voluntary participants if:

- A larger percentage of their peers were from their own racial or ethnic group

- Program staff reported providing a culturally responsive environment

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS FOR PROGRAM PRACTICE?

Several findings from this study have implications for programming at 21st CCLC sites.

Program activities

First, older students and girls reported higher rates of voluntary participation. Overall, students who found program activities to be more challenging were more likely to participate by choice. This finding reinforces what we know about promoting positive youth development through activities that allow youth to have opportunities to take on responsibility and engage in work that is meaningful and challenging. Our results suggest that the task for programs is to find activities that all adolescents, and particularly boys, find relevant and meaningful. Given this context, program coordinators may want to use youth councils to help design activities that will attract and retain older and male youth.

Race and ethnicity

Beyond program activities, this study suggests that racial and ethnic factors do influence 21st CCLC students' decisions about participating in their after-school programs. Across all racial/ethnic groups, youth were more likely to participate by choice if a higher percentage of peers in the program were of their own race/ethnicity. These findings highlight the need to proactively address potential inter-racial conflicts and facilitate cross-racial/ethnic friendships. This is as true for programs serving white students who attend a program that is predominantly students of another racial/ethnic group as it is for those serving minority students in a program that is predominantly white.

In addition, our work suggests that students were more likely to participate voluntarily if the program staff reported having a more culturally responsive environment, suggesting the influence of culture and ethnicity in the learning environment. Geneva Gay, whose work is referenced at the end of this brief, discusses the idea of culturally responsive teaching which uses the experiences and perspectives of different ethnic groups to facilitate effective teaching. She and others have suggested that teachers can do several things to create more effective teaching environments. They can:

- Incorporate culture into program curricula

- Foster cross-cultural respect and friendship

- Draw on students' varying life experiences

Although program staff cannot change the demographics of the schools they serve, they can be especially attentive to the inter-racial dynamics in their programs and help to ensure that the program environment feels inclusive for all youth.

FOR TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE ANALYSIS FOR THIS STUDY, SEE:

Wu, H-C., & Van Egeren, L. (In press). Voluntary participation and parents' reasons for enrollment in after-school programs: Contributions of race/ethnicity, program quality, and program policies. *Journal of Leisure Research*.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION ON IMPROVING THE PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT:

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Mahoney, J., Larson, R., & Eccles, J. (2005). *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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