



A BROADER VISION FOR USING 21ST CCLC FUNDING CAN LEAD TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES BEYOND SCHOOL WALLS, INCREASING COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND INVESTMENT

Community is baked into the name of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program.

In most places, the community aspect of 21st CCLC is represented by the development of partnerships with community-based organizations to expand the supports and opportunities provided to youth and their families through afterschool and summer programs. However, as part of the Integrated Service Delivery Study, we learned about some 21st CCLC grantees that are using the program as a platform for broader community renewal, a theme we explore more fully in this brief by focusing on 21st CCLC grantees in Oklahoma and Illinois.

THE MACOMB STORY

When Macomb Public Schools first learned about the 21st CCLC grant program, they immediately had a vision for how they would make use of grant funds in a way that would not only accomplish the goals and objectives of the program but also provide a platform for supporting community renewal. This seems like a tall order for a program focused on supporting afterschool and summer learning programs, but that is exactly what Macomb Public Schools has been trying to do with 21st CCLC funding since they received their grant in 2021.

With funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is conducting the **21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery Study**, a 3-year project designed to:



Identify 21st CCLC programs that are integral parts of broader systems characterized by the coordination of multiple programs, activities, and services



Document strategies and approaches that support the coordination and integration of services; and



Explore how students and families may benefit from integrated and coordinated service delivery

AIR is conducting the study in collaboration with state education agencies in the states of Illinois, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Washington. This brief summarizes early findings from the study based on a series of interviews completed in the fall of 2022 with 21st CCLC project directors and site coordinators associated with 30 centers in the five states enrolled in the study.

Macomb, Oklahoma, like many rural places in the middle of the country, has changed a lot over the span of the past 30 years (Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Green, 2020). A loss of manufacturing jobs in the community, a decline in downtown businesses, an aging population, and the transition of many young adults out of the community to follow more promising economic opportunities has left Macomb with fewer institutions and spaces where members of the community convene, socialize, work together, and care for one another. Shannon Browning, the current 21st CCLC program director and a Macomb native, has experienced what Macomb was when she was a child and what it has become in her adulthood. She was especially motivated to recapture that 21st CCLC community spirit and broader sense of collective belonging that was so important to her as a child, and she set about the process of envisioning how 21st CCLC funding could transform the community's schools from a place where families sent their children to be educated to the epicenter and lifeblood of the Macomb community.



What we noticed before was a disconnect between the school and the community. For some reason, we just weren't connecting. What we aspired to do, what we hoped to do, was build a bridge between the community and the school so that we were all on the same island instead of on two separate islands. I think that that's what we're doing with how we have designed our 21st CCLC program.

— Project Director, Macomb 21st CCLC

To accomplish this goal, Shannon and school officials focused on a key strategy: **invite the Macomb community into the district's schools with the goal of building trust and eventually making the broader community a key stakeholder in the program activities provided through the 21st CCLC program.** They did this by holding monthly community events—such as student talent shows, holiday parties, and dances—and by **recruiting community members with specific skills or knowledge (e.g., the director of a local horse rescue farm) to help develop and run afterschool programs.** This last strategy is particularly noteworthy. By asking community members to help provide programming, the school has in turn made those community members greater stakeholders in supporting the positive development of the community's youth.



What the staff here does is they identify resources that they know in the community; whether it be the church or the lady that does the rescues with horses. **They identify a resource, and then they create a partnership with them. And then doing that, what they do is now create and make them a stakeholder in the community . . .** So even to the smallest farmer out there, they can reach out to them and then bring them into the community when maybe they had bad experiences with the community before; draws them back in and says, *'Hey, we need your help.'* Okay, I'm needed now. Not only are you needed, now we have you thinking you have a vested interest in the outcome of all children. **So, it brings everybody closer together and makes everybody in part a stakeholder in the outcome of all the kids.** — Macomb Parent

. . . the program has in its mission statement to **inspire leadership and activate lifelong learners,** which in turn creates further investment from the community.

Matt Riggs, the district's superintendent, noted that the program provides reasons for parents and the community writ large to gather, connect and socialize, and see opportunities to be invested in ways that support both youth and community development. Through this process, both the program and the school took on a larger purpose than simply educating the community's youth—that of providing a platform for the development of **interpersonal relationships, trust, and norms for mutual aid and reciprocity** that benefits both the community's youth *and* the community overall.

The program is also very responsive to what youth want in the way of programming, which drives Shannon and other program leaders to develop additional community partnerships and recruit community members to design and implement programs that fulfill these interests. This effort has grown to such an extent that Macomb Public Schools offers more than **25 different afterschool activities** during the course of the school year, in a district with just over 300 total students!

The program's responsiveness to youth input on programming has resulted in unexpected but welcome outcomes for students. For example, some students were particularly interested in drones, so the 21st CCLC program was able to create a drone program. One of the students who was introduced to drones in that program ultimately graduated from Macomb High School and now flies drones for the U.S. military. Outcomes like this one are a huge source of pride for both the Macomb 21st CCLC program and the broader Macomb community.

A FOCUS ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP

In addition to being responsive to student interests, the program has in its mission statement to inspire leadership and activate **lifelong learners**, which in turn creates further investment from the community. One way the program achieves this mission is to rely on its older students to help lead program activities and staff the program. Older students are highly encouraged to create clubs they are interested in seeing in the afterschool program. In some cases, students are even connected with school-day teachers who help scaffold students' learning in the creation of lesson plans for individual activity sessions.

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And so, our goal is for all of these kids to eventually lead the clubs. I have an eighth grader now that pitched me an idea in seventh grade. He wanted to do RC [remote control] car racing, and so he came up with a lesson plan, but it needed some work. We got him together with the math teacher, and they created an amazing lesson plan. Now we have RC cars as a club because they created that. So that's what we want. We want these kids to take charge of our program. — Project Director, Macomb 21st CCLC



As youth enter high school, some are also afforded the opportunity to work in the program as paid staff, providing them with an additional opportunity to assume a leadership role in the program and develop skills that will help them as they transition to college or the workforce. Over time, providing these types of experiences to students has resulted in several students deciding that they want to go on to college to become teachers and return to Macomb to give back to their community.

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So, they're staffing kids here, teaching them life skills, giving them accountability, teaching them what it means to enter the adult world; but they're also doing it in a way that's semi-protected so that they do have a little bit of a grace to fall back on. — *Macomb Parent*

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Well, as a parent, it's a really unique situation to have not only kids in the program when they were younger, but then to have them transition into being the teachers and leaders. I was able to take my sons to open their first bank account at 16 and know that they had an income and that they were invested in something that was more than even just a job but having a sense of purpose by developing relationships and taking ownership and being a positive influence in kids' lives. — *Macomb Parent*

Parents recognize how the program provides a progressive set of leadership opportunities to the community's young people, starting with opportunities for student voice, actively participating in activity design, and ultimately work as paid staff in the program. This approach to cultivating youth leadership serves to further endear the program to the community, making parents and caregivers more invested in the program's continued success.

Macomb's Approach to Support Community Renewal

The approach Macomb Public Schools has relied on to use 21st CCLC funding to help drive community renewal hinges on its capacity to do the following:

- **Identify** and rely on the assets in the community to help provide those opportunities in ways that make the community feel needed, restore trust, support belonging, and create buy-in for the collective task of supporting and developing the community's youth.
- **Define** the opportunities youth and parents want in afterschool and summer learning programs, with a strong deference to what youth want in the way of activities.
- **Position** opportunities for youth to assume leadership roles in creating and staffing these activities, resulting in parents and caregivers seeing and appreciating the valuable skills their children are developing.

By relying on this approach, the 21st CCLC program director feels confident that the district is making substantive and tangible progress toward its goal of using 21st CCLC funding to support community renewal.

Community members similarly affirmed the program's progress in using 21st CCLC funds as a platform for community renewal:

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I'd say more than just creating a bridge to the community, the program kind of made the school the centerpiece of the community.

— *Macomb College Student*

... staff at Project Success have also built trust with the communities they work with by ensuring that the students and families they serve get **connected to the supports and resources they may need** ...

PROJECT SUCCESS

Macomb isn't the only community in our study to have taken this approach to 21st CCLC implementation. Project Success is a community-based organization that operates 21st CCLC programs in several rural communities in and around Danville, Illinois. Many of the communities served by Project Success share a number of characteristics with Macomb, particularly around the loss of industry and a shifting demographic that has left families that remain more isolated and detached from key sources of economic and social capital than was the case in previous decades.

Although largely funded by the 21st CCLC grant, the staff at Project Success have also built trust with the communities they work with by ensuring that the students and families they serve get connected to the **supports and resources they may need outside of school**, whether it's food, financial health, or behavioral health assistance. **This is possible due to the partnerships the team at Project Success has forged over the years with social service and health providers in the area.** One partner described Project Success as being a key "entry point" for the behavioral health and prevention services they provide. Families know that if they need something or if a teacher or school staff member identifies a family in need, they can go to Project Success for help in gaining access to key community resources and supports. By being there to support students and families across a variety of needs, Project Success is building trust and deep connections with the families they serve.

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And there's just certain services that we can't offer to our kids without help. And so, building strong partnerships was a key strategy for ensuring our students and families have access to the supports and resources they need.

— Program Director, Project Success

In addition, Project Success has a long-standing tradition of organizing Christmas drives for all families in the area who may not be financially able to provide presents for their children during the holiday season. Their goal is to ensure that every family celebrating Christmas can do so without facing hardship. Project Success recruits businesses and organizations in the area to support this effort, creating another platform for people in the community to be part of something larger than themselves and to make an investment in their community in a way that builds connection and a sense of collective responsibility, including among former students and families that were served by Project Success.

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We have a lot of former students that come back and they're like, 'We want to give back, especially at Christmastime.' And a lot of parents, they're like, 'You've helped us before, in the past. We're on our feet now. We want to help you.' So, it's really cool to see the people that have been affected by our programs as students or as parents, and they come back and they want to help because they know how the program has affected them.

— CEO, Project Success



Like in Macomb, there is a strong trend of Project Success participants coming back and working in the program due to a desire to give something back to the same program that supported them when they were in school. In this sense, the process of being part of the community and giving back is incredibly personal for these staff and steeped in their own experience growing up in the community, similar to what Shannon described in relation to her childhood in Macomb. Project Success has found a way to grow its own staff in ways that further builds on and enhances the connection to the communities the organization serves.

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I would say coming from a different background and being born and raised in this community has definitely helped me better achieve a one-on-one connection with my current students. I always felt that I wasn't known only because my family was Mexican . . . We were brand new to town. I always felt like I wasn't seen. So that's what I'm trying to bring to the students that are coming in, and I'm like, oh, if I see you, I'm studying social work . . . because a social worker that used to work here, she used to be very, very helpful and would help us find resources we needed . . . she was my inspiration. I obviously want to do that with my kids in the program . . . help them grow as a family and as a person here in the community, feeling connected. — *Staff Member, Project Success*



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I did see several former students and also parents who were working down in the Hoopston schools for Project Success. But one that kind of stands out to me is a young man who was the oldest of three boys. He was working for Project Success, and he had lost both of his parents to car accidents in the community. And so, as I was talking to him at the site, just as kind of an aside, he said, *'These kids need somebody like me. I'm not perfect, but they need somebody like me.'* He was there because he wanted to make a difference, which I think reflects how he felt supported by Project Success when he was a student.

— *Teacher and Project Success Staff Member*

Project Success also tries to provide leadership opportunities for older students in the programs they run and, like Macomb, has seen examples of older students wanting to continue on to college and even embark on a career in education based on their experiences in the program.

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Well, we have three high school students working [in] our program right now, and they just now graduated, and they're all three going to college. I know a couple of the kids are just like, *'Yeah, this isn't where I thought I would want to be.'* I've had a student that was thinking about teaching elementary that decided, *'Wow, junior high's not such a bad place after all.'*

— *Project Director, Project Success*

Ultimately, the success that Project Success has had in the communities it serves is predicated on cultivating a long-standing reputation for being there to help support students and families in need and providing opportunities to both former participants and the community writ large to be involved in these efforts in ways that people value and want to be part of. A high school principal who works with Project Success to implement 21st CCLC programs in his building describes what Project Success has accomplished in his community:

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When our community and our business owners and our families see what Project Success is putting into it [the 21st CCLC program], it just wants them to give even more. So, then what they put in then can be brought out tenfold. So, I hate to use the word synergy, but it's really just all working, where what they put in is leading to more, coming out to more than what they put in.

— High School Principal

Strategies for Supporting Community Renewal With 21st CCLC Funding

In examining how both the Macomb Public Schools and Project Success chose to use 21st CCLC funding to engage with the broader community, several key themes emerge. These themes have informed both programs' approaches to implementing their 21st CCLC grant and should be considered by other 21st CCLC programs seeking to achieve similar types of outcomes related to community renewal:

- **A realization that 21st CCLC funding could be a powerful lever for furthering community renewal and reinvestment.** In this sense, community renewal needs to be a formal part of the **vision** for how the 21st CCLC program is being implemented and aligned with a series of strategies that invite the community into the school and that create opportunities for members of the community to be stakeholders in the development of the community's youth.

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- **Intentional planning and holding events** so that the school is seen as the **hub for the social life of the community**, including the creation of activities and staffing opportunities for youth, former program participants, and community members to accomplish this outcome that foster a sense of belonging for all families and opportunities for developing social capital.
- **The creation of space by school leaders for the community to play a larger role** in programming and supports provided by the school, making families and community members **key stakeholders in the provision of supports and opportunities** provided through the program by inviting them to contribute and be a partner in what is happening at the school. This may mean recruiting community

members to provide programming that students want and that community members have expertise in, resulting in the creation of opportunities that otherwise would not be available to students and families.

- **Using the 21st CCLC program as an entry point for other social services, supports, and resources** provided in the community through the development of key partnerships with other community-based providers.
- **Drawing on young people in the community to staff programming**, provided in the community through the development of key partnerships with other community-based providers.



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