



Bipartisan Policy Center

A COVID-19 School-Age Care Solution: 21st Century Community Learning Centers

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School officials and policy makers are searching for solutions to support working families and their school-aged children this fall, due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, which has caused schools to implement remote learning and variable schedules. While these plans are intended to stop the spread of the virus, they will also create demand for school-aged child care from more than 23 million workers with no at-home care option, and necessitate additional educational support for children while they are not in the classroom.¹ One proven program already exists to meet these needs: 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Scaling up this program would provide working families—particularly low-income families—with the combination of school-age care and proven academic support they will need this school year.

The 21st Century program is the only federal grant program dedicated to funding afterschool and summer learning programs.² Each year, subject to federal appropriations, the Department of Education awards formula grants to every state's lead educational agency based on their share of Title I funding for low-income schools. Public or private afterschool programs at the local level may then apply to the state for funds through a competitive grant process. States are required to give priority to applications that are jointly submitted by a local educational agency and a community-based organization or other public or private entity. Awards from the 21st Century program help afterschool

programs that primarily serve students from schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families—although all students may be served—by offering enrichment activities like mentoring and tutoring that supplement student learning outside the classroom.

This program offers a structure by which states can efficiently meet increased demand for school-age care because it targets the low-income families most likely to need care for their children on remote learning days. According to the Urban Institute, working parents with incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty line were about half as likely (24%) to be able to work from home during the pandemic as parents above 250 percent of the FPL (54%).³ This disparity means a large proportion of the increased need for school-age care during the fall will come from low-income families. A scaled-up 21st Century program will be best suited to reaching these families as 70% of the nearly 1.4 million students served by 21st Century afterschool programs during the 2017-18 school year were eligible for free or reduced school lunch.⁴

In addition, parents already show overwhelming support for afterschool programs. According to a national survey by the Afterschool Alliance, three quarters of parents agreed that afterschool programs give them peace of mind when they are at work.⁵ And in the last decade, the percentage of Americans

who strongly agree that afterschool programs are an “absolute necessity” for their community has risen from 58% to 69%.⁶ Even before the pandemic, two in three parents in 2018 reported they are more likely to vote for an elected official who supports public funding for afterschool programs.⁷ Expanding the supply of afterschool programs and lengthening their operating hours could give parents a popular and well-established school-age care option that would enable them to get back to work.

With a clear need for school-age care, the 21st Century program offers a promising solution. Its unique blend of trusted afterschool care and proven academic support makes it the comprehensive program students will need to make up for learning deficits incurred during the spring shutdown and navigate unfamiliar school dynamics this fall.⁸ In recent years, students who attend afterschool programs funded by the 21st Century program have seen immense academic growth. During the 2017-18 school year, 50% of students who attended these programs improved their math grades and 49% improved their English grades.⁹ Additionally, 69% completed their homework more often and showed greater participation in class.¹⁰ These programs offer an effective supplement to virtual learning that could prevent further educational disparities and provide the consistent academic support students need to thrive during a school year with a constantly shifting educational format.

The Department of Education neither released guidance for 21st Century afterschool programs during the COVID-19 shutdown, nor indicated whether states could direct CARES Act dollars toward the program. Yet several states have taken actions that indicate afterschool centers can quickly adapt to unprecedented circumstances. According to the Afterschool Alliance, Idaho, Ohio, Oregon, and Montana have encouraged programs to continue using their grant dollars to offer alternative educational activities to their students while they remain at home.¹¹ These state policies signal that the 21st Century program could be a promising choice for states looking to support school-aged children in the upcoming school year.

Despite the clear advantages to financially supporting 21st Century, the program has received insufficient investment. In its 2015 reauthorization as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the program’s authorization level declined to \$1 billion for fiscal year 2017 and \$1.1 billion for FY2018 through FY2020, a major drop from its 2007 authorization level of \$2.5 billion.¹² As appropriations in real dollars remain at the maximum authorization level, 21st Century afterschool programs only serve 1.4 million students throughout the school year, even though roughly 26 million students are served by Title I funds annually.^{13,14}

As school districts around the country develop plans to balance student’s health and safety with their growth and development, it is increasingly likely that a large percentage of children will be learning from home for a portion of the school year. At the same time, a stable economic reopening requires the availability of school-age care so that parents can return to work or look for a job. Congress and state governments should consider harnessing the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program in order to offer a unique combination of school-age care and quality educational support to the children of the over 23 million workers who may need it this fall.

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan I. Dingel, Christina Patterson, and Joseph Vavra. *Child Care Obligations Will Constrain Many Workers When Reopening the US Economy*, Working Paper No. 2020-46, Becker Friedman Institute, April 2020, pp. 1-2. Available at: https://bfj.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/BFI_WP_202046.pdf.
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, "21st Century Community Learning Centers," March 2018. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>.
- 3 Michael Karpman, Dulce Gonzalez, and Genevieve M. Kenney, *Parents Are Struggling to Provide for Their Families during the Pandemic*, Urban Institute, May 2020, pp. 4. Available at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102254/parents-are-struggling-to-provide-for-their-families-during-the-pandemic_1.pdf.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, *21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) analytic support for evaluation and program monitoring: An overview of the 21st CCLC performance data: 2017-2018*. 2019. Available at: https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/01/FINAL_21st-cclc-gpra-syl7-18_8.13.2019.pdf.
- 5 Afterschool Alliance, "America After 3pm," 2014. Available at: http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/national.html#c/support/p_of_parents_working_parents_peace.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Afterschool Alliance, *America for Afterschool*, October 2018. Available at: http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/National_Parent_Poll_OnePager_final.pdf.
- 8 Megan Kuhfeld, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu, *Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement*, Ed Working Paper: 20-226, Annenberg Institute, Brown University, 2020. Available at: <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai20-226>.
- 9 U.S. Department of Education, *21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) analytic support for evaluation and program monitoring: An overview of the 21st CCLC performance data: 2017-2018*.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Afterschool Alliance, "Afterschool and Summer in the Time of COVID-19." Available at: <https://afterschoolalliance.org/covid/>.
- 12 Afterschool Alliance, "21st Century Community Learning Centers: 21st CCLC is a Critical Source of Funding for Many Local Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs." Available at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policy21stcclc.cfm>.
- 13 U.S. Department of Education, *21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) analytic support for evaluation and program monitoring: An overview of the 21st CCLC performance data: 2017-2018*.
- 14 U.S. Department of Education, "Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A)," 2018. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html#:~:text=Schools%20in%20which%20children%20from.of%20the%20lowest%2Dachieving%20students>.

