



The Maryland State Department of Education

Nita M. Lowey
21st Century Community Learning
Centers Program 2021 Cohort
Formative Evaluation Report for
Program Year 1

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PREFACE

This evaluation report details the findings of a formative evaluation of the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) Grant Program for the 2021 Cohort. It includes technical information for which the team anticipates being used by those who operate, manage, or evaluate out-of-school time (OST) programs, as well as those in the program evaluation sector. The authors assume that the reader has some technical knowledge of program evaluation as presented in reputable and related literature (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011; Spaulding, 2014; Vedung, 2017). The authors also assume that the reader understands the information and results presented in this report are not generalizable to all Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers nationwide, or all OST programs within the state of Maryland.

For the readers' consideration, the authors would like to offer context to this formative evaluation report. Particularly of note, in March 2020, following an executive order from the governor, all Maryland public schools closed and remained closed for differing time periods in efforts to mitigate the transmission of the COVID-19 virus (Maryland.gov, 2020). Subsequently, all public schools and OST programs transitioned to virtual instruction and programming for the remainder of the school year. By August 2021, all COVID-19 state mandates had ended and all public schools fully reopened (Maryland Public Schools, 2021). As such, in-person OST programming and instruction resumed. Still, it is plausible that some OST program sites, including those of the 21st CCLC Grant Program of the 2021 Cohort, experienced residual effects of the COVID-19 virus that continued to impact programming.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Grant Program is a federally funded program under Title IV, Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (MSDE, 2018a). The program provides federal funding to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) for the establishment of community learning centers that provide academic, artistic, and cultural enrichment opportunities for school-aged children. The guidelines of the federal grant mandates that, as the SEA, MSDE must complete periodic program evaluations to ensure that its subgrantees are providing effective and quality programming that continuously improves student achievement (MSDE, 2018b). As such, program evaluation is a critical process in which both MSDE and its subgrantees are to participate.

MSDE received Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC federal funding to provide communities with opportunities to “establish or expand activities in community learning centers” (MSDE, n.d., p.2). Subsequently, MSDE contracted Psychometric Solutions, LLC (hereafter Psychometric Solutions) to serve as the external evaluator for the Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort. Psychometric Solutions’ Program Evaluation Team (program evaluation team) conducted a formative evaluation to assess MSDE’s implementation of recommendations from previous grant cohorts. Said recommendations were designed to increase MSDE’s provision of effective and continuously improving programming. Overall, the program evaluation team found that:

1. MSDE routinely provides technical assistance in the form of webinars, monthly meetings, and one-on-one assistance to its subgrantees;
2. As it relates to SEA Performance Goals, MSDE has implemented recommendations from the previous summative evaluation report; and
3. Subgrantees could benefit from additional training regarding various types of program evaluation and corresponding data collection and reporting.

Related to its findings, the program evaluation team recommends that some subgrantees, along with their respective external evaluators, are offered technical assistance and support to address their differentiated level of need, support, and training. Also recommended is a longitudinal analysis of those subgrantees that have been awarded for multiple years. By doing so, MSDE will ensure that effective and continuous programming improvement occurs each year of the existing and subsequent grant cohorts. The program evaluation team offers additional insight with a discussion of the findings followed by an acknowledgement of the limitations associated with this evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

State Educational Agencies (SEAs), such as the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), are awarded grant funding through the United States Department of Education (USED) to establish state-level 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) programs. The grant funding hierarchy is displayed in Figure 1. As the SEA, MSDE is responsible for selecting subgrantees who meet their established eligibility requirements and for ensuring they provide structured out-of-school time (OST) programs that align with the primary goals (Table 1) of the Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program (MSDE, 2018; USDE, 2018). Additionally, the grant mandates that the SEAs ensure that subgrantees' programs are effective and continuously improving through the process of program evaluation (MSDE, 2018a). As such, MSDE must make sure its subgrantees:

1. Achieve effectiveness based on the assessment of objective data, an established set of performance indicators, and scientifically based research for assisting students with meeting state academic achievement standards;
2. Utilize performance indicators and performance measures as part of the evaluation process;
3. Conduct a periodic evaluation of how the programs and activities are providing quality academic enrichment;
4. Utilize evaluation findings for continuous improvement of the program, development, and dissemination of promising practices, and for general information to the public; and,
5. Lead ongoing technical assistance and training that enables providers to implement effective programs and evaluation strategies (MSDE, 2018a).

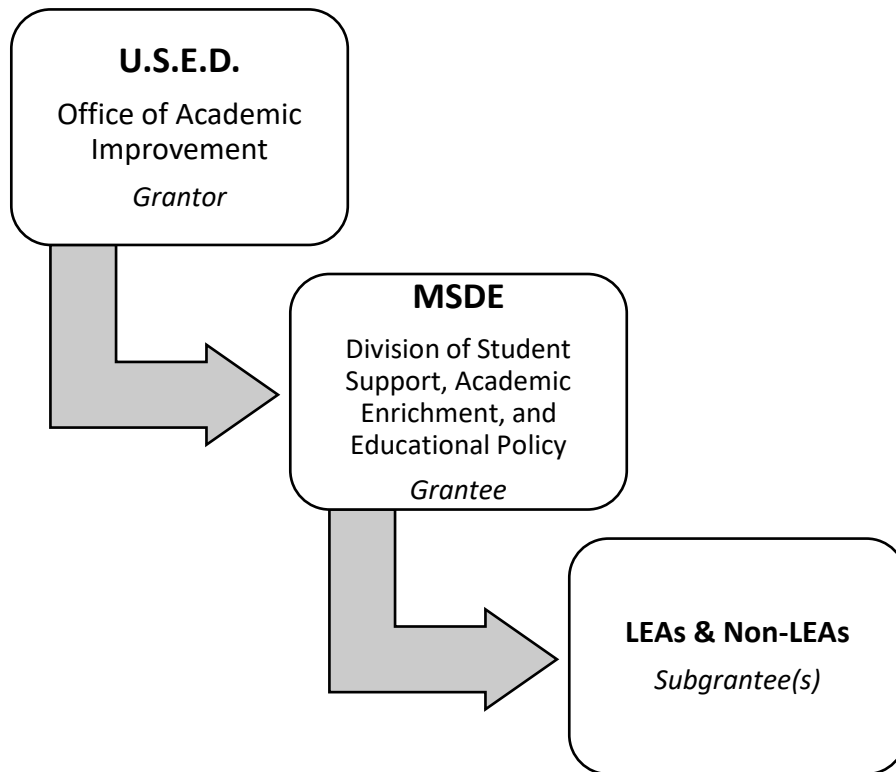


Figure 1. The Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program Operational Hierarchy and Funding Structure. This figure reflects the operational hierarchy of the Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program and the procedure for the dissemination and management of grant funds.

Table 1
SEA Performance Goals

Goal	Goal Language	Status
1.	Assist every student to realize his or her potential.	Mandated
2.	Develop and support a strong accountability system to increase academic success for <i>all</i> students.	Mandated
3.	Promote a safe, healthy, and orderly environment for learning and teaching.	Mandated
4.	Ensure educator and administrative effectiveness.	Optional
5.	Promote students' physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being.	Mandated
6.	Expand high-quality educational opportunities for students and parents.	Mandated
7.	Work with districts to strengthen infrastructure; and	Optional
8.	Increase communication and partnerships with stakeholders statewide.	Optional

The Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program 2021 Cohort

In February 2021, MSDE released *The Maryland State Department of Education, Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) Grant Application*. Eligible organizations and agencies were encouraged to apply, including local educational agencies (LEAs), non-profit agencies, city or county government agencies, faith-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and for-profit corporations (MSDE, 2021). The grant period for the 2021 cohort is three years—July 1, 2021, through August 31, 2024 (MSDE, 2021).

MSDE conducted a comprehensive peer review and validation process of grant applications. From the applicant pool, MSDE selected OST programs for the 2021 cohort. The 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort consists of 37 program sites across 18 lead agencies. Table 2 reflects the subgrantees by agency type.

Table 2
2021 21st CCLC Subgrantees Lead Agency Type

Lead Agency Type	(n)	%
LEAs	4	22%
Non-LEAs	14	78%
Total	18	100%

The 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort accounts for eight LEAs to include Baltimore City, Caroline County, Frederick County, Howard County, Montgomery County, Prince George's County, Queen Anne's County, and Worcester County. The subgrantees have varied operational schedules. The operational categories are as follows: School Year (SY); Summer (S); School Year and Summer (SY+S); Saturdays and Summer (Sat+S); and School Year, Saturdays, and Summer (SY+Sat+S). Tables 3 and 4 reflect the subgrantees' local jurisdictions and operational schedules by lead agency type, respectively.

Table 3
21st CCLC 2021 Subgrantees' Jurisdictions by Most Eastern and Western Regions

Most Eastern Region	Most Western Region
Baltimore City	Frederick County
Caroline County	Howard County
Queen Anne's County	Montgomery County
Wicomico	Prince George's County

Table 4*21st CCLC 2021 Subgrantees' Operational Hours by Lead Agency Type*

Operational Frequency	(n)			%
	Non-LEAs	LEAs	# of Program Sites	
School Year (SY)	3	4	7	19%
Summer (S)	4	1	5	14%
School Year and Summer (SY+S)	18	0	18	49%
Saturdays and Summer (Sat+S)	1	0	1	3%
School Year, Saturdays, and Summer (SY+Sat+S)	6	0	6	16%
Total	32	5	37	100%

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Purpose of the Evaluation

As required by ESSA (2015), MSDE must periodically conduct program evaluations to ensure that its Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program subgrantees are systemically progressing toward providing effective and quality programming. Additionally, MSDE also established grant requirements stipulating that subgrantees must plan for a professional and independent evaluation of its program. In 2023, through a competitive process, MSDE contracted the Psychometric Solutions' program evaluation team to serve as its external evaluator for its Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program, thereby complying with the federal grant requirements. At the issuance of the contract, the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort had completed their first year of programming and was near the conclusion of the second year.

From the onset of the contract, the program evaluation team was tasked with completing a formative evaluation to provide MSDE with a review, analysis, and summary of the status of local evaluations for Year 1 (July 2021 – August 2022). To assess if MSDE is systemically progressing towards offering effective and continuously improving programming, the program evaluation team developed the following formative evaluation questions:

1. What notable changes have occurred within the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort?
2. Is there evidence that MSDE has used evaluation findings to ensure effective and continuously improving programming?
3. Are subgrantees utilizing the program evaluation process effectively?

METHODOLOGY

Upon the award of the Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program External Evaluator contract, the program evaluation team attended an initial planning meeting with MSDE. During said meeting, the entities discussed the goals and objectives of the three-year evaluation project. The team presented an evaluation work plan to MSDE for approval. The work plan provided details regarding the anticipated evaluation activities to occur for the formative evaluation of Programming Year 1, including the writing and submission of this report.

Sample

The 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort consists of 37 program sites spread across 18 lead agencies operating within eight state of Maryland jurisdictions. Of the 18 lead agencies, 22% (n = 4) are local educational agencies (LEAs), while 78% (n = 14) are non-local educational agencies, including 12 community-based organizations, 1 faith-based organization, and 1 non-profit (see Table 2). The program evaluation team examined the population of subgrantees for its formative evaluation of Program Year 1.

Procedures

The program evaluation team met with MSDE to plan for the formative evaluation for Year 1 of the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort. After the initial meetings, the team developed an evaluation plan, complete with evaluation objectives and questions. Upon acceptance of the proposed evaluation plan, the program evaluation team prepared a data collection plan, which included quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses.

The program evaluation team received access to an electronic database—The Maryland State Department of Education, Out-of-School Time Grant Resources Folder—which contained subfolders for each subgrantee within the cohort. Upon receiving access, the program evaluation team examined the folders for confirmation that each member had provided an evaluation report for Year 1 as required.

Data Collection and Analyses

Archival Data Reviews

Upon consideration of all factors, the program evaluation team deemed a mixed methods approach for collecting data would best address the evaluation objectives and questions. This approach allows for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Typically, qualitative research methods rely on verbal procedures to collect data, whereas quantitative research methods utilize statistical or mathematical procedures to capture data (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2002). To analyze the quantitative and qualitative data, the program evaluation team analyzed the data via descriptive, content, and thematic analysis.

The program evaluation team was given access to multiple electronic databases that contained program related documents. The program evaluation team examined the electronic databases for evidence that addressed each of the evaluation objectives and evaluation questions. The team used descriptive statistics for reporting summaries of the data they analyzed, mostly demographic (Mishra et al., 2019). The team analyzed the data using content and thematic analyses, which both aim to examine the narratives using an analytical approach to sorting the content into smaller related contents prior to providing descriptive findings to the data (Vais Moradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The team presents the evaluation findings in order of the evaluation questions. Again, the evaluation questions are as follows:

1. What notable changes have occurred within the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort?
2. Is there evidence that MSDE has used evaluation findings to ensure effective and continuously improving programming?
3. Are subgrantees utilizing the program evaluation process effectively?

Archival Data Review

To explore, if any, the notable changes that the MSDE has made within the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort in comparison to previous years, the program evaluation team compared the released 2018 Grant Application to that of the 2021 Grant Application. It was discovered that MSDE has made significant changes to the application requirements as it relates to the grant application document format and sections. In comparison to the 2018 Grant Application, the requirements, criteria, and terms are more explicitly stated.

To explore if MSDE has used evaluation findings to ensure effective and continuously improving programming, the program evaluation team reviewed the summative evaluation report as submitted by Psychometric Solutions to determine if any MSDE has implemented any of stated recommendations. The program evaluation team found that MSDE has in fact implemented both state recommendations as follows:

1. That MSDE continue to offer both collective and individualized technical support; and,
2. That MSDE should examine the SEA Performance Goals that are not commonly selected and consider incorporating them into its competitive priorities.

Technical Assistance

To explore the extent to which MSDE continues to offer both collective and individualized technical support, the program evaluation team first analyzed the archival data. From the analysis, the program evaluation team found that MSDE routinely provides technical assistance in the form of webinars, monthly meetings, and one-on-one assistance to its subgrantees. Such technical assistance included guidance regarding how to align programming activities, develop indicators and identify data sources that demonstrate and directly correspond with the eight State Education Agency (SEA) goals. From the analysis of the archival data, the program evaluation team learned that the MSDE provided its subgrantees with additional OST Evaluation Criteria resources including guidelines and technical support. The OST Evaluation Criteria Guidelines were disseminated in May 2022 to subgrantees stating that subgrantees with multiple program sites were permitted to submit one evaluation report that was to include the evaluation framework, methodology, and evaluation findings for each site. Such an amendment simplified the evaluation reporting process for subgrantees with various sites. Subgrantees were also provided with an evaluation plan template to facilitate development of their evaluation questions, objectives, sources, data collection methods, and reporting. Subgrantees were offered customer service support sessions at which they could receive further assistance. Lastly, there is evidence that two future technical assistance sessions for subgrantees are planned in 2023 and 2024.

SEA Performance Goals

To explore the extent to which MSDE has examined the SEA Performance Goals not commonly selected and considered incorporating them into its competitive process, the program evaluation team compared previous grant information guides with that for the 2021 21st CCLC Cohort. The program evaluation team found that for this cohort, subgrantees were mandated to incorporate SEA Performance Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, into its programming, and subsequently had to select at least one from the optional list of SEA Performance Goals 4, 7, and 8. Of the eight SEA Performance Goals (see Table 1), the analysis of the archival data indicates that 46% (n = 17) of subgrantees explicitly report their alignment with the SEA Performance Goals. Of those reported, 100% (n = 17) elected optional SEA Performance Goal 4 and 35% (n = 6) elected optional SEA Performance Goals 7 and 8.

Program Evaluation Process

To explore if subgrantees are utilizing the program evaluation process effectively, the program evaluation team analyzed the evaluation reports submitted for each program site. For this formative evaluation, the program evaluation team considered adherence to the OST Evaluation Guidelines as evidence of subgrantees using the program evaluation process effectively. Findings show that while each site has completed an evaluation report, as it relates to following the OST Evaluation Criteria Data Reporting Guidelines, 49% (n = 18) attempted to prepare an evaluation report with the required information. Of the 18 lead agencies, 38% (n = 7) of them operate multiple program sites. These seven lead agencies account for 70% (n = 26) of all programs for the 2021 subgrantees. Some of the lead agencies with multiple program sites provided one report with a summary of all operating locations, while others provided individualized reports. Lastly, there is variation in methodology and metric reporting across the 2021 subgrantees.

Other Findings

As the program evaluation team conducted its thematic analysis, it was discovered that there was variation among 2021 subgrantees regarding reporting of enrollment, attendance, and days of programming data. While 100% of subgrantees report enrollment, some report enrollment as number of students registered, and others as number of students participated. As it relates to attendance reporting, 73% (n = 27) of subgrantees report attendance, but there is variation in approach. Of those that report attendance, the data is presented as either count, percentage, and/or average. The reporting of the number of programming days is just as varied. Half of the subgrantees (n = 18) report their programming day numbers.

Lastly, the program evaluation team found that some of the evaluation reports attempt to speak to programming impact, although impact evaluation is not explicitly stated as the framework for the report. Other reports attempt to speak to outcomes. However, for those reports, metrics are not clearly defined.

DISCUSSION

As the grantee of the federal 21st CCLC grant, the MSDE is responsible for ensuring that their 21st CCLC Subgrantees:

1. achieve effectiveness based on the assessment of objective data, an established set of performance indicators, and scientifically based research for assisting students with meeting state academic achievement standards.
2. utilize performance indicators and performance measures as a part of the evaluation process.
3. conduct a periodic evaluation of how the program and activities are providing quality academic enrichment.
4. utilize evaluation findings for continuous improvement of the program, development, and dissemination of promising practices, and for general information to the public; and,
5. lead ongoing technical assistance and training that enables providers to implement effective programs and evaluation strategies (MSDE, 2018a).

MSDE has consistently ensured effective and quality programming for the 21st CCLC 2021 Cohort through its efforts of revising its grant application and the technical assistance provided before, during, and after both the application and award processes. Additionally, the archival data review suggests that MSDE is utilizing the program evaluation process to effectively monitor its subgrantees throughout the grant cycle. The evidence suggests that although varied in quality, all subgrantees make a concerted attempt to demonstrate its programming quality by reporting of enrollment, attendance, programming hours, and alignment to SEA Performance Goals.

Limitations

Because program evaluation derives from the field of social science and is subjective in nature, the program evaluation team deems a discussion of the limitations imperative and professionally responsible. The program evaluation team promotes that it is only through the acknowledgment and intentional discussion of limitations that evaluators can improve upon their evaluation practices (Spaulding, 2015; Morrison & Harms, 2018). Hence, the team discusses the apparent limitations of this evaluation in our evaluation report.

Evaluation Activities

For the formative evaluation report, the program evaluation team placed great emphasis on its archival data review as its primary means of data collection. Due to circumstances beyond the program evaluation team's control, additional data collection activities, such as structured interviews and site observations, could not be incorporated into this report. As such, the program evaluation team acknowledges these limitations, but asserts adequate data has been obtained to produce a quality report.

Recommendations

The broad purpose of program evaluation is to improve the program's effectiveness and strengthen its quality for the population served by objectively examining program components (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2016). Given our evaluative findings, the team offers MSDE recommendations to strengthen its Nita M. Lowey 21st CCLC Program. The team does not consider these recommendations to be final or exhaustive.

Recommendation 1

The program evaluation team found that MSDE continuously provides guidance to its subgrantees regarding program evaluation standards and that its subgrantees are utilizing the program evaluation process. Moreover, the program evaluation team found that MSDE provides sufficient technical assistance in the forms of webinars, in-person sessions, and printed resources. Despite ongoing technical assistance, there is variation among the subgrantees in terms of adherence to said program evaluation approaches, adherence to reporting guidelines, data collection and reporting, as well as reporting quality. As such, it is recommended that some subgrantees, along with their respective external evaluators, are offered technical assistance and support to address their level of need.

Recommendation 2

Serving as the MSDE external evaluator for several consecutive years, Psychometric Solutions could examine repeat subgrantees' progression, starting with the 21st CCLC 2015 Cohort. Thus, Psychometric Solutions has noted that of the participating lead agencies, multiple are repeat subgrantees. As such, the program evaluation team recommends a longitudinal analysis of those subgrantees that have been awarded for multiple years. Doing so will facilitate better understanding of their success, which could inform future technical assistance sessions for more recent subgrantees.

Conclusion

In summary, MSDE has utilized the program evaluation process to make strategic adjustments in its effort to offer effective and continuously improving Nita N. Lowey 21st CCLC Programming. The changes that MSDE has made to its grant application along with the evaluation reporting guidelines and practices has facilitated its subgrantees' ability to use the program evaluation process effectively. By intentionally and actively engaging its 2021 subgrantees, MSDE has ensured a process of quality assessment. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacting the start of the 2021 21st CCLC Cohort, the measures MSDE has implemented, such as its technical assistance and effective monitoring, will facilitate quality programming for the remainder of the grant cycle.

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