

LOCAL ESA OPERATES A 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS PROGRAM: A SUCCESS STORY

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Background

Ten years ago, in 1998, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the first 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grants. The primary focus of the original funding was to provide safe environments for students to play and learn in afterschool and during the summer. With the introduction of No Child Left Behind, the focus of the 21st CCLC programs became more academic in nature, working to integrate education, enrichment, and recreation in a safe, caring environment with the intention of improving student academic achievement. The U.S. Department of Education defines the 21st CCLC program as:

This program supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children.

(<http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>, ¶1)

The U.S. Department of Education also handed the administration of these grants over to the state departments of education, and annual funding of these projects to local education agencies and nonprofit organizations serving youth is still available. The federal legislation for 21st CCLCs states that the following types of organizations can apply for funding from the state allocation:

For this program, eligible entity means a local educational agency, community-based organization, another public or private entity, or a consortium of two or more of such agencies, organizations, or entities. States must give priority to applications that are jointly submitted by a local educational agency and a community-based organization or other public or private entity.

(www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/eligibility.html, ¶2)

With 10 years of 21st CCLCs completed and years of community education programming, there is a wealth of knowledge about what works and what doesn't work. One program in northern rural Michigan used that existing research integrated with what would work for their school districts to develop an exemplary 21st CCLC program. The S.P.A.R.K.S. (Students Participating in Academics and Recreation for Knowledge and Success) program is unique in that it was designed and operated by the local ESA, the Clare-Gladwin Regional Education Service District (Clare-Gladwin RESD). Because the ESA enjoys a positive relationship with all school districts in the region, it was a natural fit for this organization to accept responsibility for the program and broker the relationships between the three participating school districts. The Clare-Gladwin RESD has taken its role very seriously, not only serving as the primary connector and communicator between districts, but also taking evaluation data that has been collected and analyzed by the external evaluator, iEval, to make significant program

improvements. This article will explore the relationship between the program design, program communication, and program evaluation, how that relationship supports continuous improvement, and how the S.P.A.R.K.S. program is able to use those connections to achieve its outcomes.

What is S.P.A.R.K.S.?

In January 2003, the Clare-Gladwin RESD partnered with three local school districts to develop S.P.A.R.K.S., which was created due to the significant needs of the youth and their families in the two counties. Clare and Gladwin counties are approved Renaissance Zones with some of the worst economic and social indicators in the state.

The S.P.A.R.K.S. program served four elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school, and it will be expanding to include an additional high school and school district, for a total of 13 school buildings in July 2008. Staff members at the Clare-Gladwin RESD administer the program but work closely with the local districts and the external evaluator. The S.P.A.R.K.S. program was created to address many different needs including: economic (providing quality free afterschool care with transportation), social (varying the interactive experiences), isolation (providing experiences not available in our area normally), academic (ensuring certified teachers provide one-on-one and group tutoring for students), enrichment (engaging in disguised learning opportunities), and recreation (creating time to just have fun).

Program Design

The S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members are employed by the Clare-Gladwin RESD but are located at the local school buildings. Critical components of the program design include the staffing structure, the staff roles, and the daily schedule.

Staffing Structure

The S.P.A.R.K.S. program relies on a small staffing structure to provide for strong communication, consistency in program delivery, efficient flow of data, and constant review of practice to provide quality programming. One full-time program director and one full-time administrative assistant handle the logistics of running the program. Eight different sites serve students in two counties, each staffed with a full-time site coordinator and direct service staff.

Staff Roles

While the eight program sites have some autonomy of scheduling, student recruitment, etc., there must be consistency in staff responsibilities to help ensure program quality, which is the primary role the Clare-Gladwin RESD provides. The program director and site coordinators meet formally every three weeks, informally daily through phone calls and emails, and monthly through site visits by the program director. The site coordinators also meet with their site staff each week.

Daily Schedule

All program participants attend two sessions per week in both math and language arts to ensure that critical academic components from the regular school day are reinforced. The next priority for students is recreation, followed by technology, community service, and a variety of enrichment offerings. Student choice is viewed as an important part of quality programming. Different ages have different degrees of input ranging from choice of activities to designing the activities.

Program Communication

It is essential to ensure constant and clear communication on many levels in order to create a successful program. The Clare-Gladwin RESD was perfectly poised to take on this role.

Program Director as Lead

The program director, an administrative role at Clare-Gladwin RESD, is in constant communication with the site coordinators, evaluator, school representatives, community, and funders. She holds regular formal meetings and constant informal communication (e.g., phone, email) with site coordinators to discuss budgets, licensing, evaluation, etc. She conducts professional development, gives presentations at local community groups and school board meetings, develops a community annual report about program progress toward success, seeks additional funding, and works in a participatory way with the external evaluator. Site coordinators are provided an evaluation timeline that gives monthly assignments for disseminating current evaluation data and processes that need to be followed to obtain new data.

Site Coordinators as Lead

The site coordinators conduct weekly staff meetings at their own sites because constant attention with all direct staff is vital. Staff meetings focus on professional development, review of evaluation findings, Youth Program Quality Assessment data, program design elements, field trips, and creating action plans based on data to improve programming. Site coordinators also communicate regularly with parents through newsletters, a web site, phone calls, positive postcards, and visits as the children are being picked up. Communication with the regular school day staff can include messages in school mailboxes and email, conferences during teacher preparatory time, observations during academic sessions, building staff meetings, and district professional development.

Program Evaluation

The Michigan Department of Education mandates that each grantee have a local evaluator. This decision to require a local evaluator is state-based and not part of the federal

legislation. Based on a highly regarded recommendation from a local superintendent and member of the initial 21st CCLC advisory committee, Clare-Gladwin RESD chose Dr. Wendy Tackett, iEval, to lead the local evaluation for all 21st CCLC grants administered by Clare-Gladwin RESD. The local evaluator, in turn, works closely with the state evaluation team to provide necessary data for the statewide annual performance report provided to the U.S. Department of Education.

While the concept of evaluation as a way to determine value or make program improvements is generally accepted, the use of evaluation varies dramatically based on the person/organization using the data. For example, the U.S. Department of Education is interested in using summative evaluation data to determine if 21stCCLC impacts student academic outcomes such as grades and test scores. The Michigan Department of Education is interested in those same student academic outcomes, but also wants to know about outcomes associated with youth development (e.g., career exploration, cultural enrichment) and characteristics of successful programs. The local programs are interested in all of the previous outcome data, but they are most significantly concerned with formative evaluation that will help with continuous program improvement. The Clare-Gladwin RESD has taken the evaluation data provided, made substantial changes to programming based on that data, and seen success in students, school partnerships, and parent satisfaction. The rest of the article will focus on the data collected, how it was analyzed, and what changes resulted from the use of this data.

In order for the local programs to be able to use data to make continuous program improvements, it is critical that the evaluation process is a partnership between the local program, the local school districts, and the external evaluator, with cooperation from the state

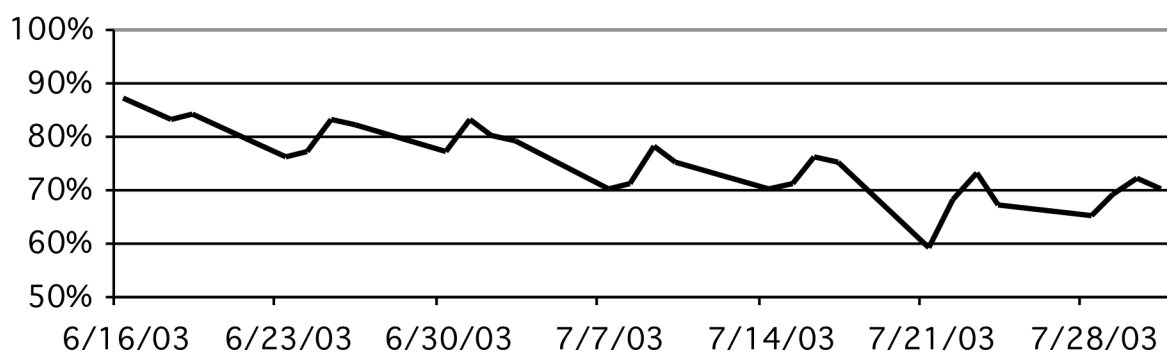
evaluation team. It is a vital role that provides an external perspective to the data and the ability to process data at a more sophisticated level than most internal evaluation teams.

There are many sources of data, and the external evaluator needs the ability to access data in a timely fashion in order to provide appropriate reports back to the local programs to make improvements, which is why the cooperative partnership is so important. And, because the Clare-Gladwin RESD has a respected relationship with the local school districts, the sharing of data is seamless. The evaluation plan for S.P.A.R.K.S. focuses on many types of data including program attendance and activities; Youth Program Quality Assessment; surveys and interviews of parents, students, regular school day staff, and S.P.A.R.K.S. staff; regular school day attendance, behavior data, quarterly grades, and other academic scores; state standardized test results; social emotional surveys; and program observations. Below are several examples of how the S.P.A.R.K.S. program, in partnership with iEval, uses the various sources of data to make programmatic decisions.

Program Attendance

In 2003, the program attendance data made it clear that attendance was significantly dropping off after the third week of summer programming and again after the fifth week.

SPARKS Daily Attendance Rates: OVERALL Summer 2003



Once the program staff knew that, they were able to look closely at what incentives could be offered later in the program to encourage students to keep coming. The local sites began offering field trips at the end of the week, building up to a larger field trip at the end of the program that students could only participate in if they were keeping up with regular attendance.

Youth Program Quality Assessment

The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) is required for use by Michigan 21st CCLC programs as part of the evaluation process. The High Scope Educational Research Foundation developed the YPQA instrument. The Michigan Department of Education contracted with High Scope to provide training to all 21st CCLC programs in the state, the local 21st CCLC staff conduct program observations, and the external evaluator is involved in helping to analyze the data.

The YPQA is a validated instrument designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth have fun, work, and learn with adults. The YPQA evaluates the quality of youth experiences as youth attend workshops and classes, complete group projects, and participate in meetings and regular program activities. For staff, the YPQA process is a great way to see what is really happening in their programs and to build professional competencies. (<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=117>, ¶1)

Program staff members conduct observations at their own site and other sites using a set of scorable standards for best practices in after school programs. Observations focus on a safe and supportive environment, student and staff interaction, and engagement. Staff members are able to envision optimal quality youth programming using a shared language and scoring rubric

that can be used for comparison and assessment of progress over time. The immediate feedback empowers site staff members to create action plans and make changes for program improvement. For example, staff at one of the sites during the fall 2007 observation found that they scored lower in the area of children developing a sense of belonging, so they were able to create activities designed to encourage students get to know each other better, identify more closely with the program, and develop stronger relationships. Staff, in real time, administers the YPQA instrument, bringing the user directly into the process and providing immediate results.

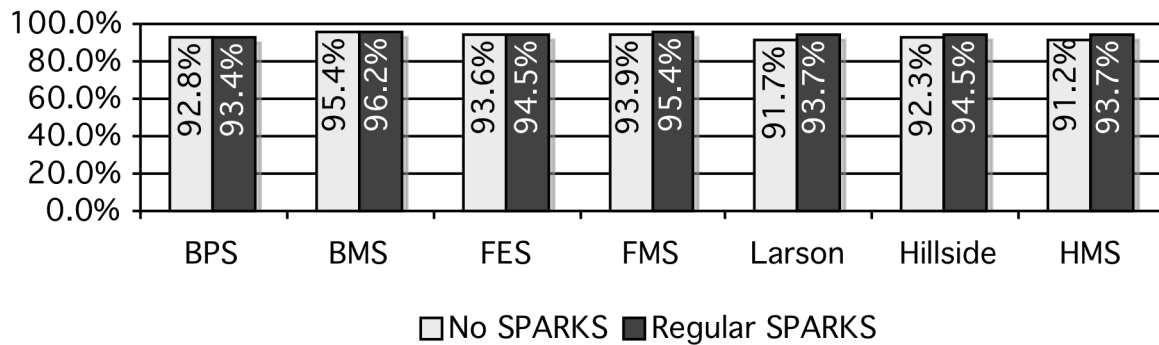
Parent Surveys at Events

In 2007, parents/guardian were given an informal survey at several events where parents were invited to be part of S.P.A.R.K.S. activities. It was determined that parents/guardians wanted their children to go to S.P.A.R.K.S. because it provides time to complete homework and opportunities to play with other children, but they also wanted more individualized homework help for their kids. This information helped S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members prioritize future programming, ensuring that sufficient help was available during homework time.

Regular School Day Attendance

One of the premises of afterschool programming is that if students enjoy the program, their regular school day attendance will increase. Having local data to support that hypothesis is extremely helpful in convincing school leaders about the positive impact of the program. Because data is collected by the local evaluator on all students then comparisons are done between those students participating in S.P.A.R.K.S. compared to the rest of the student population, the S.P.A.R.K.S. programs have been able to show that regular attendance in the program significantly increases school day attendance.

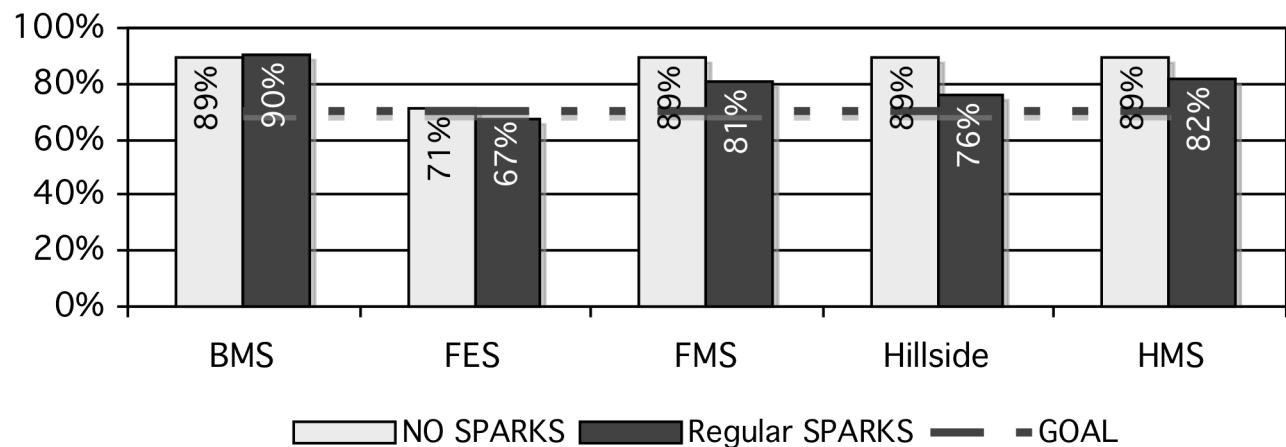
Building Average Daily Attendance: 2006-2007



State Standardized Tests

The state test in Michigan is the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The MEAP reading and math tests are used for general comparisons between regular S.P.A.R.K.S. participants and the rest of the student population, and it is also used on an individual student basis to target instruction during the summer program that focuses primarily on academics. From the graph below, the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members were able to see that the regular participants, while mostly meeting the program goal of 70% maintaining/improving, were performing at a lower level than the rest of the students.

Maintained/Improved on MEAP Reading 2006



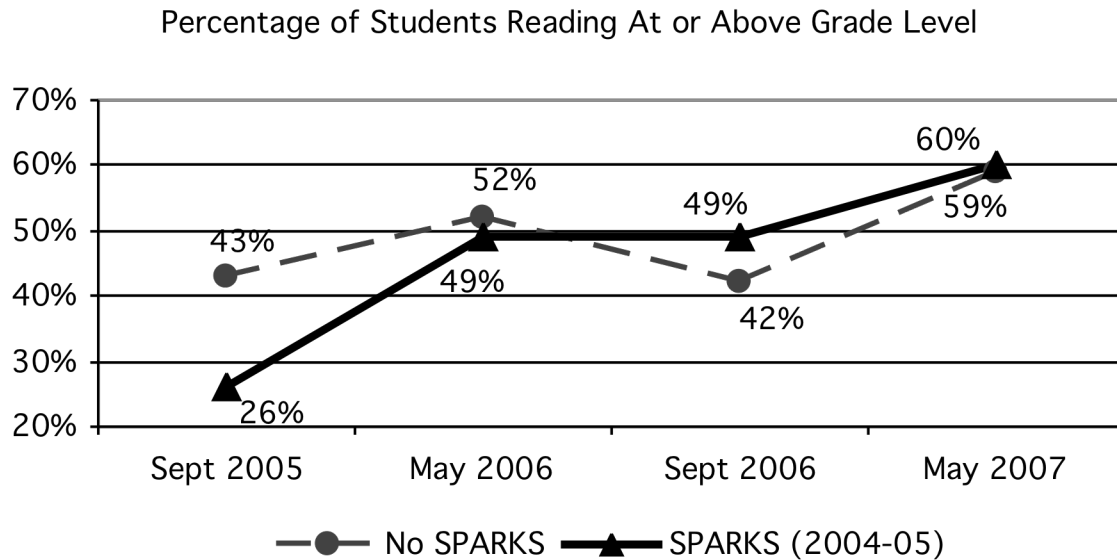
This indicates that the S.P.A.R.K.S. program was indeed targeting the students at highest risk of academic failure at most sites and more detailed analysis helped determine areas to focus on during academic enrichment and homework help.

Social Emotional Surveys

In the early years for the S.P.A.R.K.S. program, the evaluator used a short survey focusing on the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets. Data from 2003 was used to provide evidence to school boards and community organizations of the need for the S.P.A.R.K.S. program based on issues of safety. Students felt safest at S.P.A.R.K.S., i.e., 78% of students always felt safe at S.P.A.R.K.S., 74% always felt safe at home, and 68% always felt safe during the school day. This data was extremely helpful because the program had only been in existence for a few months, so there wasn't any other data (e.g., academic or behavior) that could prove the value of the program. The value could only be determined at this point based on participant, parent, and teacher perceptions.

Other Academic Scores

If the local schools use another measure of academic achievement, it is helpful to the evaluator to be able to triangulate actual achievement between grades, state tests, and other academic tests. An exciting finding in 2007 has helped the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff prove the value of their program. It has been assumed that afterschool programs continue to benefit students even after they have ended participation. Data indicated that students who were regular S.P.A.R.K.S. participants in 2004-05 had steady growth in reading, based on the STAR reading test and running records, throughout the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years even if they were no longer in S.P.A.R.K.S. The percentage of students reading at or above grade level continued to increase, closing the gap with the rest of the student population from -17% to +1%.



Survey of Afterschool Staff

The state evaluation team sends out an annual survey to all afterschool staff. A total of 46 staff members across all S.P.A.R.K.S. sites responded to the survey. The survey results are divided into 20 scales based on 84 questions. A portion of the average responses is listed below with higher numbers indicating better scores (with 5 the top and 1 the lowest).

Table 1. *Staff survey scale.*

Scale	Average Response
Supervisor quality focus	4.6
Supervisor support	4.6
Staff shared values	4.5
Adult modeling	4.5
Emphasis on relationships	4.5
Professional efficacy – management	4.2
Shared control – position	4.2
Role overload	1.5
Quality of staff meetings	1.0
Quality of planning for youth program sessions	.9
Exposure to evaluation data	.8
Involvement in data collection & use	.7

The survey confirmed for S.P.A.R.K.S. staff that the intentional focus on hiring quality staff was making an impact on staff perceptions, with supervisor quality focus, supervisor

support, staff shared values, adult modeling, and emphasis on relationships all receiving the highest scores. The lowest scales focused on quality of staff meetings, quality of planning for youth program sessions, exposure to evaluation data, and involvement in data collection and use. This allowed S.P.A.R.K.S. site coordinators to redesign staff meetings, using more input from staff members as they continue. Interestingly, data suggested that the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members felt they were not involved or sometimes aware of the evaluation, when in fact they were critically involved and bombarded with evaluation data at every meeting. However, because evaluation is so integrated into the “way they do business,” the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members did not identify it as evaluation work. This provided the site coordinators with an opportunity to better educate the staff on when they are actually doing evaluation tasks and using evaluation data.

Conclusion

The key elements that have made the S.P.A.R.K.S. program so successful in improving student academic and behavioral outcomes, creating meaningful partnerships, treating staff members as professionals, and satisfying participants and their parents include the quality program design, constant communication, and embedded evaluation. The program design was based on national research of what works in afterschool programs, but then was personalized to meet the needs of the students and local school districts. Communication was identified as a priority from program inception, and the high level of constant communication has evolved over the past five years. Evaluation was also determined to be a priority at the beginning of the program – the program director was given a phone and the number of the external evaluator on her first day of work! This could not have been accomplished without the respect the Clare-

Gladwin RESD has with local districts, the competence of Clare-Gladwin RESD staff, and the integral use of an external evaluator.

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