
Evaluation of the Arkansas School of the 21st Century Program

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The School of the 21st Century,
The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy

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Executive Summary

The School of the 21st Century (21C), a national school-based model, began a state initiative in Arkansas in 2001, with support from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF). The program, conceptualized and developed for national implementation at the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, has been implemented in over 1300 schools across the country. The 21C program in Arkansas, referred to as AR21C, is now in 43 communities in the state, involving 173 sites. Each year, Yale has performed evaluations of the AR21C program. Past evaluations have included collecting baseline level information as well as comparisons of mature versus new sites. Yale researchers have also tracked several indicators of success at the program and school level. In 2005, additional data was gathered for the purpose of tracking longitudinal effects of the 21C program. The purpose of the current evaluation is to report on the implementation, development and impact of the AR21C program from its inception to its current status in June 2007.

Data for this evaluation are derived from several sources including coordinator, school and principal questionnaires, progress and final reports from each 21C program awarded a WRF grant through the initiative, school climate surveys, and student school records. The evaluation is also informed by our work with various individuals in Arkansas during the previous year as well as information collected in the course of site visits. The evaluation presented in the following pages includes three sections: a section on the current state of implementation, a second section on the development of each component and its quality, and the third on school-wide impact. The implementation section of the evaluation describes the current status of the AR21C initiative, including information about which services are provided, the population served in each of the programs and the quality of the programs. The development section details the changes made for each component, in terms of both populations served and services provided. The impact section addresses the effect the AR21C initiative has had on children and the school as a whole.

IMPLEMENTATION

In 2006-2007, 35 21C programs were part of the AR21C initiative. These 35 programs cover 43 school districts and 173 sites with a total student enrollment in 21C of approximately 47,000 children. 21C programs are representative of Arkansas as a whole, with similar demographics in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. The sites which offer 21C services are most commonly elementary schools and preschool centers. All districts offer preschool, parenting, and supplemental literacy services, while 97 percent offer information and referral and mental health services. Ninety two percent offer school-age programs, health programs, and networking with child-care providers. This indicates that the vast majority of sites are offering nearly all 21C components. Since the implementation of 21C components occur on a phase-in approach, the scope of components provided by AR21C provides a good indication of excellent progress to date.

DEVELOPMENT

The development of the AR21C program has been extensive. From 2001 to date, the number of districts has risen from 13 to 43. Within just the last 3 years, the number of sites almost doubled and the number of students nearly quadrupled, approximating 47,000 children. Also during this time period, the number of children served by early education services doubled, those in the school-age program increased by one and a half times, an additional 12,000 students were reached through the health education and services component, 18,000 more individuals participated in network and training activities related to local child-care providers, and 4,000 more participated in parenting visitation programs.

In addition, sites increased the types of services they offered to children and families. More enrichment activities and academic help in after-school programming were provided in 2007 than in previous years, as well as more nutrition, fitness and preventative health services. More sites are now offering activities

within the component referred to as local child care networks, including network meetings (20 percent increase), incentives (15 percent increase), workshops (10 percent increase), transition services (5 percent increase) and network newsletters (3 percent increase). The number of sites offering educational workshops and parenting classes (part of the guidance and support for families component) increased by 15 percent for parents of preschoolers and 20 percent for parents of school-age children. Sites offering specific literacy programs also increased, and there was an astounding 37 percent increase in the number of literacy education programs for parents. Additionally, 20 percent more sites began offering preventative and 23 percent more sites provided identification mental health services in an effort to present behavioral and emotional problems.

Program quality, assessed by national environmental quality measures and 21C quality measures has remained exceptional with the majority of programs within the good to excellent range for all components. Nevertheless, we have found significant increases in quality scores for the following components: school-age child care, network for local child-care providers, literacy services and mental health programs.

IMPACT ON THE SCHOOL AS A WHOLE

The impact on the school can be noted through a significant 2.2 percent decrease in rates of absenteeism, 6 percent decrease in student turnover and 5 percent decrease in special education rates. An impressive 6 percent increase was noted in percentage of students reading at grade level. School climate remained relatively high for all cohorts across time periods, with the exception of student teacher relations, which showed an increasing trend, even though the scores were always relatively high.

Additionally, principals presented convincing qualitative evidence, providing comments such as *“Our pre-kindergarten has proven to be very beneficial for students with no formal school experiences. Our data indicates that of the students enrolled in the program during the past two years, absolutely none have been recommended for kindergarten retention.”* – Principal

CONCLUSION AND FOLLOW-UP

Both the implementation and school-wide impact of the AR21C program indicate a successful effort of the AR21C initiative. For the next phase of the evaluation, we have to see if these programs continue to be effective over time, both in terms of implementation and school-wide impact.

21C IN ARKANSAS WORKS!

The following results are based on the previous annual evaluations conducted by the National 21C office at Yale.

School Readiness

- Individual district evaluations indicate that those with 21C preschool scored higher on measures of school readiness than those from outside preschools.
- In a pilot study of ABC & 21C programs, 21C ABC preschool centers were associated with a greater increase in school readiness across a year than those centers which were ABC alone, as well as more children who were school-ready before kindergarten. This indicates that 21C *adds* something to the already successful ABC program.

Reading at Grade Level

- Mature 21C sites have a higher percent of children reading at grade level (71 percent) than newer 21C sites (61 percent).
- From 2003 to 2007, AR 21C sites increased the number of children reading at grade level by 6 percent.

Absenteeism

- Mature 21C sites had half as many children with excessive absenteeism than newer 21C sites.
- From 2003 to 2007, AR 21C sites reduced their absenteeism rates by 2.2 percent.
- Schools without an on-site 21C preschool had five times the number of children who were excessively absent than schools with an on-site 21C preschool.

Student Turnover

- Mature 21C sites have significantly lower student turnover rates (23 percent) than newer 21C sites (38 percent).
- From 2003 to 2007, AR 21C sites reduced their turnover rates by 6 percent.

Special Education

- From 2003 to 2007, AR 21C sites reduced the number of children in special education by 5 percent.
- Schools that had a 21C preschool program had half of the special education rates in kindergarten and first grade that those schools without a 21C preschool program had.

Retention

- Schools with a 21C preschool program had half the number of kindergarten and first-grade children retained in their grades than those without a 21C preschool program.

Suspensions

- Mature 21C sites have a significantly lower number of suspensions (8 in-school and 3 out-of-school suspensions) than newer 21C sites (15 in-school and 11 out-of-school suspensions).
- Schools without a 21C mental health component averaged 21 in-school and 12 out-of-school suspensions, whereas schools with a mental health component had 6 and 4 suspensions, respectively.

Parent Involvement

- Mature 21C sites had higher levels of parental involvement than new sites in terms of parent-teacher conferences (9 percent better) and informal discussions with teachers at least once a month (14 percent more).
- Schools that had the 21C Networks and Training component had significantly higher PTA attendance rates than those without this component (50 percent versus 28 percent, respectively).

Comments from Educators in 21C Sites

We recently received a thank you note from a parent whose child participates in the after school program [funded through 21C] at our middle school. The parent expressed her appreciation of the program for helping her daughter improve her grades and feel more confident about her abilities. She wrote "the program has helped my daughter to do better in school and raise her math grade from a D to a B+. In talking with the after school site she has noted marked improvement in the child's academic performance, attitude, and behavior over the course of the school year. – 21C Program Coordinator

21C and WRF has provided after school care for many of our preschool students/parents where other options for such care were very limited. It has given them an opportunity that they never would have had. – Principal

Preschool and its parent involvement component are a huge asset to our school. Each child who attends our preschool program is so much better prepared for kindergarten than those who didn't attend. They are more socially adjusted and have learned many pre-reading skills. – Principal