

Evaluation of Community Learning Centers

Summary Brief

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

April 28, 2014

1 Executive Summary

With the revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a series of federal grants were appropriated for the purpose of creating after-school Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in low income, at-risk schools meant to provide enrichment activities to students in schools with high levels of poverty. The federal grants are awarded to states, who then award grants to individual centers based on a competitive application process.

The community learning centers had several enumerated goals¹, including:

1. To “provide opportunities for academic enrichment, including providing tutorial services to help students...to meet State and local student academic achievement standards in core academic subjects.”
2. To “offer students a broad array of additional services, programs, and activities, such as youth development activities, drug and violence prevention programs, counseling programs, art, music, and recreation programs, technology education programs, and character education programs.”
3. To “offer families of students served by community learning centers opportunities for literacy and related educational development.”

This study evaluated student data from CLCs over the last three years to determine if the centers are meeting their stated goals.

¹See <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg55.html>

2 Summary of Findings

1. Student Participation in CLCs - What type of students attend CLCs, how often do they attend throughout the school year, and do they return in subsequent years?

Community Learning Center attendees tend to be predominantly economically disadvantaged students. Most students who attend CLCs do so for less than thirty days. Less than half of all students who attend CLCs return in the following year, and only about a third return for 30 or more days.

2. Effect of CLC participation on test scores - Do students who take advantage of CLCs experience any academic gains?

The results were mixed, providing some evidence that attendees experienced small gains in math scores. However, no evidence was found that attendees experienced any gains in reading scores, and the data suggested that the benefits of CLC attendance on math scores fade after students exit the program.

Treatment effects on student test scores were not universal across all of the CLCs examined, however; some centers appear to be doing an effective job of educating the students who attend them. Characteristics of successful centers included:

1. Percent of total staff that is paid teachers: Successful centers had higher concentrations of paid teachers than did less successful centers;
2. Low paid staff turnover rates: Centers with high rates of turnover among center staff tended to be low-performing;
3. Deliberate targeting of activities: Successful centers targeted a very small proportion of their activities at the entire student body, and instead focused on groups with specific needs, such as low-performing students;
4. An avoidance of art activities: Less than 5% of the activities in high-performing centers were art-based, compared with almost 10% of activities in low-performing centers.
5. Provision of family-oriented activities: High-performing centers provided significantly more activities that were designed for the whole family, rather than just students, than did low-performing centers.

3. Effect of CLC participation on non-academic outcomes - Do students who take advantage of CLCs attend school more often?

The study found a positive and statistically significant effect of CLC participation on attendance rates in the first year after treatment at both the primary and secondary levels. In the second year after treatment, CLC attendees maintained higher rates of attendance

than non-CLC students, but the differences were significantly smaller, suggesting that the benefits of CLC attendance on overall attendance rates fades after students exit the program.

4. Effect of CLC participation on disciplinary outcomes - Do students who take advantage of CLCs miss fewer days of school as a result of disciplinary incidents?

The study found that students who attend CLCs tend to miss fewer days of school due to disciplinary incidents than do non-CLC students. Also, in contrast to the findings on test scores and attendance rates, the benefits of CLC attendance on disciplinary days did not appear to fade in the second year of treatment.

5. Effect of CLC participation on graduation and post-secondary outcomes - Do students who take advantage of CLCs graduate from high school or enroll in post-secondary institutions at higher rates?

The results were positive, finding increased rates of graduation and post-secondary enrollment. The increases, however, were very small.