

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-400](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Education’s 21st Century program—funded about \$1 billion annually since 2002—supports a broad array of activities outside the school day to improve student outcomes in high-poverty or low-performing K-12 schools. A statement accompanying the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 included a provision for GAO to review Education programs outside the regular school day.

GAO examined (1) how 21st Century funds are awarded and used, (2) what is known about the effectiveness of these programs, (3) how Education manages and uses program data to inform decision making, and (4) Education’s technical assistance for evaluating and sustaining programs. GAO conducted a 50-state survey of program officials, obtaining a 100 percent response rate. GAO also reviewed selected state program evaluations and academic studies on student outcomes, and observed program activities and interviewed officials in four states representing a range of grant size and location.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that Education expand its performance measures for behavioral outcomes and provide written guidance to states on conducting high-quality program evaluations. Education neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations, and outlined steps it is taking to address them. View [GAO-17-400](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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K-12 EDUCATION

Education Needs to Improve Oversight of Its 21st Century Program

What GAO Found

The Department of Education (Education) awards 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st Century) grants to states, who in turn, competitively award funds to local organizations, which use them to offer academic enrichment and other activities to improve students’ academic and behavioral outcomes. In their most recent grant competitions, states awarded 21st Century funds to nearly 2,400 organizations—including school districts and community-based organizations—based on a variety of criteria, such as the quality of their proposed program designs. Relevant research we reviewed that compared program participants to those of non-participants suggests that the 21st Century program is effective in improving students’ behavioral outcomes, such as school-day attendance and reduced disciplinary incidents, more often than their academic outcomes. However, because Education’s current 21st Century performance measures primarily focus on students’ reading and math scores on state tests, Education lacks useful data about whether the program is achieving its objectives to improve students’ behavioral outcomes such as attendance and discipline—the areas where the program most frequently has a positive effect. Education officials have not substantially revised the program’s performance measures since 1998, in part because its authorization lapsed from fiscal years 2008 through 2016. Leading practices in performance measurement call for federal agencies to align performance measures with program objectives.

21st Century Community Learning Centers’ Objectives and Performance Measures for Student Outcomes

	Fully measured	Partially measured	Not measured
Objective	Improved student academic performance	Improved student behavior	Improved student social skills
Measure	Proficiency in state test scores in math or reading Improved semester grades in math or English	Improvement in classroom participation, student behavior, or completing homework <i>Attendance or disciplinary actions not measured</i>	<i>No established measures</i>

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education documents. | GAO-17-400

Education’s technical assistance to states does not adequately address challenges states face in evaluating their 21st Century programs and sustaining them when program funding ends. About a third of states reported in GAO’s 50-state survey that they face challenges in evaluating program performance, such as difficulty designing evaluations that shed light on program effects. Further, the 21st Century program was reauthorized twice, which resulted in significant changes to state requirements for evaluating programs. However, Education has not provided states written guidance on developing and conducting high-quality evaluations since 1999. Federal standards for internal control state that when significant changes occur agencies should periodically review policies for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving their objectives. Absent written guidance to states on conducting high-quality evaluations, Education may miss opportunities to help states improve their capacity to conduct such evaluations to assure the program is meeting its goals.