

21st Century Community Learning Centers

Central Decatur & Mormon Trail Evaluation

Cardinal Muscle and the **Saints Afterschool Program**, represent a collaborative project resulting from the combined efforts of Central Decatur and Mormon Trail Community School Districts, and Graceland University, Lamoni Iowa. The partners share resources, responsibilities and risks of the 21st Century program, each contributing to its operations, programming and quality according to individual areas of expertise and mission alignment.

During the 2012-2015 grant cycle, the grant has supported the operation of three 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The program serves students at three centers within the two districts: South Elementary (K-2 grades) and North Elementary (3-6 grades) represent the Central Decatur district in Leon, Iowa; the third site is located at Mormon Trail Community Elementary School (K-6) in Humeston, Iowa. The original design of the program involved a high level of collaboration between the two districts to ensure uniform delivery of the program; however, as implementation evolved over the course of the grant cycle, it became clear that each site had its unique needs and program delivery was tweaked to accommodate those differences in order to better serve students at each center.

In the first year of the grant, formal “before school programs” were purposefully developed and offered at learning centers with daily start times of 7:00 a.m. This practice has evolved into a less formal, but perhaps a more powerful, intentional “touch base time”, where teachers and staff purposefully seek out participants. Each morning, staff welcomes the student back to the learning community and deliberately

processes with the student how the morning has gone. The staff then reminds students that they are each capable of success as long as they remember to do what they already know how to do! Because the morning “touch base” practice has become a part of the culture of these centers, all students (not just participants) benefit. These intentional efforts also help students to develop and maintain a growth mindset as they head into the school day. Dynamic and well organized afterschool programs are offered at all sites beginning as soon as school dismisses and lasts until 5:00 p.m. at Mormon Trail and 5:30 p.m. at both Central Decatur centers. Specifically designed summer enrichment and academic maintenance programs were operated at all grant centers.

Two goals for programming were identified in the initial grant. These goals continue to be a primary focus of the program:

Goal 1: Increase academic achievement for students in reading.

Goal 2: Increase academic achievement for students in math.

- NOTE: The initial objective was lofty and specific in seeking a desired outcome of 85% proficiency in reading and math for those participants attending 30 or more days. As implementation of the grant evolved, a more realistic learning objective was applied to represent a more attainable outcome. The desired outcome was revised to represent a more practical measure of program impact; program facilitators sought to find evidence of increased scores in reading and math for those students who attended the program 30 or more days.

The evaluators have found robust evidence that the program has sustained an enduring commitment to the original established guiding values of the Central Decatur & Mormon Trail Learning Centers including:

- All children deserve physical and emotional environments that satisfy their basic needs.
- All children need supportive adult relationships and role models.
- All children benefit from expanded learning opportunities.

Program Information:

Each program day during the school year, students receive the following from the time school ends until 5:00 p.m. (Mormon Trail) and 5:30 p.m. at both Central Decatur centers.

- A healthy snack. A healthy snack is provided through each center's School Food Service snack program by
- Academic time. During academic time, students receive homework help and tutoring from both certified teachers and Cardinal Muscle staff members. Cardinal Muscle staff members also use high frequency word games, developed specifically for Cardinal Muscle programs, as well as practice spelling words. Each learning center has a rotating bin of books specifically selected from the school libraries for students to read during independent reading time.
- Enrichment time. During enrichment time, students participate in expanded learning opportunities designed to encourage them to further explore and apply the knowledge they have learned during the school day. Enrichment activities are supervised and created by e staff members and community partners at each learning center.
- Recreation time. The original grant writers collaborated with Health and Movement Sciences faculty and staff at Graceland University in an effort to design purposeful and age-appropriate recreational activities. During recreation time, students participate in a variety of structured and semi-structured activities including fitness walking, teambuilding games, playground games, and small group indoor and outdoor activities. Once each month, students

attend a field / study trip designed to introduce a variety of local enrichment, cultural, and entertainment venues. These trips are especially important for students from low SES families who often do not have the opportunity to engage in activities such as these in their life outside of school-based programs.

- Staffing:

Program delivery differs slightly by learning center site in order to accommodate unique community differences and to maximize the opportunity to facilitate student success; however, each center has depended upon four basic types of staff:

- Program Coordinators. Program Coordinators are certified teachers employed by Central Decatur and Mormon Trail Community School Districts. These staff members are certified teachers with experience in leadership and program development. They attend training throughout the year and collaborate with each other at least twice a year.
- Certified teachers and paraprofessionals. Each 21st Century learning center has between two and six certified teachers or paraprofessionals who share responsibility for supervising students, providing extra support around academic activities, homework completion, tutoring, and enrichment activities.. All staff and faculty are supported with ongoing training and staff development.
- Community Members. Each 21st Century learning center includes at least one community member who shares responsibility for supervising students, monitoring academic activities, homework completion, tutoring, and enrichment activities. Community members are supervised by the program director(s) and undergo background checks prior to joining the program. They are also provided on-going support in the form of training and professional development conducted by the individual learning centers each year.

- High School Students. Initially, each 21st Century learning center included high school students as assistants and program mentors. Due to the geographic separation of the high school and elementary buildings (Humeston vs. Garden Grove), the Mormon Trail center has had difficulty sustaining the participation of high school students, and this fall made the decision to not recruit high school staffers. Central Decatur Learning Centers continue to employ between two and seven high school students who assist with individual students, and assist adult program staff in supervision of elementary students and program delivery. High school students complete a job application each year, are interviewed, and (once selected) undergo background checks. They are provided appropriate formal training by the program coordinator each year. Informally, the program coordinator and program staff provide continuous ongoing supervision and support.

Objectives

Each 21st Century Community Learning Center site may have building specific needs. However, there are two main objectives that are embedded in each 21st century program. They are as listed below:

Objective	Assessment Tool	Assessment Method
85% of students (attending 30 or more days) will be proficient in reading as measured by the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) by June 2015, (grades 2-6)	MAP- Measures of Academic Progress	Spring testing- grades 2-6
85% of students (attending 30 or more days) will be proficient in math as measured by the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) by June 2015. (grades 2-6)	MAP- Measures of Academic Progress	Spring testing- grades 2-6

***NOTE:** As discussed earlier, the informal objective was adjusted to reflect a minimum desired outcome of overall improvement by participants attending 30 or more days.

Comparative Performance Summary:

Program impact and student growth were measured by the percentage of student participants (who attended 30 or more days) who tested as proficient on the MAP Reading and Math assessments using National Standard Score (NSS) as a determinant of proficiency. The three year data (to be submitted to the PPICS depository) consistently evidences that the learning centers fell short of the 85% proficiency objective; however, there is strong evidence of student growth in both Reading and Math across all grade levels and centers indicating critical and positive progression toward their original objective. In addition to test data, survey responses from parents, teachers and students continue to be overwhelmingly positive. This finding was supported by anecdotal evidence cultivated through informal interviews and dialogue which the evaluators had with parents, teachers, and students.

Recommendations:

The sustained student learning impact has not been formally assessed; though it appears the data is available. The evaluators recommend that students who participated in 30 or more days for all three years be tracked and that the “over time” data be analyzed to establish long-term impact of the program. This type of data analysis could build capacity for the program to leverage appropriations from outside sources for continued funding.

The three year data evidences that in some areas, non-participants outperform participants. The evaluators have expressed confidence that there are outside variables that can be attributed to the higher scores of the non-participants such as family structure and socio-economic status. Further analysis could verify this hypotheses to determine variables which might influence these differences; this understanding could work to inform program design and delivery for improved student performance.

The evaluators observed this program over an 11 month period and have acquired an expressed confidence that each learning center fills a critical role in serving all children (but especially “at risk” students) before and after school as well as during summer breaks in their respective communities. There is strong evidence that the program has a positive impact on student learning, student motivation, and student success. As this grant moves forward, careful consideration of sustainability is needed. . Other sources of funding may need to be secured to meet the needs of all students. The evaluators recommend that a committee be formed to study the data, explore research funding opportunities, and seek additional sources financial support.

All learning centers have evidenced a deep commitment to parent involvement. Again, in an attempt to measure the long term multi-year grant impact, the evaluators recommend that the three years of survey data be aggregated and analyzed by recurring themes to better measure parent satisfaction. Given the amount of unsolicited anecdotal evidence cultivated by the evaluators, it is assured that parent surveys as the sole measure of satisfaction does not tell the whole story. We recommend the program reconsider modes (or add additional modes) of collecting parent data to ensure parent ideas and concerns are included when considering the design and delivery of the program.

Due to the rural nature of the school districts and communities, it can be difficult to provide “cultural” and off site enrichment opportunities. Increased attendance on these “field trip” days indicates this is a highly preferred activity. The program has done a superior job of designing and implementing these cultural opportunities. It is recommended that the grant applicants consider how to exploit the geographic location of and relationship with Graceland to expand opportunities, increase the frequency of opportunities, or bring the opportunities to the learning centers. There is a strong working relationship between Graceland University and the 21st Century Learning Program personnel; the evaluators feel that it is appropriate for the program to ask for a higher

level of committed involvement that would expand these enrichment opportunities.

CARDINAL MUSCLE continues to be forward-thinking in their enrichment. The learning center has a built in STEM activity time every day and, the summer of 2015 they held a highly successful STEM camp. THE SAINTS AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM also purposefully integrates STEM activities in their program delivery. The evaluators recommend and encourage the program to continue to explore avenues that would further enhance opportunities for students to engage in STEM activities. Additional training with program staff on developing STEM activities would benefit the program as would additional resources/funding. STEM opportunities on a small scale were always well attended by students. Staff would benefit from training in the design and implementation of additional STEM activities.

The data from surveys continues to evidence that homework assistance to fill a critical need. The evaluators recommend that, program staff continue to look at more ways to offer specific tutoring for struggling students.

The evaluators recognize the immense potential of the 21st Century Learning program to support the recently mandated legislation in the state of Iowa that all third graders be proficient in reading. It is recommended that the learning centers explore the ways the program can support the initiative for intensive reading instruction both during the academic year and summer programs. It is also recommended that program directors work to identify partners outside of the school district that can assist them in this endeavor.

Prepared by:

Michele Dickey-Kotz, Ed.D, and Nancy Halferty, Ed.D 10-28-15

