Bringing in the Community:
Partnerships and Quality Assurance in 21st Century Community Learning Centers

By Charles Smith and Laurie Van Egeren

Executive Summary

As a matter of policy, 21st Century Community Learning Centers rely heavily on community organizations to provide a variety of instructional programs. In this way, 21st Century sites tap the depth and breadth of knowledge available in their communities to provide non-traditional learning experiences that can better meet young participants' need for engagement and relevance than can a simple extension of school-day routine. However, the inclusion of multiple partners along with school-based site staff at any given 21st Century site means that the quality of instruction can be extremely uneven. How do school districts that receive 21st Century grants, and the coordinators of each of their sites, ensure high quality across a wide variety of offerings led by staff from many different organizations? To begin to answer this question, we first explored the extent to which 21st Century sites in Michigan are actually partnering with community organizations. We then researched selected high-quality sites to arrive at an instructional partnerships model of quality assurance practices whose wide adoption could have significant impact on 21st Century policy and on the youth development field as a whole.

Over the past decade, the legislation authorizing 21st Century Community Learning Centers has undergone changes with each reauthorization. Originally a small community development initiative, 21st Century is now a billion-dollar afterschool program focused on school success (McCallion, 2003). Throughout this evolution, partnerships between school-based 21st Century grantees and community-based organizations have remained a central component of the policy (Dynarski et al., 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2002; McCallion, 2003). Such community partnerships hold potential to provide exactly the kinds of non-traditional learning experiences called for by a wide range of school-day reformers: increased access to community settings, projects that require expression and application of knowledge, and development of real-world skills. These modes of learning can not only produce more equitable learning outcomes for individuals (Gutierrez, in press; Sternberg, 2003), but may also support the nation's economic competitiveness (Levy & Murnane, 2004; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006; Time, Learning and Afterschool Task Force, 2007). They can also complement the narrowing school-day curriculum with alternative pathways to learning (Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004).

In principle, community partnerships are good sources for alternative learning experiences that the traditional school day is ill-suited to produce. But how do school-community partnerships affect the learning of children and youth in 21st Century programs? What are the characteristics of effective school-community partnerships that support out-of-school learning?

As policies that affect program quality have received increasing recognition in the afterschool field, the High/Scope Foundation has had extensive opportunities to look inside 21st Century programs as both researchers and technical assistance providers. Over the past five years, we have conducted observations at dozens of 21st Century sites and have delivered training and technical assistance to hundreds of 21st Century staff in programs across the country. We almost always saw staff from community partner organizations working directly with children during

any given program week—that is, community partner staff were leading a significant number of the learning opportunities offered at these 21st Century sites. However, review of dozens of weekly program schedules showed that staff from community partners came and went on an extremely irregular basis, so there was little consistency in terms of *who* was leading the learning. When we conducted research that spanned the program year, we frequently found that staff members who were part of the pre-observation were no longer with the program at the post-test. Furthermore, when we delivered training on quality systems or youth development strategies, we rarely saw administrators or direct-service staff from community partners—even when the training was conducted at a specific program site rather than statewide.

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Because of these observations, we started to wonder who was keeping track of the quality of learning experiences provided by community partners. How do 21st Century site managers assure that staff from community partner organizations are competent, stay on task, and fit the activities they lead into the site's curriculum? Turnover rates are high both for staff employed directly by the site and for staff from partner organizations. How do site managers ensure continuity for the children and youth in the program? The fact that we did not see community partner staff involved in training and technical assistance provided by the state department of education led us to wonder in what ways—if any—the state's regulation, knowledge resources, and performance incentives trickle down to reach these staff members who are so crucial to children's learning.

These questions led to broader issues about the role of community partnerships in 21st Century policy. Is the quality of services provided by community partners a major component of the policy or a peripheral concern? In order to address this question, we wanted to look at such basic data as how many community partners were involved in 21st Century programs and what proportion of the learning experiences they provided. We quickly learned that little information was publicly available about this critical question. In a summary review of agency reports on state

department of education 21st Century websites, community partnerships were frequently mentioned, but few details were available about how much contact time community partners provided.[1]

Thus, we set out to study community partnerships and quality assurance practices in 21st Century afterschool programs. Using unique and detailed data from a statewide program evaluation conducted by Michigan State University, we explored the structure, scale, and scope of community partnerships in Michigan's 21st Century program. To our knowledge, this is the first study of a large sample of community partnerships that extends to the level of individual sites and community partners. We then addressed the quality assurance issue by selecting a subset of high-quality programs with which to conduct structured interviews with staff from both the school-based 21st Century sites and their community partners. This article summarizes some of the findings of our larger report (Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007).

We found that partnerships and quality assurance are key elements in what we refer to as an *instructional partnerships model* that is emerging from the ways in which high-quality 21st Century sites implement 21st Century policy. This model enables school-based afterschool programs to ensure quality in the process of mobilizing the non-traditional educational assets of their communities. Though 21st Century programs, at least in Michigan, have been remarkably effective at building partnerships with an impressive array of community-based providers, 21st Century policy has not given those sites much help in addressing the quality of the educational opportunities community partners provide. Use of the instructional partnerships model of quality assurance could affect not only 21st Century programs but also the entire afterschool field. By influencing organizational performance and workforce development practices across communities where 21st Century programs are located, quality assurance measures could help ensure that children in afterschool programs receive high-quality instruction no matter which organization is providing it.

PARTNERS OR VENDORS?

In a fundamental sense, study of community partnerships tells an important story about effective implementation of 21st Century policy. Through extensive patterns of partnership, school-based 21st Century programs appear to have created a platform for access to non-traditional sources of instruction. Although students who attend 21st Century programs spend time

working alone on homework and in unstructured play, they also spend a substantial amount of time in what can only be described as an instructional context, in which expert adults are teaching novice youth, whether the subject is soccer or watercolor painting or math. In this sense, divisions between academic content and enrichment are artificial. Both entail adult-youth processes that are focused on instruction. Our study showed that community partners provide instructional services to support learning in many content areas, as described below.

A small literature on school-community partnerships suggests that deeper collaborations between schools and community partners, involving such aspects as shared goal setting and joint management, are more likely to produce strong organizational performance and sustainable collaborations (Deich, 2001; Melaville, 1998). Work specifically on afterschool partnerships suggests that when partners share a joint mission, merge staff into close working relationships, and develop a sense of purpose that is associated with the partnership itself, they are more likely to "provide children with a sense of belonging essential for their development and their learning" (Noam, 2001, pp. 13–14; Noam & Tillinger, 2004).

The single study that addresses this issue in relation to 21st Century programs (Dynarski et al., 2002) suggests what our interviews with Michigan experts confirm: Most partnerships between 21st Century sites and community-based partners are not deeply integrated. The national evaluation of 21st Century programs noted, "In general, centers contracted with community agencies to provide specific after-school sessions rather than as partners with shared governance or combined operations" (Dynarski et al., 2002, pp. 3–4). Although some 21st Century sites have established true school-community partnerships as described above, most community relationships seem to represent a kind of outsourcing. Community organizations essentially serve as vendors that are contracted to provide specific content to site participants for a specified number of days or hours. Community partners that function as vendors are not likely to be involved in developing the program's vision and goals. Shared governance and goal setting or devel-

PARTNER SERVICES IN A HYPOTHETICAL PROGRAM
This activity and staffing schedule for a hypothetical 21st Century site is based on numerous program schedules we reviewed. The enrichment period is typically delivered by a mixture of site staff and partner staff. Site staff generally include full-time site coordinators and part-time permanent staff, usually school-day teachers. As you can see, partner organizations, and therefore partner staff, change regularly during the program year.

Time	Program Component	Provider
3:30–4:25	Snack, greeting circle (20 min); Homework or independent reading (35 min)	Site staff
4:30–5:30	Enrichment time: Scheduled offerings (see below), board games, or independent reading	See Enrichment Time Calendar
5:35–6:15	Outdoor time and pick-up	Site staff

Schedule	Activity	Provider
M & W	Basketball OR	Site staff
	Girls' drill squad (Sept–Dec) Hip-hop dance (Jan–Apr)	YMCA
T & Th	Life science (Sept–Dec) Physical science (Jan–Apr)	4-H
F	Crafts OR	Site staff
	Life skills (Sept–Dec) Build your own games (Jan–Apr)	Faith-based organization

opment of a new shared identity combining school-based and community-based staff occur less frequently. The 21st Century sites are more likely to focus on individual learning rather than on adopting the broader vision of youth and community development that community-based organizations could bring to the table.

In this context, the 21st Century site staff employed by the host schools assume primary responsibility for making sure that community partners are accountable to the programmatic mission of the sites. If the community partner serves as a vendor rather than a true partner, then the purchaser of services—the 21st Century site—must adopt accountability tools to ensure quality. Quality assurance practices like those described in our instructional partnerships model provide tools for negotiating and evaluating partnerships to ensure that the instruction delivered is effective in serving the needs of young participants.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

In educational contexts, *quality assurance* is a form of accountability that focuses on improving the performance of staff members as they deliver learning experiences. In this era of high-stakes testing, the idea of accountability has taken on negative connotations for many educators and youth workers, primarily due to

problematic assumptions that link test results to staff effectiveness and program improvement (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2005; Laitsch, 2006; Ryan & Brown, 2005; Wiggins, 1993). In contrast, we define *quality assurance* as a form of accountability that draws on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and knowledge management theory (Mason, 2003). In this model, motivation to achieve higher levels of performance is likely to occur where:

• Reliable information about individual performance is available
• A group of staff who share a vision of the meaning of their work collaborate to link this data to subsequent behavior change
• Successful change is actually possible

Accountability, in these terms, is a quality assurance process that empowers professionals to raise their level of performance according to known standards. It uses fair and meaningful assessment to mark progress toward or satisfaction of goals. Quality assurance focuses on active processes—how staff perform as they work with children at what we call the *point of service*.

Program Quality

The traditional indicators of program quality have been such program-wide markers as staff retention and education, program funding, and various forms of community outreach. More recent publications suggest that the field is beginning to identify quality assurance practices as levers of change that more directly affect staff performance with youth (Akiva & Yohalem, 2006; Hilberg, Waxman, & Tharp, 2003; Pianta, 2003; Smith & Akiva, in press; Wilson-Ahlstrom & Yohalem, 2007). These tools include:

• Program standards that are clearly communicated to all staff
• Observational assessment focused on enabling improvement

• Training in developmentally appropriate methods of instruction
• Ongoing coaching of less experienced staff by more experienced staff

All of these tools are focused on how children and youth experience afterschool programming. These quality assurance practices constitute *learning features* that, as we will outline below, must be coupled with management practices that we call *focusing features*. Focusing features concentrate evaluation efforts on the interaction between staff and children. The combination of learning features and focusing features in quality assurance practices can improve the quality and continuity of instruction in 21st Century programs.

Point-of-Service Quality

In order to explore the relationship between community partnerships and quality assurance, we need a definition of *quality* that is focused on the point of service, where adults and youth meet and instruction occurs. Our construct for point-of-service quality is

FIGURE 1. POINT-OF-SERVICE QUALITY CONSTRUCT
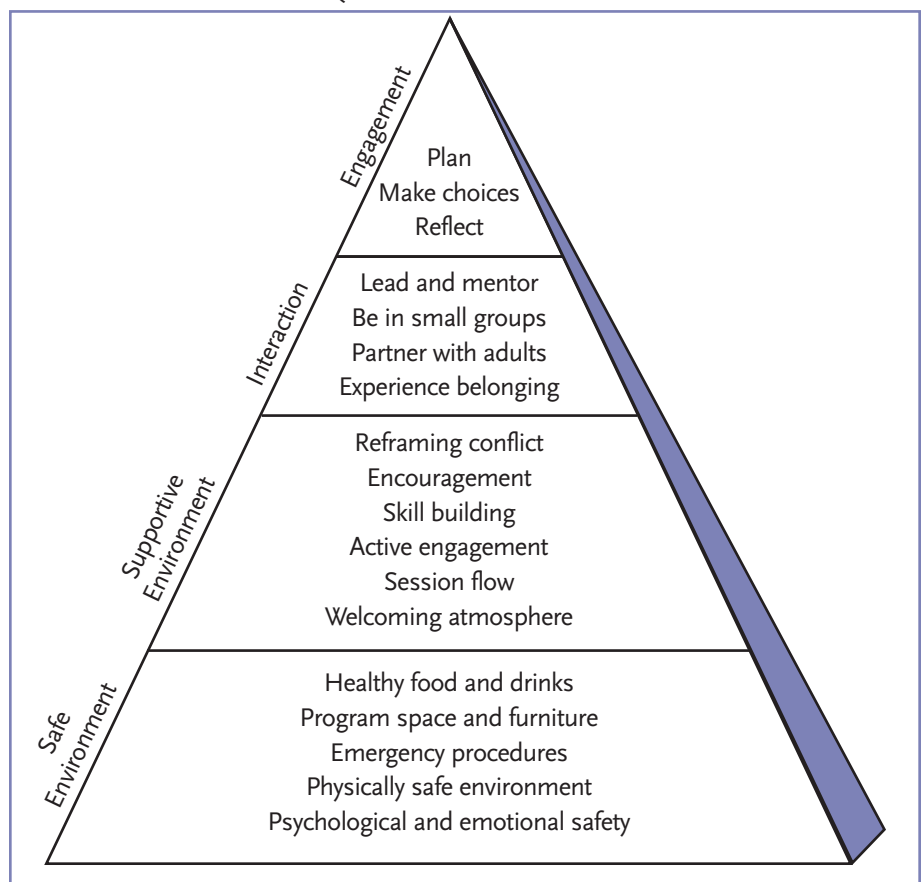
provided in Figure 1. This model of instructional quality, the product of a formal validation study (Smith & Hohmann, 2005; Smith, 2005), has been widely vetted among both researchers and practitioners (Akiva & Yohalem, 2006). With several other research-based constructs, it parallels a converging definition of quality in the afterschool field (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2007). Each level of the pyramid includes activities that lead to the four quality markers: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. Each level of the pyramid builds on the one under it; for example, a safe environment provides the foundation for an environment that is also supportive, and the environment cannot be supportive unless it is first safe. A supportive environment in turn provides the foundation for the next level of quality, interaction. Several studies have demonstrated that higher levels of point-of-service quality, especially the higher levels of the pyramid, are positively associated with program attendance, youth interest and motivation, social-emotional skills, and academic achievement (Blazevski, Van Egeren, & Smith, 2007; Intercultural Center for Research in Education & National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005; Russell & Reisner, 2005; Smith & Hohmann, 2005).

In our research on point-of-service quality, we have found that afterschool programs, school-based and community-based alike, generally provide moderate to strong levels of safety and support, so that the two base levels of the pyramid are in place. However, the frequency of activities that promote interaction and engagement, represented in the two higher levels of the quality pyramid, is low across the majority of programs. Regardless of the program type, content focus, or age of children served, programs are less likely to promote such sophisticated interactive learning strategies as cooperative learning, teaching others, or partnering with adults; they are also less likely to provide opportunities for cognitive engagement through planning, goal setting, and reflection (Smith, Blazevski, Akiva, & Peck, in press).

Furthermore, across several samples, quality scores vary as much *within* programs as *between* programs. Apparently, the performance of individual staff members has at least as much effect on quality as do the practices of the site as whole. By contrast, the instructional partnership model exists precisely in order to regularize children's experience of the instruction—across staff and therefore across partners. Figure 1 describes a model of point-of-service quality that is independent of the particular content of instruction,

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whether "academic" or "enrichment." It can be used to assess the performance of individual staff members, whether they are employed by the 21st Century site or by a community partner. Exemplary quality assurance practices then link information about individual performance to known standards in order to spur improvement. Such quality assurance practices are especially important in settings where multiple independent providers provide what should be a seamless programmatic experience for young participants.

RESEARCHING QUALITY PARTNERSHIPS

This study proceeds from two separate but related sets of research questions, one set investigating the nature of school-community partnerships and one focused on the quality assurance practices used by managers of 21st Century sites in Michigan.

Our research on the nature of partnerships between 21st Century school sites and community-based partners in Michigan focused on three aspects: structure, scale, and scope.

• **Structure** refers to organizational practices that accommodate extensive partnerships: How are grantees set up to manage relationships with multiple community-based partners? Do specific types of partners become specialized in certain kinds of services that fit the needs of many school sites?

• **Scale** refers to the basic descriptive numbers: How many community-based partners are active at how many sites? What kinds of organizations get involved in afterschool programming? How many students are they serving? These questions are of particular interest because 21st Century policy has the potential both to attract new private-sector resources for afterschool programming and to reach deep into networks of community partners to leverage development of a community's overall afterschool workforce.

- **Scope** refers to the level of transaction between partnering organizations: Is the relationship one of true partnership, or simply a purchaser-vendor relationship? Are the partnerships deeply integrative, drawing on the core resources of both organizations to fulfill a joint mission? Or are the partnerships merely time-limited commitments in which instructional services are purchased from (or donated by) a community-based partner that delivers the agreed-upon service and then leaves?

Our second set of questions has to do with quality assurance practices used by managers of afterschool programs—that is, the grantee directors and site coordinators who oversee 21st Century sites. In the sites that employ an identifiable *instructional partnerships model* with a wide array of community-based partners, what practices are being used to make sure that those partners delivery high-quality services? How do managers ensure that the experiences of participants at the point of service are of high quality every single day—not only on a given day but also over time? Because the primary goal is quality instruction, we were especially interested in how the performance of front-line staff sent by community-based partners is monitored, evaluated, and improved.

Context: Michigan's 21st Century Program

In Michigan, the school districts that receive 21st Century grants are called *grantees*. Each grantee typically operates several sites, usually at elementary and middle schools, where afterschool programs are mounted during the school year. Many grantees also offer summer programming. During the 2005–2006 school year, Michigan's 21st Century program funded 36 grantee agencies that managed 187 afterschool sites. These sites served 25,792 children, of whom about 40 percent attended for at least 30 days during the year (Van Egeren & Sturdevant-Reed, 2006).

Michigan is an ideal system in which to investigate quality assurance practices. The Michigan Department of Education agency responsible for afterschool programming, the Office of Early Childhood and Parenting, mounted a major initiative in 2002 to raise the quality of afterschool services, as defined by the pyramid in Figure 1. The 2004 Michigan Model Out-of-School Time

Standards, applicable to all afterschool providers, informed a major revision of state licensing laws to align them with the standards. The state education agency has also begun to implement a quality initiative (Wilson-Ahlstrom & Yohalem, 2007) that requires an annual team-based quality assessment at all 21st Century sites. In addition, an online data-reporting process makes annual performance and improvement reports, based on uniform measures of program quality and student outcomes, available to all 21st Century sites. Though the impact of these efforts is yet to be recorded, they represent a major investment in uniform standards and quality assurance on the part of the Michigan Department of Education. The state education agency has thus moved beyond the usual regulatory and monitoring functions to act as a capacity-building intermediary in the statewide afterschool system (Blank et al., 2003; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998).

Methods and Data

In describing the structure, scale, and scope of community partnerships in Michigan's 21st Century Community Learning Centers, our goal was not only to provide a system-level perspective. We also separated the data down to the level of individual sites and community-based partners wherever possible in order to describe how the instruction affected the point-of-service experience of children and youth.

Data sets were made available for this study by the evaluator for Michigan's 21st Century program, the

TABLE 1. YOUTH SURVEY ON POINT-OF-SERVICE QUALITY

Scale	Corresponding Survey Items
Governance and decision making	Staff and kids decide together how to do the activities; staff and kids decide the rules together; kids get to choose their activities; all kids get a chance to be a leader; kids get the chance to do a lot of different things; kids and staff set goals for what should happen; kids and staff talk about what the kids learned
Peer support	Kids treat each other with respect; kids work together to solve problems; kids make sure that other kids follow the rules; kids treat staff with respect; kids help each other out; kids tell one another when they do a good job
Staff support	Staff care about kids; staff treat kids with respect; staff try to be fair; staff help kids understand homework and school subjects; staff make activities interesting and fun

Community Evaluation and Research Center in the Office of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University. The data sets represented total reporting on partnerships for the 2005–2006 school year. They included 91 percent of grantees and 87 percent of the sites in Michigan. These data sets consisted of linked data for:

- 2,195 *offerings* or planned sequences of activities with the same staff and youth (for example, the sewing club at Madison Middle School), provided by…
- 352 community-based partners that delivered services, for pay or as an in-kind contribution, to…
- 163 school sites, nested within…
- 28 grantee organizations[2]

The remaining four grantees did not report using any outside partners to provide services.

In the second step of our investigation, we conducted interviews about quality assurance practices at a subset of seven exemplary sites determined to have high point-of-service quality. First, we used youth survey data from all the 21st Century sites that reported use of community partners to construct a point-of-service quality measure, outlined in Table 1. The three scales—governance and decision-making, peer support, and staff support—roughly correspond to the top levels of the point-of-service quality pyramid in Figure 1.

We constructed a list of 20 sites with the highest youth survey scores and then asked expert informants—reviewers from the Michigan Department of Education and evaluators from Michigan State University—to evaluate the list based on their own experience. This selection process, as well as site staff's willingness to be interviewed, yielded seven high-quality 21st Century sites where we conducted a total of 17 interviews with grantee directors, site coordinators, and directors of community-based vendor organizations. All 17 staff interviews included the following questions:

- What is your personal definition of quality for the afterschool program at the site?
- What kind of accountability practices are used to monitor the quality of vendor services at the site, and what is your role in the process?
- How well do community-based vendors meet their own service missions through the collaboration with the 21st Century site?

We coded the interview data by analyzing responses to develop a set of categories for each of the three questions. After the coding, our primary interpretive approach was simply to count the number of times that interviewees mentioned particular practices or values. To provide background for the study, we also conducted four expert interviews with two lead consultants at the Michigan Department of Education, a local evaluator for a large urban district, and an expert with extensive experience in state licensing reform in 21st Century sites.

STRUCTURE, SCALE, AND SCOPE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Successful implementation of 21st Century policy is rooted in access to the diverse resources of communities where afterschool sites are located. Community-based organizations offer a wider variety of program options than any site could deliver alone, from sports and arts programming to life skills and youth development. What, then, are the characteristics of the relationships between 21st Century sites and their community partners?

Structures That Support Partnership

Michigan 21st Century grantees generally use one of two management models, which we refer to as the *grantee-manager model* and the *grantee-fiduciary model.* In the **grantee-manager model,** the school district that receives the grant manages its own 21st Century sites, employing its own personnel as lead administrators and site coordinators. The school district grantee contracts both with school-day teachers and with community-based partners to deliver programming. In smaller cities and towns, the pool of community-based resources is often much smaller than in large urban areas, so that the relationships between individual community-based partners and 21st Century sites are often long-term and multi-purposed, rather than short-term and specialized. For example, in the City of Port Huron, two longstanding community-based organizations were asked to join the original 21st Century proposal and have been the primary outside service providers over the entire lifetime of the 21st Century grant. Each of these organizations has come to deliver a mix of services that cover the primary academic, enrichment, and prevention emphases of the program.

Two of Michigan's largest school districts, Detroit and Grand Rapids, use the **grantee-fiduciary model.** These 21st Century grantees maintain fiduciary responsibility but outsource site management to

local high-capacity nonprofit organizations that have extensive experience as service providers, evaluators, and consultants in the education and human services sector. Examples include municipal recreation departments, nationally affiliated afterschool management organizations such as Communities in Schools, and local entities including Detroit's Youth Development Commission.

In 2005–2006, Detroit had five organizations managing 50 sites; Grand Rapids had three organizations managing 22 sites. These management organizations then hire permanent coordinators for each site. Like the grantee-manager school districts, these management organizations also contract with school-day teachers and with community-based partners to deliver services. However, the mechanisms for matching community-based resources to school sites in these large urban systems is very different from those used by the grantee-manager districts. For example, in Detroit, the management organizations host annual fairs at which community-based partners present their content to all 50 site coordinators, who then select partners for the upcoming semester. The management organizations coordinate the necessary contractual relationships and support the community partners in scaling up to deliver services. Further, Detroit's management organizations offer technical assistance and system-wide training in youth development methods to community partners at low or no cost. For example, Detroit's Youth Development Commission provides several dozen training opportunities each year to 21st Century grantee staff at a nominal fee, with content ranging from nonprofit board development to youth work methods.

Throughout the analyses that follow, we present evidence broken out by the two management models—which also represent differences between Michigan's largest urban districts and the rest of the state. Though we discovered some interesting differences, we generally found that grantee-managers and grantee-fiduciaries use their community partners in similar ways.

Scale of Partnerships

The 163 21st Century sites in our data set reported partnerships with 352 unique community partners. Grantee-manager districts accounted for 301 distinct partners, with grantee-fiduciaries partnering with the other 51 community organizations. These partners typically delivered multi-session offerings, frequently repeating the service at multiple sites. In order to provide a picture of the scale of programming pro-

vided by community partners, we use the following terminology:

- *Activities* are the scheduled content for every subdivision of time in a program. Activities include not only instructional offerings but also less structured pursuits such as homework help, snack, and unstructured play.
- *Offerings* are planned sequences of multiple sessions with a stated learning purpose, involving the same staff and group of participants. A sewing club, book group, or softball league that meets a certain number of times each week throughout a semester at a particular site constitutes an offering.
- *Sessions* are one meeting of an offering sequence, for instance, the October 19 meeting of the sewing club.
- *Slots* refer to a single student's attendance at one session of an offering. When seven students participate in the October 19 sewing club, that constitutes seven slots.

Community-based partners at all sites for which we had data provided 2,195 offerings with 98,433 distinct slots. On average, partners served 17 children per session and served 36 distinct children across the average offering sequence.

Partner Delivery of Services

To get a sense of the extent to which partner staff rather than site staff are used to deliver activities, we examined the use of partner staff in 163 21st Century sites in Michigan. Partners were part of the delivery of 30 percent of 8,201 total activities during the 2005–2006 program year. Site staff alone conducted 71 percent of activities, partner staff alone conducted 9 percent, and partner and site staff together conducted 21 percent. Remember that *activities* include not only instructional offerings but also less structured activities such as informal choice time and outdoor play. Since permanent site staff are generally responsible for these activities, the total proportion of purposeful instructional *offerings* delivered by partner staff is certainly higher than these figures indicate.

Differences emerged between the two management models in the division of labor between site staff and community partner staff. Grantee-fiduciaries were more likely to use a combination of site and partner staff, with such a combination leading 36 percent of activities, as compared to 15 percent for the grantee-manager model.

FIGURE 2. PARTNER TYPES

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Grantee-manager model ■ *Grantee-fiduciary model* ■
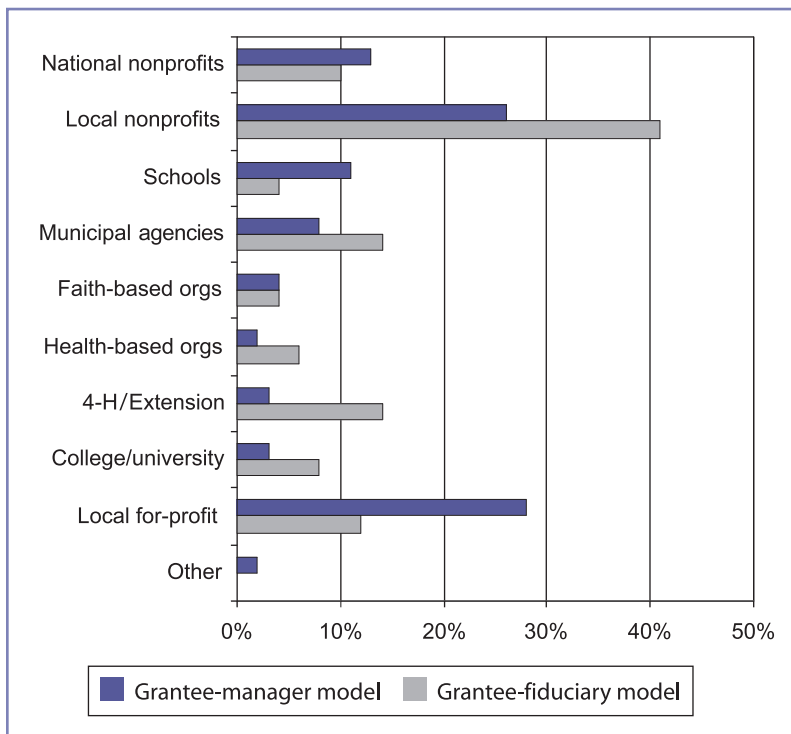
Kinds of Community-based Partners

In Figures 2 and 3, community-based partners are divided into a typology that includes:

- **Nationally affiliated nonprofit organizations** or program models, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, or YM/YWCA
- **Local nonprofit organizations** of varying purposes and capabilities, such as a community arts organization or soccer league
- **School organizations,** including public schools, charter schools, and school districts
- **Municipal agencies and institutions**, such as parks and recreation departments, museums, or police and fire departments
- **4-H** clubs and services from county **Extension** programs supported by Michigan State University
- **Colleges and universities** (other than 4-H and Extension)
- **Local for-profit organizations**, such as bowling alleys or other sports, entertainment, or arts venues, as well as self-employed individual vendors
- **Faith-based organizations**, including not only individual houses of worship but also larger organizations such as Catholic Charities
- **Health-based organizations**, such as hospital systems or nursing centers
- **Other types of organizations** that do not fit within

the categories above, for example, state agencies or the National Guard

Figure 2 presents the distribution of types of partners, out of a total of 352 partners, with the grantee-manager sites representing the lion's share of those partners. Figure 3 shows what percentage of the 2,195 unique offerings were delivered by each type of partner. The grantee-manager model accounts for 1,552 of these offerings and grantee-fiduciaries for 640.

The two most active types of partners were local nonprofits and local for-profits. The greatest difference in the two management models was reflected in the use of these two types of partners, with the grantee-manager model using more local for-profit partners and the grantee-fiduciary model using more local nonprofits. Other frequently used partners included nationally affiliated nonprofits, schools, municipal organizations, and, for grantee-fiduciaries, 4-H/Extension. However, the proportion of *offerings* delivered by these partners did not always reflect their numbers. For example, although the organizations using the grantee-fiduciary

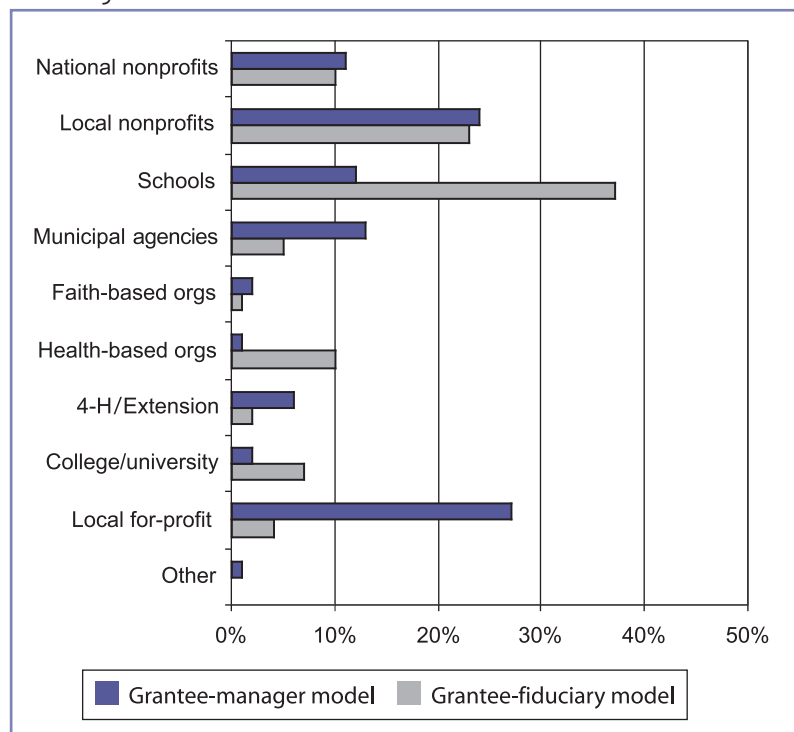FIGURE 3. OFFERINGS BY PARTNER TYPE

FIGURE 3. OFFERINGS BY PARTNER TYPE

Grantee-manager model ■ *Grantee-fiduciary model* ■

TABLE 2. CONTENT OF COMMUNITY PARTNER OFFERINGS

Offering Type	% of all offerings by partners*		Examples of Offerings	Offering Objectives
	Grantee-Manager Model	Grantee-Fiduciary Model		
Recreational	33%	24%	Movie to support theme	Raise enthusiasm for theme used in instruction
			Roller skating	Roller skate together and with family
Youth development	29%	20%	M.I.N.D.: Men In Need of Direction	Promote conflict resolution, self-respect, respect for others
			4-H Teen Club	Increase quality of educational and recreational opportunities, grades 6–10
Arts	18%	24%	Music around the House	Create music with materials found at home
			Dance lessons	Learn dances while socializing in a new environment
Academic enrichment**	14%	12%	Disguised learning	Learn fundamental skills using fun resources and games
			Creative writing	Brainstorm
Homework/tutoring**	11%	17%	Homework	Support academic achievement and enrichment
			Reading aloud	Allow students to relax and just enjoy being read to
			Family Life Enhancement	Provide family development, asset building, character education, support services
Technology**	3%	5%	Technology	Practice using a variety of computer and technology applications
			LEGO League	Collect and assemble data; explore representation of data

*Column does not total 100% because some offerings were coded into multiple types.
** These offering types, typically led by permanent site staff not included in this data, actually represent a much higher proportion of offerings than reflected in these percentages.

based on their content, as determined by the Michigan State University evaluator. The first column shows each offering content type. Most of the categories are self-explanatory. As defined in the statewide 21st Century evaluation data, the *youth development* category includes offerings focused on life skills, character education, conflict resolution, leadership, community service, mentoring, and drug and alcohol resistance. The second column in Table 2 displays the percent of total offerings that were of that content type, regardless of which partner delivered the service. Individual offerings often fell into more than one category, so that percentages in each column add up to more than 100 percent. Table 2 does not describe the "dosage" of offering content, since the number of sessions for any specific offering is not reflected. The table also does not reflect the total number of site offerings, since many, especially academic support and homework help, were provided by school-day teachers or other regular program staff employed by the 21st Century sites.

The most common offering types delivered by partners were recreation, youth development, arts, and

model reported that only 4 percent of their partners were school organizations, those partner schools provided 37 percent of their offerings.

Sites' Use of Partner Services
Across the 163 sites, the mean number of community-based partners per site was 5.5. On average, they provided 286 hours of service. The mean value of subcontracting with all community partners at a given site was $45,098. This suggests that, on average, site coordinators are responsible for monitoring the performance of staff from five different organizations over the course of a program year. However, there are enormous variations in each of these figures for individual sites. Where one site might have five partners, another could have 12, while another has only one; similar variations are found in the hours of service and the value of the services provided. At some sites, then, each of these figures is substantially higher.

Kinds of Offerings Partners Provided
Table 2 profiles partner services for both management models by types of offerings

TABLE 3. OFFERING CONTENT SPECIALIZATION BY PARTNER TYPE

	Recreational	Youth development	Arts	Academic enrichment	Homework/ tutoring	Technology
Nationally affiliated nonprofits	42%	40%	11%	5%	10%	4%
Local nonprofits	23%	30%	31%	14%	8%	3%
School organizations	20%	7%	8%	21%	41%	7%
Municipal agencies/ institutions	48%	14%	16%	14%	8%	9%
4-H/Extension	9%	15%	6%	51%	6%	0%
Colleges and universities	49%	11%	23%	16%	7%	1%
Local for-profits	29%	33%	27%	3%	11%	1%
Faith-based organizations	2%	73%	17%	4%	7%	7%
Health-based organizations	48%	31%	12%	1%	3%	0%
Other types of organizations	48%	22%	22%	4%	4%	0%

academics in the form of both academic enrichment and homework or tutoring help. Partners were least likely to provide special events, parent involvement, and technology programming; however, part of the reason is simply that the sites tended to provide these types of offerings less frequently than the others.

Partner Specialties

We also analyzed the categories of offerings by the types of community-based partners to identify the offering content each type of partner most frequently provided. Table 3 provides a profile of offering content specialization by partner types. We highlighted a partner type as specialized in an offering content area if 40 percent or more of offerings were classified in a single content category.

School organizations and 4-H/Extension were the types of partners most focused on academic offerings, with 62 percent of all offerings from schools and 58 percent of those from 4-H/Extension having an academic component, whether academic enrichment or homework and tutoring help. Of all the partner types, school organizations dedicated by far the largest proportion of their time to homework help and tutoring, 41 percent of their offerings, whereas 4-H/Extension devoted 51 percent of its offerings to academic enrichment.

On the other hand, youth development was the primary focus of the traditionally defined community-based sector. Forty percent of the offerings delivered by nationally affiliated nonprofits were in this area, as were 73 percent of offerings by faith-based organizations. Recreation was a specialty for nationally affiliated nonprofits, municipal organizations, colleges and universities, health-based organizations, and organizations in our "other" category, as each had 40 percent or more of their total offerings in the recreation category.

In addition to patterns of specialization, Table 3 also shows some trends toward generalization. First, local nonprofits clearly tended to be generalists, delivering 20 percent or more of their offerings in each of the following content areas: recreation, youth development, arts, and academics. Second, none of the partner types were entirely specialized. For example, though school organizations were primarily focused on academic offerings, they also delivered substantial numbers of recreational, youth development, arts, and technology offerings. Similarly, while faith-based organizations clearly specialized in the youth development category, they also delivered substantial numbers of offerings in the arts, academic, and technology content areas.

The differences between the two management models, which were small, emerged primarily around recreation and youth development. Partners working with grantee-managers were more likely to conduct these offerings than were grantee-fiduciary partners, which were somewhat more likely to deliver arts and academic offerings.

FIGURE 4. OFFERINGS DELIVERED BY PARTNERS, ALONE OR WITH SITE STAFF
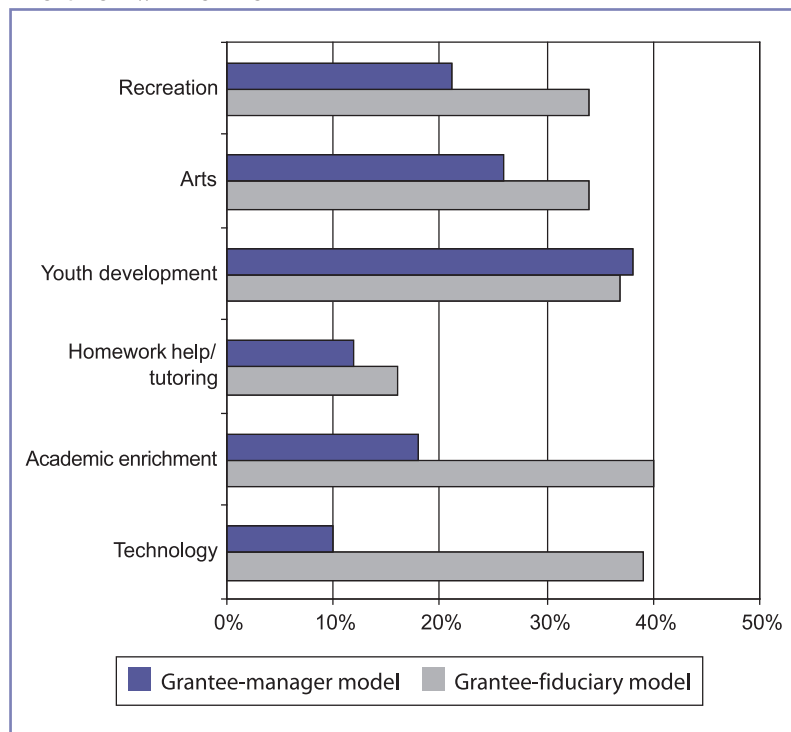
Kinds of Instruction 21st Century Sites Seek from Partners

While Tables 2 and 3 describe the ways in which partners' skills are distributed, they do not identify the areas in which sites are likely to seek instructional expertise from community-based partners rather than from their own staff. Figure 4 shows the percentage of each type of offering in which partners deliver the services, either alone or in conjunction with permanent site staff. The results suggest that grantees were particularly likely to seek partners to deliver content in youth development, the arts, recreation, and academic enrichment, and less likely to use partners for focused academic support, particularly homework help and tutoring.

However, the two management models showed some distinct differences. Sites in the grantee-fiduciary

model were much more likely to use community-based partners to deliver technology and the more interactive component of academic offerings, academic enrichment, than were sites managed by school district staff. Part of the reason may be that the large urban areas that use the grantee-fiduciary model simply have more community partners available. Another explanation may be philosophical differences between the administrators of the two models: Grantee-manager administrators tend to reflect the orientation of school districts, while grantee-fiduciary administrators tend to reflect that of community-based organizations, whose strengths may lie in youth development.

Scope of Partnerships

Our question about the scope of partnerships centered around whether the community partners are true partners or merely vendors: Did community-based partners have the opportunity to contribute their non-instructional time and expertise to form a deeply

> Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of community-based partners means that more types of services are available, regardless of the specific infrastructure in a given community.

integrated combined entity with the 21st Century sites? While our data do not permit us to evaluate the depth of collaboration, we do have information on the financial and time resources exchanged between 21st Century sites and community partners. A huge proportion of partner services, at least in the grantee-manager model, are donated to the afterschool sites.

We have data only for partnerships in the grantee-manager model, so these numbers represent something less than half of the total time and financial resources exchanged through the 21st Century system in Michigan. However, the numbers suggest deep engagement on the part of at least some community partners. Community partners delivered 27,902 hours of on-site service, with a reported value of over $5.5 million, in 2005–2006. The amount grantee directors reported paying community partners from their 21st Century funds totaled about $2.7 million. The value of partners' in-kind contributions, which consisted primarily of staff time spent delivering instructional offer-

ings, was therefore $2.9 million. Only 43 percent of partners contracted for pay; the majority donated their services. Most likely to be paid as contractors were local for-profits (64 percent), local nonprofits (44 percent), municipal organizations (40 percent), and health-based organizations (40 percent). Paid contract relationships were least likely among other organization types (0 percent), colleges and universities (11 percent), and faith-based organizations (27 percent).

Diversity and Flexibility

Analysis of the data indicates that in many ways and at many sites, Michigan's 21st Century afterschool program is indeed tapping the potential benefits of partnerships with community organizations. Nearly all 21st Century grantees have developed partnerships, averaging more than five distinct community partners per site in 2005–2006. Furthermore, on average across all sites, each federal dollar invested by 21st Century sites in purchased services from community partners was nearly matched by services that were donated.

One advantage of these partners is the potential for diversity in instructional offerings. Many different combinations of partners—from traditionally defined community-based nonprofits to institutions of higher education to municipal departments and the armed forces—provide instructional services in both academic and non-academic areas. In most cases, several different types of partners delivered different types of content. Although some patterns of specialization emerged, such as school organizations providing more academic support and local nonprofits more youth development, these patterns had many exceptions.

The use of community partners also appears to provide flexibility in terms of staffing and content expertise. Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of community-based partners means that more types of services are available, regardless of the specific infrastructure in a given community. If no nearby university is available to offer science enrichment, perhaps the Boys and Girls Club in the next county can.

The two management structures that accommodate extensive partnerships, the grantee-fiduciary model in larger cities and the grantee-manager model in medium-size and smaller communities, were associated with some differences in the types of community partners with which the school sites connected and the content of offerings partners delivered. However, the larger patterns of organizational diversity and content flexibility were similar across the two manage-

ment models. All 21st Century grantees in Michigan have access to a wide variety of partner types, and each partner type offers a wide variety of content.

The extent to which 21st Century sites in either model partner with community organizations raises the question of point-of-service quality. Many staff members from many different organizations are likely to deliver instructional services at a given site in a given week. How can site coordinators ensure consistency in the quality of the instruction children and youth receive?

QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

While it is clear that assurance of quality at the point of service is an issue that applies to all staff at afterschool sites, this study focuses on staff from community partner organizations for two reasons. First, staff from community partners are likely to have impermanent relationships with 21st Century programs, posing a challenge to the continuity and quality of experiences delivered by different staff to the same children. Second, because the 21st Century policy explicitly requires use of community partnerships, partnerships and quality assurance should be addressed as a matter of policy.

In order to address these issues, we wanted to determine how site managers think about quality "on the ground," at the point of service where adults foster learning with children and youth. We also wanted to compile best practices that can ensure high-quality programming day in and day out, no matter what organization's staff is leading instructional offerings. To that end, we interviewed staff from seven 21st Century sites identified (through the methods described above) as providing consistently high-quality services. These sites included three in elementary schools, three in middle schools, and one in a high school, located in both urban and rural areas. At four of the sites, we captured complete nested data for all three key players: the grantee director, the site manager, and the director of a community partner organization. We asked interviewees about their definition of *quality* for the afterschool program and about the practices used at the site to assure the quality of services provided by community partners. This data helped us construct the *instructional partnerships model* that describes how afterschool programs can assure point-of-service quality corresponding to the pyramid of four quality features in Figure 1. Below we outline the definitions of quality and the quality assurance practices our interviewees supplied. We then group these practices into

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sets of *learning features* and *focusing features* that inform the instructional partnerships model.

Definitions of Quality

In our interviews, we asked 21st Century grantee directors and site managers, as well as staff representing community partners, to define elements of afterschool quality at their sites. Importantly, their answers parallel many elements of the quality pyramid in Figure 1, suggesting that at these higher-quality sites, staff are focused on the quality at the point of service. We list below the categories of quality, the frequency with which they were mentioned in our 17 interviews, and the specific elements of staff definitions of quality that were coded into that category. We have maintained the language and terminology of the interviews where possible.

Engagement and relevance (33 mentions) were the most frequently mentioned elements of quality. This category corresponds in large part to the top level of the quality pyramid in Figure 1. *Engagement* refers to offerings that are driven by students' interests and are hands-on, requiring purposeful action on the part of the students. *Relevance* refers to offerings that youth see as meaningful for their own lives, such as homework for school success or skills needed for life outside of school. Most respondents saw diversity of program content as a primary pathway to content relevance; offering more types of program content was equated with meeting more youth interests. The primary staff skill set associated with youth engagement and relevance was positive youth development methods. The terms *youth-centered* and *youth-focused* were used by 13 of 17 staff respondents in reference to the site's approach to working with youth.

Meaningful relationships (20 mentions) includes references to a broad range of relationships in which youth and their families attain a sense of connection to

the program and its staff. This category corresponds closely with the quality pyramid's supportive environment and interaction levels. Relationships that support a young person's sense of connection included those among youth and adults within the program, between students' families and program staff, between the program and its broader community, and between program staff and the students' teachers. Mentoring relationships between youth and adults including program staff were also part of this category.

Youth voice structures (five mentions) includes references to youth governance structures that gave youth an active and ongoing role in program planning and in evaluating partners. This category also includes less formal methods of getting feedback from students about their preferences. Elements of this category correspond to both of the top levels of the quality pyramid.

Staff at the high-quality sites we examined were focused on tapping into youth motivation through an emphasis on engagement and relevance, while also recognizing the critical nature of adult-youth relationships as a platform for learning. A focus on youth-centered practice appears to be a part of the institutional fabric at these sites; staff from five of the seven high-quality sites said that they had explicit structures in place to capture youth input on program offerings and procedures.

Quality Assurance Practices

How, then, do 21st Century sites ensure that their definitions of *quality* are enacted consistently by both site and partner staff? When we asked our interviewees about quality assurance, they named specific practices that ensure continuity across all program staff. Again, we list these practices according to the frequency with which they occurred in the interviews.

Ongoing collection of data and information (15 mentions) refers to staff review of a variety of sources of information about program quality, including youth and parent surveys, observations, checklists, and many others. Site coordinators stressed that keeping informed of the needs and views of parents and youth allows them to ensure relevant programming. Three consistently important sources of information were youth activity interest surveys, academic tests, and, most importantly, the state-mandated program quality assessment tool. In 11 of the 17 staff interviews, the staff member reported that the
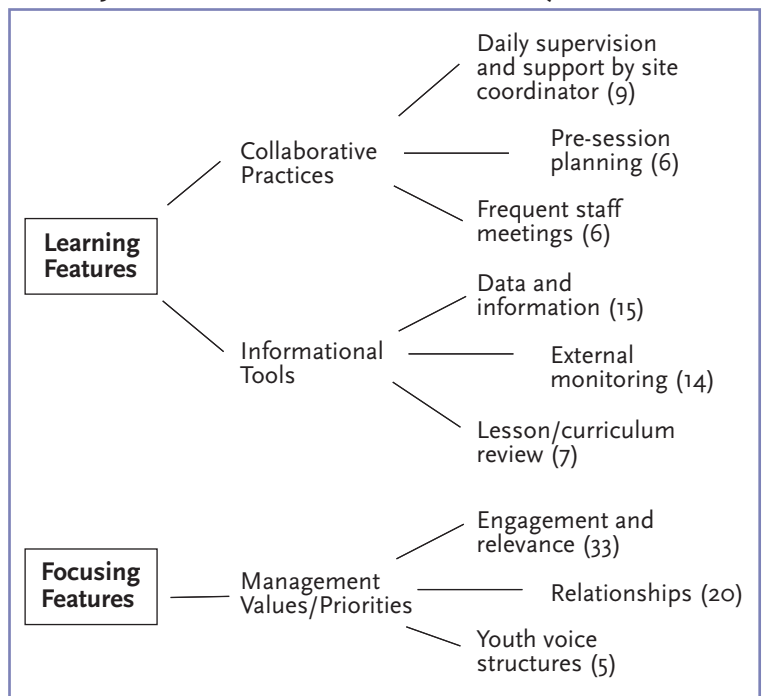
state-mandated quality assessment tool was used at the site; however, the depth to which data was integrated was not great in all cases.

External monitoring, monthly or more (14 mentions) includes close attention to actual offerings and activities by grantee directors or others charged with monitoring the quality of partner staff performance. Frequent visits to the site and structured observation of program activities were the primary means by which this monitoring was accomplished. Directors of community partner organizations also routinely engaged in such external monitoring in coordination with grantee administrators.

Daily supervision and support by the site coordinator (nine mentions) encompasses the site coordinator's formal responsibility for supervising the offerings delivered by partner staff. Site coordinators regularly observed and participated in program activities, reporting their findings to the grantee director or other administrators. Our interviews with four experts who had broad experience with 21st Century programs confirmed the importance of this daily supervision. All four cited the failure of site coordinators to advocate for the quality of the program or to monitor the performance of partner staff as a major shortcoming.

Lesson and curriculum review, monthly or more (seven mentions) includes any practice that for-

FIGURE 5. PROGRAM FEATURES THAT PROMOTE QUALITY

Learning Features
- Collaborative Practices
  - Daily supervision and support by site coordinator (9)
  - Pre-session planning (6)
  - Frequent staff meetings (6)
- Informational Tools
  - Data and information (15)
  - External monitoring (14)
  - Lesson/curriculum review (7)

Focusing Features
- Management Values/Priorities
  - Engagement and relevance (33)
  - Relationships (20)
  - Youth voice structures (5)

mally provided site staff with opportunities to review partner lesson and curriculum plans. Several references to these practices specifically noted the site coordinator's role in reviewing partners' lesson plans each week. Site coordinators stressed the importance of being aware of what partners' lesson plans look like and thinking carefully about how various curricula meet the needs of their particular students.

Pre-session planning (six mentions) includes any practices that brought site and partner staff together before program start-up. Site staff worked with partner staff to develop the content and sequence of offerings, using age-appropriateness and students' interests as selection criteria. Site staff also used the previous year's data and information to find partners that fit the needs and interests of their youth.

Frequent staff meetings, monthly or more (six mentions) includes practices that formally provided site coordinators and grantee directors with opportunities to discuss partner performance. In addition to regular meetings with site partners, some site coordinators reported meetings with parent organizations, teachers, school administrators, and youth committees to discuss partner performance and future directions for partner programming.

This set of quality assurance practices described by staff at high-quality 21st Century sites provides rich insight into how relationships with community vendors can be transformed into instructional partnerships in which the quality of instructional experiences is maintained across multiple providers.

Learning and Focusing Features for Quality Assurance

The interview data on definitions of quality and on quality assurance practices informs our *instructional partnerships model*, presented in Figure 5. Our research suggests that higher-quality sites engage in a set of practices we have categorized as *learning features* and *focusing features.*

Learning features in the instructional partnerships model include both *collaborative practices* and use of *informational tools. Collaborative practices* include daily supervision and support from the permanent site coordinator, pre-session planning, and frequent staff meetings in which partner staff join in planning and reviewing program objectives while site staff review and guide partner performance. Such collaborative practices, because they situate information about youth preferences and staff practices in a context of

shared meanings and responsibilities, are likely to support translation from information to action. High-quality sites also use *informational tools* to learn about point-of-service quality: observational assessment and survey data, in-person monitoring of partner staff, and frequent review of lessons and curriculum. Whatever method is used, feedback about partner performances is made available to the site management and, frequently, to the community partners themselves. Since much of the information is generated when site coordinators and grantee directors actually attend program sessions, the data is laden with rich contextual knowledge of the program, its staff, and its participants. A well-developed set of learning features fosters accountability in the true sense—support for individuals and for the staff as a whole to improve their performance based on meaningful, shared standards and goals.

Focusing features are a set of management values and priorities that *focus* the learning features on the point of service, where staff from partner organizations work with children and youth. According to the definitions of quality expressed in interviews, afterschool programs should seek to engage children and youth

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Our research suggests areas in which federal and state 21st Century policies could have significant impact on the quality of 21st Century programs.

Federal policy should:
- Include guidelines on best practices for selecting community partners
- Require partner staff to be familiar with federal program goals, their state's 21st Century program standards, and the content of their grantees' proposals
- Set aside a proportion of existing funding for outreach by state agencies to provide training and technical assistance for partner organizations
- Mandate use of a validated quality assessment tool or process

State policies should:
- Provide an annual institute on quality assurance for all 21st Century site managers
- Target training and technical assistance for administrators of community-based partners that receive or donate more than $15,000 in services to 21st Century sites
- Use the knowledge and tap the capacity of large management organizations that are already focused on quality assurance with community partners

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through diverse and relevant content, hands-on activities, strong relationships, and structures that promote youth voice. These priorities provide strong incentives for involving young people in making decisions about their own learning and for adults to represent their needs and interests. Adopting these values also requires managers to monitor and observe program sessions consistently to see if students actually are engaged and relationships really are supportive. The values and priorities that constitute the focusing features, because they direct the learning features toward providing high-quality instruction, are particularly vital when multiple partners are providing learning experiences for young participants.

INSTRUCTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Over the past year or so, leading policy entrepreneurs have called for stronger integration between community resources and policies designed to augment youth learning and development (America's Promise Alliance, 2007; Benson et al., 2006; Time, Learning & Afterschool Task Force, 2007). All these reports link the parallel concepts of *positive youth development* and *asset building* with definitions of learning that extend beyond traditional school-day content and routines.

The scale and scope of community partnerships uncovered in our study confirm that Michigan's 21st Century sites are successfully leveraging partnerships as potential gateways to the soft skills, expressive talents, and expert resources their communities have to offer. However, true integration between school sites and their community partners, characterized by shared goal-setting and joint management, is rare. Emerging in its place is an *instructional partnerships model* in which site coordinators select and purchase services from community partners who specialize in various content areas. Because the service being purchased is instruction—the substantively complex process of educating

children and youth—quality assurance is a crucial component of this model. Site staff must continuously evaluate and improve the instruction provided by community partners in order to ensure continuity of high-quality learning experiences for program participants. The less-than-perfect evaluation findings that have dogged the 21st Century program nationally, including weak attendance and small academic effects (James-Burdumy et al., 2005), may be due in part to the lack of emphasis on quality assurance practices.

Addressing the issue of quality in afterschool education in order to implement pertinent policies requires an understanding of the community resources and nested organizational relationships in which afterschool programs operate. The 21st Century instructional partnerships model emphasizes cross-community relationships among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Partnerships informed by this model are flexible and specialized enough to provide high-quality afterschool programming—not only creating safe and supportive environments, but moving higher on the quality pyramid (Figure 1) to offer opportunities for interactions and engagement that are most likely to influence youth development outcomes. Furthermore, the instructional partnerships model offers a major opportunity for 21st Century funding to influence the quality of a community's wider youth development assets. Individual staff members may be shared among several 21st Century sites as well as partner organizations. Improving staff members' performance through quality assurance practices, even at a single site, thus has the potential to grow the skill base of the local afterschool workforce. If such quality assurance practices were built into 21st Century policy and implemented throughout the 21st Century system, the effect would be exponential. The instructional partnerships model thus could not only improve the quality and effectiveness of 21st Century programs but extend the impact of 21st Century investments throughout the field of afterschool programming and youth development.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Charles Smith is director of the Youth Development Group at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, where he manages consulting and research related to High/Scope's youth-level work. Dr. Smith's current research interests include accountability systems, quality and effects of learning environments, and methodology. He is principal investigator for the Youth Program Quality Intervention Study, a three-year randomized trial focused on setting change in out-of-school time organizations. Dr. Smith presents, writes, and consults on alternatives to current accountability models. At Wayne State University in Detroit, he co-founded the Youth Urban Agenda/Civic Literacy Project, a civic learning initiative for secondary and undergraduate students operating since 1993.

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NOTES

[1] See table and citations for reports reviewed in Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007.

[2] For a full discussion of data sets, missing data, and issues that arise from site-based self-reporting, see Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007.