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Collaborative Partners Feedback Report: Request for Applications and Application Process

Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers

(21st CCLC) Grant Program

Pursuant to Title IV, Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),

as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015

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# Executive Summary

In an effort to increase equitable access to funding, equitable funding for eligible entities, and equitable access to programs/services for target student populations and their families, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers team at the Colorado Department of Education solicited two rounds of collaborative partners feedback in January 2023 to inform the development of the 2023 Cohort X 21st CCLC Request for Applications (RFA) which was released in the spring.

The first round of feedback was solicited through an online survey that was widely distributed to 21st CCLC collaborative partners through CDE networks in January 2023. The survey sought to understand ways that CDE could improve the application and application process and to examine ideas about equitable funding and access to funding for organizations and communities that have not traditionally been funded or have been under-funded by the 21st CCLC grant, and to examine ideas about equitable opportunities for youth and families who have historically not been served or have been under-served through the 21st CCLC grant. Results from a total of 59 respondents indicated although the application and process have many strengths (e.g., clear deadlines, reasonable priorities), there are also barriers to applying. In particular, the most recent grant application from 2021 was too long and/or intimidating and some applicants felt that they did not have the resources to complete it. In addition, more than half of the participants who had not previously applied for the grant were unaware of the opportunity, indicating a need for more outreach.

The second round of feedback was solicited through four focus groups held via Zoom in January and February of 2023. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes, had 10-15 participants each (total *N* = 53), and focused on concerns of equity in grant eligibility, priority funding, funding parameters, program design, and local evaluation. In general, the feedback from these groups varied widely and was often specific to particular types of programs. However, across all four groups, two dominant themes emerged: the need for a streamlined application process and a need for help in identifying readiness to apply. Other themes that emerged included requests for more training on a variety of topics (including grant writing for first-time applicants and training on equity, diversity, and inclusion) and an overarching concern for how rural communities are able to access and apply for this opportunity.

CDE responded to this initial feedback by taking two immediate steps: 1) revising the request for applications (RFA) to significantly reduce the amount of information applicants need to provide and 2) creating a readiness assessment that organizations can use to assess their ability to successfully apply for and manage the grant. Future intentions informed by this feedback include examining current costs for staffing and student services in rural areas to understand how to better serve these communities; providing more frequent and targeted training on topics such as grant writing, sustainability, and diversity, equity, and inclusion; and continuing to examine funding limits in light of current economic conditions.

# Purpose and Overview

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) competitive grant program is authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. This is the largest federal funding source for out-of-school time programs that serve high-poverty, low-performing schools and communities.

The purpose of this program is to establish or expand community learning centers that:

* Provide opportunities for academic enrichment to help students meet state and local student performance standards in core academic subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics;
* Offer students a broad array of additional services, programs, and activities, such as youth development activities, service learning, nutrition and health education, drug and violence prevention programs, counseling programs, arts, music, physical fitness and wellness programs, technology education programs, financial literacy programs, environmental literacy programs, mathematics, science, career and technical programs, internship or apprenticeship programs, and other ties to an in-demand industry sector or occupation for high school students that are designed to reinforce and complement the regular academic program of participating students; and
* Offer families of students served by community learning centers opportunities for active and meaningful engagement in their children’s education, including opportunities for literacy and related educational development.

In 2022, as a part of the normal evaluation cycle, grantees were asked to provide feedback on the grant. Overwhelmingly, concerns were raised about equity surrounding access to the opportunity given the current application process and funding structure.

Upon identifying this opportunity for improvement and following a theory of action created by CDE based on the “Moving Toward Equity Stakeholder Engagement Guide” by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) regarding Colorado’s 21st CCLC grant program and considerations of equity for an upcoming grant competition. Feedback was solicited through an online survey and online focus groups.

Collaborative partners feedback was centered on increasing equitable access to funding, equitable funding for eligible entities, and equitable access to programs/services for target student populations and their families.

In particular, CDE solicited information on perceptions of equity around eligibility for funds, priority distribution of funds, funding parameters, and concerns around program design and local evaluation, as well as ways to improve equity in these areas.

# Method and Results

Feedback for this report was solicited from two rounds of inquiry that occurred in January 2023.

## **Online Survey**

* The first round of feedback was obtained through an online survey about Colorado’s grant program and considerations of equity for the upcoming grant competition. In particular, the survey sought to: Understand ways that CDE could improve the application and application process.

The survey was distributed widely via both internal (to CDE) and external listservs encompassing many stakeholder groups, including current grantees, advisory board members, libraries, and student advocacy groups.

**Box 1. Survey Distribution**

* Examine ideas about equitable funding and access to funding for organizations and communities that have not traditionally been funded or have been under-funded by the 21st CCLC grant.

**How did you hear about the survey?**

* Examine ideas about equitable opportunities for youth and families who have historically not been served or have been under-served through the 21st CCLC grant.

The survey was distributed widely among Colorado Department of Education networks using Google Forms (see Box 1 for an overview of survey respondents). It was left open for three weeks. The survey was tailored to each individual taking it using skip logic and took about 20-40 minutes to complete (Figure 1). The survey, which included a link to the 21st CCLC RFA, instructed participants to read the attached RFA and reflect upon it. The survey was a mix of multiple choice and open-ended responses. Open-ended responses were categorized by a CDE evaluator.



*Figure 1*. Survey flow for the first round of 21st Century RFA feedback.

A total of 59 participants completed the online survey. Participants were primarily affiliated with Colorado school districts (32.2%), community-based organizations (CBOs; 30.5%), and faith-based organizations (10.2%). Other affiliations included state agencies or offices (6.8%), migrant education programs (5.1%), and youth/family advocacy organizations (3.4%). Approximately 85% of participants were affiliated with entities eligible to apply for the grant. Of those eligible to apply, half had in the last five years.

### **Multiple Choice Responses**

**Strength of and areas of improvement for the grant application.** Respondents who had applied in the last five years and respondents with organizations that were ineligible to apply were asked to review the current RFA and provide feedback. Figures 2 and 3 show the percentage of each who endorsed each area of strength or opportunity for improvement in the RFA.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Strengths of the Grant Application

*Note*. The “other” response expressed appreciation for setting concrete goals during the application process.

**Figure 3:** Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Opportunities for Improvement in the RFA

*Note*. “Other” responses included setting clear limits on the number of performance measures required for the application, shortening the timeframe for award notification, and updating priority points to reflect post pandemic priorities.

**Strength of and areas of improvement for the application process.** Participants who had applied in the last five years were also asked what they liked about the application *process*. Among the 25 respondents, 60% indicated that the process is easy to understand, 64% indicated that the deadlines give adequate time to apply, 44% indicated that the online application system is used friendly, 28% indicated that the process was appropriate for people who don’t write grant applications, and 24% indicated that the application asks for appropriate information. In a question about what could be improved about the process, 44% of participants endorsed the notion that the RFA process is too difficult for organizations that don’t regularly write grants. A further 20% agreed that the online system is hard to use, 16% agreed that the RFA asks for too much information, and 12% agree that the process was difficult with not enough time to complete it. Only one participant endorsed the notion that the process is difficult to understand.

**Reasons for not applying and barriers to application.**Participants who were eligible to apply but had not within the last five years (*N* = 23) were asked why they hadn’t and whether they had experienced barriers to applying. The percentage of respondents endorsing each of the survey options is presented in Figures 4 and 5.

**Figure 4:** Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Reasons for Not Applying for the 21st Century Grant

*Note*. “Other” responses included not being in the position to take on a learning center and collaborating with another applying organization.

**Figure 5:** Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Barriers to Applying for the 21st Century Grant

*Note*. “Other” responses included the application length, not knowing how to find resources, and not knowing about the release of the RFA.

**Open-ended Responses**

Two additional open-ended questions were asked of all participants. The first concerned how the application process could be improved to allow greater access to funding for organizations and communities that have not traditionally been funded or have been underfunded by the 21st CCLC grant. By and large, the most common response was increased funding of rural areas, followed by prioritization of entities who are applying for the first time. Beyond these suggestions, comments varied widely and included such suggestions as decreasing minimum funding amounts, increasing maximum funding amounts, and providing bonus points for several criteria, including both active collaborations with local organizations and no alternative community activities to support the work.

“Rural communities face unique funding and staffing challenges that larger population centers do not. Ethnic diversity is generally not very high, FRL is very under-reported by immigrant families in fear of being exposed, and small 'N' sizes make it difficult to balance the amount of funding requested with the number of students served.”

**- Survey Respondent**

The second open-ended question asked about ways to provide more access to out-of-school time programs for youth and families who have historically not been served or have been underserved through the 21st CCLC grant. Responses varied widely, with only three suggestions being repeated by more than one participant. First, participants reported that transportation is often an issue, and that awarding bonus points for transportation would allow for more connections with children and families. Participants also suggested prioritizing programs for middle and high school students as they are harder to recruit and retain. Finally, participants suggested priority funding for programs already serving underserved youth.

**Conclusion**. Among those participants who had applied for the grant or who were ineligible to apply, there was consensus that the grant deadlines are clear, and the application priorities are reasonable. However, both groups also agreed that the grant application is too long and/or intimidating. Among those participants who had not applied for the grant, more than half had not applied because they had not heard of the opportunity and just under half considered access to resources to be a barrier to applying, indicating a need for more outreach.

## **Focus Groups**

The second round of feedback, which was guided by the results of the online survey, was obtained through four focus groups held in January 2023. Focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 90 minutes, and had 10-15 participants each (total *N* = 53). After a brief introduction, participants responded to a three-question online poll (Figure 2), and then engaged in a facilitated small-group discussion. Groups convened with a large-group share out and summation of small-group activity.

The online poll comprised two multiple choice questions about priority points and funding limits and an open-ended question about improving funding distribution in the state. In the facilitated small group discussions, groups were prompted to consider the following:

* Grant eligibility (e.g., Geographic distribution of funds & maximum centers per district/ application)
* Priority funding (e.g., current and potential areas to assign priority points)
* Funding parameters (e.g., maximum amount and cost per student based on average daily attendance [ADA])
* Program design (e.g., required minimum hours of programming, allowable and recommended activities)
* Local evaluation (e.g., parameters around and cost for local evaluation)

Two facilitators took notes throughout each session. An evaluator with CDE compiled the notes and extracted themes, rating them on importance by how many groups raised each issue.

### **Online Poll**

The first question concerned what other priority points should be included in the RFA. Participants were given eight options to choose from, resulting in a rank ordered list for each of the four focus groups with higher ranks indicating that more participants endorsed that option. The highest ranked option was “Serving other disadvantaged, marginalized, and/or historically underserved youth and their families” and the lowest ranked was “Alternative Education Campuses (AECs).” See Table 1 for ranking across the four groups, as well as average rankings.

Table 1. *Rankings for priority point options by group and average rankings.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Group Rankings** |  |
|  | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 | Average Rank |
| Serving other disadvantaged, marginalized, and/or historically underserved youth and families | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1.5 |
| Schools with higher dropout rates or lower graduation rates (than the state average) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2.75 |
| Schools with Free and Reduced Lunch rates of 75% or higher | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2.75 |
| Serving highly mobile youth | 5 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 4.25 |
| Fifth-day programs | 6 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 4.75 |
| Middle school programs | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| Community schools | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 |

The second question asked participants what the Maximum Award Amount should be (per center, per year) and offered five options as well as an “Other” option. See Figure 6 for the percentage of participants that endorsed each option. “Other” responses varied and included funding based on projected participation numbers or district/program size.

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*Note*: Responses were recorded for 42 participants.

The final Mentimeter question was an open-ended question: “How can we improve the distribution of funding across Colorado?” Given that this question was further explored in group discussions, responses were examined in conjunction with discussion notes.

### **Group Discussions**

**Dominant themes.** Two clear themes emerged across each of the four focus groups. This means that these specific ideas were mentioned by multiple participants in each group. They were:

1. **A need for a streamlined application process.**
2. **A need for help in identifying readiness to apply.**

Both themes centered around the notion that the current application process is long, time consuming to complete, and can be complicated to understand for those not accustomed to grant writing or who had never applied. A readiness assessment would help to assure applicants of their ability to obtain and manage a 21st CCLC grant before spending considerable resources to complete the application.

**Secondary themes.** Other specific ideas that emerged across multiple groups included:

* The possibility of providing grant writing training, particularly to first-time applicants.
* Worries that a high “cost per student” confers a disadvantage when applying, particularly for smaller communities with higher costs.
* A concern for rural communities overall – sometimes costs can be more than three times as much for these communities who need more but can do less due to fewer staff and resources.
* Issues with using average daily attendance as a metric for funding, as well as the possibility of using regular student attendance data instead.
* Questions about what will happen when schools no longer track free and reduced lunch, as well as concerns that many districts do not adequately track this/offer this to families.
* The possibility of providing sustainability education to help grantees prepare for the years after the grant.
* The possibility of providing either training or funding for training around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Additional feedback.** Additional group feedback was specific to individual participants and sites but can be broadly grouped into the following categories:

*Outreach to increase awareness*. Participants suggested identifying and creating an outreach plan for a wide variety of entities, including organizations not tied to a district and the most underserved areas of the state. They also suggested providing early guidance and support around the application process to encourage applications from organizations lacking the staff and resources to apply.

*Increasing and encouraging opportunities for community-based organization (CBO) partnerships.* Participants suggested partnering with CBOs in a number of ways, including creating a list or organizing a meet a greet to connect grantees with potential partners. They also suggested additional training or mentoring for smaller CBOs wanting to apply.

*Changes to grant parameters.* Participants suggest leaning into differences across the state by allowing different requirements by location. They also suggested regional or size-based approaches to funding and brought up considerations of how requirements could change for programs catering to different grade levels.

*Ideas about funding limits.* Participants were both for and against funding limits, citing that while more programs could be served if grants were limited, limiting funding is unfair for programs with inherently higher costs, like rural, fifth-day, or special education programs. They also brought up the rising costs of staffing in the state, as well as the increased responsibilities programs face (e.g., providing basic resources) after the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Ideas about priority points.* The two most consistently mentioned groups deserving of priority points were rural districts and fifth-day programs. Other suggestions included (among many others) providing priority points for: high-need schools using metrics other than free and reduced lunch, schools in food deserts, community schools, and programs targeting elementary, middle, and high school youth (each suggested by one participant).

*Specific considerations for special populations.* Participants raised concerns about identifying, communicating with, and hiring staff reflective of marginalized populations. They also discussed making the grant language more inclusive for CBOs, including consideration of the difficulties such organizations often face with obtaining student data. Participants suggested hiring subject matter experts in regard to working with both CBOs and rural districts during the application process. Many concerns about rural districts were also raised, including how much more everything costs (including staff travel) and how few staff they have available to complete lengthy applications or to fulfill grant requirements such as evaluation reports.

*Additional areas of state support.* Participants discussed how further training around data collection for the grant application and grant administration would be appreciated. Participants also requested assistance in some aspects of grant management (e.g., outreach, transportation), as well as more opportunities for state-provided training. Specifically, participants requested more topical office hours; *additional training funds* or state-provided training on diversity, equity, and inclusion; assistance with finding and sustaining partnerships; and targeted application support.

# CDE Response

## **Immediate Actions**

*Readiness Assessment.*

In response to the immediate need for a readiness assessment, the 21st Century team worked with current grantees and program managers to create the Applicant Readiness Assessment Tool (Appendix). The assessment was published on the CDE 21st CCLC website as an appendix in the 2023 RFA.

The Applicant Readiness Assessment Tool presents potential applicants with 15 statements concerning readiness around critical areas of the grant (e.g. planning and collaborative partners engagement). Potential applicants rate each question on a scale of 1 to 4 (Do not agree=1, Slightly agree=2, Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4), calculate the total rating, and use the key to determine their readiness to apply for the grant. The information is used by potential applicants only and is not to be submitted to CDE as part of the application submission or process.

*Improved Request for Applications.*

In response to the immediate need for a pared down and more concise application process, the 21st Century team revised the RFA to reduce the amount of information required in many sections of the application. This included cutting more than 10 subsections and combining others to eliminate redundancies in required reporting. For example, the application narrative went from 40 questions to 29 questions or was reduced by 25% from the 2021 RFA to the 2023 RFA. Moreover, the use of priority points was clarified, simplified, and placed at the beginning of the application. Finally, RFA language was simplified where possible and some information was moved to appendices to allow for quicker referencing.

## **Future Actions**

CDE is committed to ensuring that the 21st CCLC grant competition process reaches and is accessible to all interested organizations and districts across Colorado who have the capacity to implement high-quality out-of-school time programs for their students and families, particularly those in communities with the most need. Given that the 21st CCLC grant is a long-standing program run in a cohort model, small incremental changes will allow the 21st CCLC team at CDE to solicit feedback on a regular basis to ensure that such changes are both welcome and functioning as intended (i.e., by making the grant opportunity more accessible to a wider audience).

Future intentions include examining current costs for staffing and student services in rural areas to understand how to better serve these communities; providing more frequent and targeted training on topics such as grant writing, sustainability, and diversity, equity, and inclusion; working with CDE’s data services experts to understand how free lunch for all Colorado students will affect the way that CDE prioritizes by measures of financial need (currently FRL rates); and continuing to examine funding limits in light of current economic conditions. The 21st CCLC team at CDE also intends to begin outreach efforts to those groups who have historically not applied and who indicated they will be applying for the first time. Further, CDE will continue to check in with current subgrantees, potential applicants, and other key collaborative partnerss to understand how the current round of changes has affected grant accessibility.

## **Acknowledgements**

We appreciate and thank the participants who took part in this round of feedback, as well as our current and past grantees for contributing to an ongoing culture of continuous improvement around the administration of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grant at the Colorado Department of Education.

## **Questions?**

Please contact Anna Young, Out-of-School Time (OST) Manager & 21st CCLC State Coordinator for programmatic questions (720-614-8666 or Young\_A@cde.state.co.us) and Bonnie Brett, Evaluation and Research Principal Consultant, for questions about this report (720-653-8207 or Brett\_B@cde.state.co.us).

Appendix**: Applicant Readiness Assessment Tool**

***Directions:*** Use this tool to assess your readiness for applying for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) Grant. Rate each question for each topic/area on a scale of 1 to 4 (Do not agree=1, Slightly agree=2, Agree=3, Strongly Agree=4). After rating all questions, calculate the total rating and use the key to determine whether you are ready to apply. This information is to be used by potential applicants internally and will not be submitted to CDE as part of the application submission or process. CDE will not use this completed tool as part of the review process in consideration of awarding funds to applicants.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***TOPIC/AREA*** | ***QUESTION*** | ***RATING*** |
| **1** | **Priority Schools** | The school(s) proposed to be served have 40% free/reduced lunch eligibility AND have been identified to receive Comprehensive Support or Targeted Support (CS or TS). Rate this topic: All schools are on the priority list = 4, no schools are on the priority list = 1) |  |
| **2** | **Planning**  | At least one individual is able to set aside 50-100 hours to lead a team through planning, research, intentional program design, and online application entry process. |  |
| **3** | **Collaborative Partners Engagement**  | Key collaborative partners (including school leadership/staff, families/caregivers, students, and community partners) have been engaged to discuss the readiness and capacity of the lead applicant to design and implement a comprehensive 21st CCLC program at the school(s). |  |
| **4** | **Youth Voice & Choice** | Youth have been directly consulted and involved in the planning and designing of the 21st CCLC program at the proposed school(s). |  |
| **5** | **Needs Assessment** | Based on collaborative partners engagement and available data, there is a demonstrated need for after school/expanded learning programs, including summer learning programs, in the community to support overall student learning and school improvement. |  |
| **6** | **Readiness** | The proposed school(s)/center(s) are ready to help develop and maintain a full comprehensive community learning center, using the most effective evidence-based practices to meet high expectations around student learning. |  |
| **7** | **Partnerships** | At least one viable partnership has been developed between the school(s) and community agency, faith-based organization, municipality and/or individual community partners or people that will be successful to support the program over time. If there no partnerships currently, a plan is in place to identify and establish one within the first year of the grant.  |  |
| **8** | **School Leadership** | The school principal and other school leaders are committed to being active participants and collaborators of the program throughout the life of the grant. If the school experiences turnover in leadership, there is a plan in place to ensure continuity of buy-in from the school for the grant program. |  |
| **9** | **Implementation**  | If awarded, the applicant has a dedicated staff member to lead the implementation of the 21st CCLC program design (CDE recommends at least a 0.75 FTE program director, who could also serve as center coordinator). The applicant has read and understand all program and fiscal implementation requirements and is ready to implement if awarded. |  |
| **10** | **Organizational Capacity** | The applicant has a strong organizational structure that has the capacity to support the project including hiring new staff (a director, site leaders, many other new staff).  |  |
| **11** | **Fiscal Capacity** | The organization understands all fiscal training and reporting requirements listed in the grant application and has the capacity to take on increased financial Federal grant management responsibilities over time. |  |
| **12** | **Data/Evaluation** | The organization understands all monitoring, evaluation, and reporting requirements listed in the grant application and has the capacity to take on increased evaluation (data) responsibilities over time. |  |
| **13** | **High-Quality Staff** | High-quality staff, including school-based teachers and staff, community professionals, educators, and others, are interested and available to work in the program during the school year and for summer learning programs. There is a plan in place to reduce staff turnover and maximize staff capacity (through professional learning opportunities) throughout the life of the grant. |  |
| **14** | **Space & Resources** | Full access to appropriate and adequate space in the school and/or community including classrooms, gyms, multi-purpose rooms, cafeterias, libraries, and access to technology and the outdoors that can be used as part of the program. |  |
| **15** | **Transportation** | Applicant has a plan in place to ensure transportation to and from the center for students and families, including collaborating with school/district staff to organize and pay for transportation. Transportation should not be a burden or a barrier to participate. |  |
|  |  | **TOTAL RATING:** |  |

**Ratings:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **45-60 points** | 75% or more of total  | We are ready to apply for Colorado’s 21st CCLC grant! |
| **30-44 points** | 50%-75% of total | We may be ready, but we should consult with collaborative partners, partners, and leadership to address areas with low scores before applying. |
| **Below 30 points** | Below 50% of total | We are not ready and should possibly consider applying in the next grant competition instead. |