

# ARKANSAS SCHOOL OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY NETWORK

## *A GRASSROOTS EFFORT THAT IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE*

*Research and Practice Issue Brief*

The School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Yale University



The School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (21C) program at Yale University publishes Research and Practice Issue Briefs to summarize and disseminate current research on topics of special interest to educators and policymakers, as well as to provide information to facilitate the application of research to practice. The goal is to provide concise, objective, and constructive information and explore the implications for the 21C program and other school reform efforts.

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# THE SCHOOL OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The School of the 21st Century (21C) is a school reform model that includes school-based child care, family services, and other components that together make up a comprehensive and continuous system of learning support, from the birth of a child through elementary school and beyond. The rationale underlying 21C is that families often need some kind of support when their children are growing and that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, at times need help to perform well in school.

## 21C Structure

Schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century contain six core program components. These **components**, which are adapted to the vision and resources of a given community while meeting the diverse needs of children and families, include:

- Guidance and support for families;
- Early care and education for young children;
- Before-school, after-school, and vacation care for school-age children;
- Health education and services;
- Networks and training for child care providers; and
- Information and referral services.

Once the core components have been implemented, other programs and services, such as youth development or adult education, can be added to meet other community needs. Existing services, such as Head Start or Even Start, can also be brought under the 21C umbrella.

All 21C Schools uphold **six guiding principles** that:

- Facilitate strong parental support and involvement;
- Provide universal access to child care and other services;
- Offer all programs as non-compulsory;
- Focus on all developmental pathways, including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains;
- Provide high quality in all services; and
- Offer professional training and advancement opportunities to child care providers.

*Teachers noticed that one three-year-old would hold toys, books, or any other any visual stimulus 1 to 2 inches from his face to see them. The school nurse took him to a local eye doctor who fitted him for glasses. The district PTA Council paid for the glasses. His vision was so poor that the glass was going to have to be very thick, so the doctor donated the more expensive thinner lenses. I cannot describe the day the glasses arrived and the nurse brought them to the boy - the world opened up for him that day.*

21C adds to and works with existing services. Each school begins with a needs assessment, which provides an indication of what services are required and an organizational audit, which gauges available financial, human, and program resources. With this information, schools develop an implementation plan. In planning, the approach is to **think big, start small** so that the implementation is phased-in over a number of years and is tailored to the needs and resources of each community.

# ARKANSAS 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY NETWORK

## A Grassroots Community-based Initiative

With technical assistance, coaching, and other supports provided by Yale's Zigler Center for Child Development and Social Policy, Arkansas School the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (AR21C) sites build on their strengths and develop programs unique to the local context. Each AR21C program functions autonomously and creates a specific set of services and distinctive flavor based on six core components while responding to the local needs of its community.

## Major Foundations Facilitate AR21C Growth

Conceptualized at Yale University in 1987, the School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has taken root in more than 1,300 schools around the country. The 21C model was first implemented in Arkansas in 1992 in the Paragould School District. Since then, with financial support beginning in 2001 from the Ross Foundation and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, 35 programs joined as founding members of the Arkansas 21C (AR21C) Network.

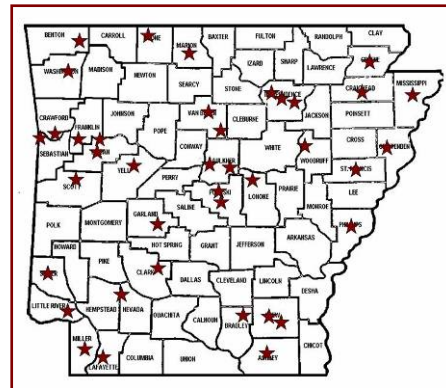
## Networking and Training

The AR21C Network hosts training events for all AR21C program directors and staff. Topics cover all 21C components and provide relevant skills. During these events, network members form relationships that provide more informal

support—they call or email each other frequently for ideas, information, or even coaching on specific issues

## AR21C Programs Cross the State

As of 2009, 21C was implemented in 44 school districts across Arkansas, in more than 100 sites. In accordance with 21C's guiding principles, Arkansas program implementation reflects the variations in needs and resources among communities. Locations of AR21C programs are indicated in the map below (note that some stars indicate more than one program).



## AR21C Leadership Council

The AR21C Network is governed by a Leadership Council comprised of members representing the AR21C community. The group has established a strategic outline and obtained its 501(c)(3) non-profit status. Members are focusing on financial planning, policy development, and long-term viability of AR21C.

## 21C SCHOOLS IN ARKANSAS MAKE A DIFFERENCE



National research on 21C has demonstrated the efficacy of the program for a variety of student, family, and school outcomes. Ongoing evaluation of AR21C schools has revealed significant results that demonstrate the positive impact programs are having on children and their families. Data demonstrating that 21C is making a difference are presented on the following pages, arranged by 21C component.

Highlights include:

### Implementation Growth

Since 2001, AR21C programs:

- Increased in number from 7 to 35;
- Doubled the number of home visits by parent educators and preschool staff;
- Expanded the number of families served by parent educators almost eight-fold;
- Provided four times as many children with health services; and

- Expanded the AR21C child care provider networks five-fold.

### Outcome Successes

AR21C programs:

- Provided higher quality of preschool compared with other state-funded preschool programs; and
- Demonstrated increased involvement in parent-teacher conferences and participation in informal parent-teacher discussions in established AR21C programs.

AR21C school children:

- Score higher on measures of school readiness;
- Are more likely to read at grade level;
- Have lower absenteeism rates;
- Advance to the next grade more often;
- Have fewer discipline issues;
- Have parents who are more involved in their education;
- Stay in their current schools longer; and
- **Are ready to learn and succeed in school!**

21<sup>st</sup> Century (21C) Schools are improving the lives of 47,000 children and their families in school districts throughout Arkansas.

*[One child] entered the transitional classroom in late August. She had a very difficult time separating from her parents and was extremely shy when she started school. During the course of this school year she developed confidence and independence. She now has a very good command of letters, sounds, numbers, listening and comprehension skills, vocabulary, and social awareness. She is one of the first children to volunteer to read aloud to the class or to our office staff. M.'s parents are very pleased and even shocked by the progress she has made this year. They look forward to an easier and more enjoyable experience in kindergarten because they know their daughter is truly ready.*

## GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

AR21C schools provide a range of programs and activities that engage parents in their children's learning, train and coach them in parenting skills, and provide supports that help them build and maintain a stable home environment. These activities are provided in diverse ways, such as:

- Parenting classes
- Playgroups
- Parenting libraries
- Child development information and assessments
- Home visits
- Family events with a literacy focus
- Parenting centers and lending libraries

Recognizing parents' important role in their child's development before they enter school, 21C programs offer services to parents of children from birth on to identify and prevent potential problems that, if not addressed, can stand in the way of the child's later academic success.

Similar programs are offered to parents of preschool and school-age children with topics that are relevant to older children. Parenting skills and ways to provide homework help are some of the common subjects.

### Parent Connections Grow

During the course of our evaluation:

- Home visits almost doubled, increasing from 7,386 to 12,185; and
- The number of families served by parent educators increased almost eight-fold, rising from 820 to approximately 6,500.

### Home Visitation Matters

Established AR21C programs, compared with "newer" AR21C sites, reported:

- 9 percent higher involvement in parent-teacher conferences; and
- 14 percent more participation in informal parent-teacher discussions.



*I think the home visit component of 21C has really helped me be a better mother. When the parent educator first started doing home visits to my house, we lived in a small trailer and I was embarrassed to let her come in. We visited on the front porch for the first several months. She made me realize that it doesn't matter what kind of house you live in but what kind of care you give your family that is important. I look forward to her making home visits and working with us. When my children are older, I want to get my GED and then maybe go on to school.*

# EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

21C schools provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate child-care services for children ages 3 to 5 at the school or at a school-linked site; some programs also offer child care for children from birth to 3 years of age. These early education experiences increase children's readiness to learn as they enter kindergarten and lay the foundation for children's later success in school and for positive relationships between schools and families.

School-based early education provides a critical opportunity to offer kindergarten transition activities, registration, and screening. Receiving these services from a known person, such as a child's preschool teacher, reduces stress for both children and their families during a potentially difficult time.

## AR21C Early Care and Education Programs:

### Reach more preschool children

- From 2003 to 2007, the number of children ages birth to 5 in 21C programs **increased 300 percent.**

### Increase children's readiness to learn as they enter kindergarten

- Data show **significantly higher scores** by AR21C preschool children on all developmental indicators compared with other state-funded preschool children.

### Establish high quality programs throughout the state

- Site assessments show **higher quality rating** of 21C preschools programs compared with other state-funded preschool programs.

### Keep children in school and moving forward

- From 2003 to 2007, AR21C sites:
  - **reduced their school absenteeism** rates by 2.2 percent, and
  - **reduced their school turnover** rates by 6 percent.



*I am a single father, who got custody of my son when he was 3 years old. Having the preschool program made it more possible to be able to obtain custody of my son, because the judge was aware of the program in our school and knew that I would have quality child care for him while I was working.*

## BEFORE- AND AFTER-SCHOOL AND VACATION PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Either on site or at a linked site, 21C schools provide diverse, supervised activities for school-age children outside of regular school hours. School-age child care enables children to learn, grow, and socialize in a safe environment during non-school hours. It also reflects the need for supervision while parents work; research indicates that children left alone during critical out-of-school hours are at risk for engaging in behaviors that can lead to delinquency, pregnancy, substance abuse, and school failure.

These extended day services are often also offered to preschool children whose parents are working and need child care outside of the regular classroom time period. Summer programs offer educational summer-time experiences to children who otherwise wouldn't have access to them.

Studies conducted nationally at both 21C and non-21C schools have shown that school-age programs have a positive impact on student academic achievement, in addition to increasing a child's self-esteem. In Arkansas, one school district reports:

*When examining Benchmark Scores in grades 3-8 for the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years, students who participated in the after-school programs at least 30 days showed greater growth than non-after-school students in both literacy and math and this held true for every grade level.*

AR21C programs reported that 3,153 children participated in out-of-school programs during 2007. Ninety-two percent of these programs offer academic services and 74 percent include enrichment activities.



*One of our students in the extended day program lives with his grandmother. The grandmother is unable to help the student with homework because of limited reading skills. The after-school teacher helps him with his homework assignments and, when the grandmother picks him up, the teacher helps her as needed with any notes or school correspondence that requires a response. The student's academic grades have improved because of the tutoring and his conduct grades have improved because he is completing his homework. He is also able to participate in any special activities because his permission notes are signed and returned.*

## HEALTH EDUCATION AND SERVICES

In collaboration with community-based health care providers, 21C schools offer a range of services and education related to health issues. These include providing education about health, nutrition, and fitness education.

In Arkansas, programs offer physical health services, developmental screenings, mental health assessments, nutrition information, fitness activities, and dental treatments. More than 50 percent of the AR21C programs have an on-site school nurse available for their students.

Schools work with food service personnel to change cafeteria menus; they modify preschool and after-school snacks to reflect children's

nutritional needs; and staff members provide parents with useful information to make family life style changes. AR21C coordinators also run health fairs, nutrition marathons, and walking clubs.

AR21C schools implemented a variety of mental health services, including preventative, identification, referral, and on-site training for administrators, teachers, and parents.

### Health Care Grows

- Eighty percent of AR21C districts offer health education and services.
- The number of children reached by these services nearly quadrupled within two years, from 4,512 in 2005, to almost 17,000 children in 2007.



*One child needed major dental work, so the school partnered with a local dentist who provided the work for a discount. The remainder of the bill was paid for by staff members. After many teeth were pulled (due to double teeth), the student's speech and breathing have improved significantly. The student has more self confidence and improved relationships with other students.*

*One four-year-old girl in our 21C program suffers from severe ear infections. She has had numerous surgeries over the past few years, pertaining to tubes being placed in her ears. When she first began coming, she barely spoke, had trouble playing with the other children, and was very emotional. Over the course of two years, she has learned to talk fluently and has learned to interact with the other children. Her progress in the past six months is amazing. She was far behind the other children in her development, and now she has gained on, and even passed, some of the others.*

## NETWORKS AND TRAINING FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Private providers continue to provide services in communities, even though school districts have filled some of this need. Research has shown that the skills and knowledge base of the child care provider have a significant impact on the quality of child care that is provided.

To strengthen the quality of child care in the community to ensure that **all** children enter kindergarten ready to learn, 21C schools initiate relationships with local child care providers through a child-care provider network. The network offers training opportunities, support groups, and newsletters to support child-care providers in the community. The network engages both school-based providers and child-care and home-based providers in the larger community.

Many 21C programs offer some of the following to local private providers:

- ***On-Site Services for Providers:*** Because they are often the only adult supervising the children, 21C programs deliver services directly to the provider's child care home or center.
- ***Inviting Providers to School:*** Bringing family child care providers to school can be an educationally, as well as socially, enriching experience for both providers and the children in their care.
- ***Networking and Training:*** 21C schools can schedule trainings at convenient times for providers and providing support, such as child care and translation, during meetings.
- ***Financial Support:*** Occasionally, school districts are able to provide financial incentives and benefits to child care providers in their communities.

The AR21C networking efforts with child care providers have increased:

- In the two years between 2005 and 2007, the network grew from 69 to 498 child-care centers.
- In 2005, 2,981 children were enrolled in networking centers and homes; 20,756 children were participating by 2007.



## INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES

Because of their familiarity with resources in their community, AR21C staff members are an indispensable conduit connecting families with support services. All AR21C schools inform families about a wide range of services pertaining to the well-being of children and families available in the community, including information about child care options, housing, jobs, health and mental health services, and adult education. Some programs develop printed materials that list local resources; others staff a phone line to answer questions, while most provide drop-in services with pamphlets and handouts.

Schools often provide these information and referral services through Family Resource

Centers for parents. Through many of their services, 21C programs encourage connections among the school, families, and community.

**AR21C programs are a vital link between families and the services they need.**

Referrals related to early identification of developmental delays can ultimately save school districts and taxpayers considerable money. Providing services at an early age often eliminates the need for special education services, which are costly for school districts. For example:

- From 2003 to 2007, AR21C sites reduced the number of children in special education by 5 percent.



*We have a child that is autistic that came to our program during the summer. He was non-verbal and the other child care centers could not handle him. We provided services for him; he has blossomed with language and social skills. He also can identify all letters, shapes, numbers, and so on. The teachers in his room are fantastic and do the extras to help him excel. If there is a discipline problem, they work through it. The children are so supportive and treat him with respect. He will be moving into kindergarten next year; our children will be attending school with this young child for the next 13 years. Each of our children has learned skills from him and, in turn, he has learned from his peer mentors.*

## WARREN: A PIVOTAL PARTNERSHIP MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

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Gina Woodard's passion for 21C bubbles over when she talks about the program. It's not surprising then, given Gina's energy and enthusiasm, that community partnerships are a cornerstone to the program's success. Gina's zeal has proved contagious, attracting numerous collaborations to form a web of support to meet the needs of the whole child and family in this largely rural, low-income, and minority district.



One partnership that has made all the difference is between the Warren School District and Southeast Arkansas Community-Based Education Center (SEACBEC, the area's adult education program where Gina is housed). Before their involvement with 21C, there was a limited communication between Warren's adult education program and the schools. The district school provided after-school programs for a small group of school-aged children, while SEACBEC provided extended-day child care for 64 children ages birth to 5. **A turning point came when Warren's superintendent attended an AR21C Network meeting for superintendents. He came back convinced of the impact and importance of 21C programs.**

When Gina asked him for his support, he urged her to secure state funds to open an ABC school (Arkansas Better Chance, a state-funded program that provides preschool funding), remodel a nursing home into preschool space, and ultimately obtain a community block grant to build a new early childhood building, which will be on the Warren school campus and he enthusiastically helped her navigate these projects to success.



Initiating her 21C program in 2004, Gina states, "The 21C program has allowed us to add so much to what we were already providing," Gina points out. "We jumped from serving 50 families to 167 families in just a few years." The Warren 21C program has created a tapestry of innovative services to help families build stable and enriching home environments. Programs include home visits, parent education, a parent center and parenting lending library, literacy-focused family events, training and other supports for child care providers, evening ESL, child care with homework help, along with English literacy activities and a lending library, and programs for high school moms with free, high-quality child care that facilitates their high school graduation.

Of course, many factors have contributed to the rapid success of the program, not the least of which is the energy and skill of Gina and the staff in Warren, but none of it would have been possible without partnerships among key community players.

## MONTICELLO: NETWORKING WITH PROVIDERS CHANGES THE DELTA LANDSCAPE

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Monticello is located on the edge of Arkansas' Delta Region, an area rich in history and beauty and graced by the Mississippi River. The region is also economically depressed, with a significant low-income and minority population. The Monticello 21C Program responded to the challenging needs of these Delta families by building on the community's existing strengths—people's willingness to work together on shared problems. "It's really a wonderful community to work in," says 21C Program Director Katrina Cavaness. "People really pull together to take care of each other." Over the years, Katrina and Monticello District administrators leveraged that community spirit to build networks that further enhanced the community's connections and mutual support.



The 21C Program has been especially successful in building innovative relationships with and among the community's preschool providers. Establishing a Child Care Provider Network, they hold an annual luncheon and two networking meetings each year where members learn what other centers are doing, share information and resources, and stay on top of what's happening at the state level. Members build strong relationships through the network and contact each other on a regular basis to share information. "Every day, you have challenges with individual families and students. By developing a network in our community, we're not duplicating services and we can meet their needs," says Cavaness.

The program has worked closely with one preschool program in particular. Monticello's assistant superintendent Tommy Tyler forged a relationship early on with *Head of the Class* directors, Shay and Sherrie Gillespie, seeing them as "very proactive in the African American community. It's a fantastic way for us to reach parents of their kids." The district provided materials and curriculum to establish a Parent Resource Center (PRC) at their preschool and has supported the Gillespies in securing state preschool funds to increase their capacity to serve eligible families.

The strategy has worked: Tyler states, ***From our checklist of kindergarten readiness, Head of the Class students are above average when they enter school. The trend has been consistent over the past three years and we are very pleased with the results of the private sector early childhood opportunity at Head of the Class.*** The Monticello 21C Program has been successful by paying attention not just to the community's needs but also its strengths. They wisely built on the region's collaborative spirit, setting up a successful network with local preschool providers, and, in doing so, have deepened and enhanced this community's strengths.

## **SOUTH SIDE BEE BRANCH: 21C CONNECTIONS LEAD TO IMPRESSIVE GROWTH**

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The South Side Bee Branch (SSBB) 21C Program demonstrates that a small start in a tiny community can grow quickly into something big. With only 552 students, the district is small. Located in a rural, largely agricultural region with few local jobs, many families drive up to 100 miles for work – an especially tough scramble for low-income families with young children.

Before their 21C involvement, SSBB schools provided limited half-day preschool sessions. They now offer a full-day preschool program with certified staff, after-school programs that extend up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a summer session, and a new building! How did they get there? With tenacity, a can-do approach, skillful networking, and fundraising.

Introduced to 21C by a colleague, SSBB 21C Director Deb Swink immediately saw its potential for her district. With support from superintendent, Billy Jackson, and school professionals, Swink and her staff found and secured state funding to expand their preschool to 20 full-time slots and pay for a certified teacher and para-professional.

With high quality education for younger children in place, Swink and Pennington turned their attention to after-school support services for children. Initiating their extended day programs to preschool and elementary children, they recently expanded their after-school programming to children in 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade to provide tutoring, enrichment, parent involvement activities, and classes in computer technology and credit recovery/money management.

SSBB faced a challenge: They were outgrowing their campus, which included an old building that barely met licensure standards. Through the AR21C Network, South Side's preschool teacher, Jennifer Pennington, heard about, went after, and secured a \$325,000 Block Development Grant to build a new building for preschool and child care classrooms, an infant/toddler room, and parent center.

Much of the program's success grew out of SSBB's involvement in the Arkansas 21C Network and the support of Superintendent Jackson and his school board. By networking with 21C colleagues, the South Side team learned about various funding sources, and program models that allowed the team to see beyond current programming and strive for big things. In Swink's words: ***I've met and networked with folks from around the state I never would have. It's been invaluable: I always learn something new at network meetings. I'm more effective when I can reach out and get information by calling on my network resources.***

In only a few years SSBB grew from a limited program in a rural area with few resources to high quality, wrap-around services for all children and their families. 21C provided networking opportunities and foundational funding that allowed them to build their momentum and sustainability into a wide-reaching program with multiple funding streams.





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