K-12 EDUCATION

Education Needs to Improve Oversight of Its 21st Century Program

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

What GAO Found

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

GAO is making four recommendations, including that Education expand its performance measures for behavioral outcomes and provide written guidance to states on conducting high-quality program evaluations. Education neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations, and outlined steps it is taking to address them.

What GAO Recommends

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