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Afterschool Centers on Education

Cycle 9 Austin Independent School District

Final Report 2020–2021



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) is the program administered through the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grants authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (Public Law 114-95). The Austin Independent School District (AISD) received Cycle 9 21st CCLC funding to provide a comprehensive range of out-of-school-time (OST) academic assistance, academic enrichment, college and career readiness, and family engagement activities. At the local level, the program is known as ACE Austin. Building on the existing infrastructure of evidence-based OST activities and partnerships, ACE Austin collaborates with a range of partners to provide a comprehensive menu of before-school, afterschool, and summer programming to reinforce and complement our regular academic programs. The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program exists to provide intentional afterschool program experiences that are high quality, are challenging, and inspire all program participants to improve their school outcomes. By serving students at Title I schools, ACE Austin strives to achieve the overarching goal of narrowing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and students of more affluent families. Across activities and centers, the afterschool program focuses on three primary objectives:









- increase academic achievement
- decrease school-day absences
- decrease in-school suspensions

Key Accomplishments




The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program is aligned with the campus needs assessments and goals identified in the campus improvement plans (CIP) of each center. The findings of this report were mixed. For example, regular participants (i.e., students who participated for 45 or more days) who were targeted for math improvement had a greater average percentage grade change than did nonregular participants (i.e., students who participated for fewer than 45 days) at the elementary level only. A greater percentage of regular participants than of nonregular participants who were targeted for improvement in school-day attendance improved. Almost all ACE program staff agreed the ACE program helped students perform better in academic outcomes, attendance, behavior, college/career readiness, and social emotional learning. Additionally, the majority of the program staff indicated a desire to continue synchronous live virtual activities on Zoom and asynchronous anytime activities in the future.

Many of the program staff selected the following three professional development areas: aligning with school-day academic goals, social emotional learning (SEL), and engaging with families. Finally, the majority of the teachers at ACE Austin Cycle 9 schools agreed that the ACE program benefited the students and/or families. Despite challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program clearly remained committed to providing quality programming that was accessible, flexible, and supportive of the development of students’ full potential. Table 1 summarizes the major key accomplishments, based on Texas 21st CCLC ACE component areas.

Table 1.
Summary of Key Accomplishments

Program measure and outcome	Result
Student population served	
Program quality	
Academics	
Reading	
Math	
Grade average	
School-day attendance	
Discipline	•
Family engagement	•
Program impact	
ACE staff perceptions	
Teachers' perceptions	

Note. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare program participants on each student outcome (i.e., reading and math grades, average grades, and school-day attendance rate) between regular participants and nonregular participants.

-  Indicates a positive outcome for the measure
-  Indicates a neutral or no change for the measure
-  Indicates a negative outcome for the measure
- Indicates limited or no data available

Areas for Improvement

The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program staff remained committed to offering quality programming amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As we strive to go back to normalcy, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program staff continue to identify opportunities to assist students in maximizing the benefits of program participation. While we achieved a positive impact on many student outcomes this year, program managers, site coordinators, and program staff should continue to examine best practices to recruit and retain students in the program. Working collaboratively with parents, school-day campus teachers, and administrators is key to ensuring that students who need assistance are identified and are recruited into the program to take advantage of this free-of-charge, quality afterschool programming. Professional development opportunities to improve program effectiveness should be provided to ACE staff in areas deemed important.

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM

The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) is funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) federal grant, and is authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (Public Law 114-95). The Texas ACE program is administered through the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The Austin Independent School District (AISD) received Cycle 9 21st CCLC funding to provide a comprehensive range of out-of-school-time (OST) academic assistance, academic enrichment, college and career readiness, and family engagement activities. At the local level, the program is known as ACE Austin. Building on the existing infrastructure of evidence-based OST activities and partnerships, ACE Austin collaborates with a range of partners to provide a comprehensive menu of before-school, afterschool, and summer programming to complement our regular academic programs. The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program exists to provide intentional school program experiences that are high quality, are challenging, and inspire all program participants to improve their school outcomes.

By serving students at Title I schools, ACE Austin strives to achieve the overarching goal of narrowing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and students of more affluent families. Across activities and centers, the afterschool program focuses on three primary objectives:

- increase academic achievement
- decrease school-day absences
- decrease in-school suspensions

This Texas ACE program is at 32 schools across the district. This report examines outcomes for the 2,052 ACE Austin Cycle 9 participants at 10 AISD campuses during the 2020–2021 school year: six elementary schools (Langford, Oak Springs, Rodriguez, T.A. Brown, Widen, and Wooten) and four middle schools (Bedichek, Dobie, Martin, and Mendez). At each school, activities are offered at least 15 hours per week for 31 weeks during the academic year and 16 hours per week for 6 weeks during the summer. All activities are in one or more of the four 21st CCLC core component areas: academic assistance, enrichment, family engagement, and college and career readiness (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

ACE Austin TX 21st CCLC Core Component Areas

Family engagement

ACE Austin staff partner with the AISD Adult Education Department and parent support specialists to provide family engagement activities that help connect families to schools and enable them to support their students' academic achievement.

College and career readiness

The ACE Austin participants are provided with activities to help them prepare for college and career. Students investigate careers, visit area colleges and universities, practice public speaking skills, and participate in service projects.



Academic assistance

ACE Austin offers activities designed to improve students' achievement by providing extra assistance and support through tutoring and homework help for students who are struggling in core subjects, including science, math, reading, and social studies.

Enrichment

ACE Austin offers skill-building enrichment activities to which some students would otherwise lack access, including fine arts, technology, games, health and fitness, outdoor and environmental education, and youth leadership and development.

EVALUATION STRATEGY

Expectations

The Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) staff and ACE Austin program staff together reviewed the grant requirements and developed an evaluation plan and timeline for the program, which were published online, as part of the DRE work plan

(https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/dre/docs/2021_DRE_Evaluation_Plans_2020-2021.pdf). Throughout the duration of the grant program, evaluators worked closely with program staff to collect and submit identified data in a timely fashion and met regularly to monitor progress and make any needed adjustments.

The evaluation plan was used to ensure continuous improvement for (a) program management, by monitoring program operation; (b) staying on track, by ensuring the program stayed focused on the goals, objectives, strategies, and outcomes; (c) efficiency, by streamlining service delivery and lowering the cost of services; (d) accountability, by producing evidence of program effects; and (e) sustainability, by providing evidence of effectiveness to all stakeholders.

The ACE Austin program staff used the TX21st student tracking system to track students' program attendance and other program data needed for TEA reports. The DRE evaluator extracted students' records from AISD's data warehouse and assisted program staff with formatting and data entry into the TX21st student tracking system to ensure accurate reporting to TEA.

Measurement

Program participation files and AISD student records provided demographic information and input for each of the school-related outcomes. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, AISD kept its school buildings and facilities open at a limited capacity, following the national safety and state health precautionary guidelines and measures. A wide-array of learning models and activities (i.e., in-person, synchronous “live” virtual learning, asynchronous “anytime” virtual learning activities, and a hybrid model that combined two or more learning models) was offered to students and families to suit their individual needs for optimum learning and campus involvement, with safety and health at the core of every programming decision.

Similar to last year (de la Cruz, Andrews, and Christian, 2020), this year’s end-of-year outcome measures were limited to the available data. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the usual program surveys given to parents and students were not administered this school year, so they could focus on matters deemed important and essential related to students’ learning and family life. Due to delays in test data availability from TEA at the time this report was written, State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) could not be used as an outcome variable this year. No targeting for average grades was done due to inconsistencies in the reporting periods in the prior year. In addition, very little campus discipline occurred, likely due to the majority of students attending virtually for much of the school year. This made using campus discipline as an outcome not possible. However, the ACE Austin Staff Survey was administered to gather feedback about staffs’ experiences with the afterschool program. Additionally, data generated from the district-wide surveys, such as the AISD Family Survey and the End-of-Year Multi-Program Survey (formerly Employee Coordinated Survey), that were relevant to ACE programming were analyzed to support the grant’s reporting requirements.

Data analyses were conducted to examine the impact of program participation on students’ outcomes (i.e., academic achievement in reading and math, average grades across all core subjects [English language arts, math, science, and social studies], and school-day attendance), based on participation status. Program participation status was categorized based on the total number of days students participated in the afterschool program during the 2020–2021 school year: regular participants were students who participated for 45 or more days, and nonregular participants were students who participated for fewer than 45 days. In this report, independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare regular and nonregular targeted students on academic achievement in reading and math, grade average, and school-day attendance.

Prior to running the appropriate data analyses, descriptive statistics were compiled to report on the percentages of targeted participants who showed improvement on each of the outcomes.

Table 2 presents a summary of the methodology used in this report, based on program objectives.

Table 2.

Summary of Program Methodology

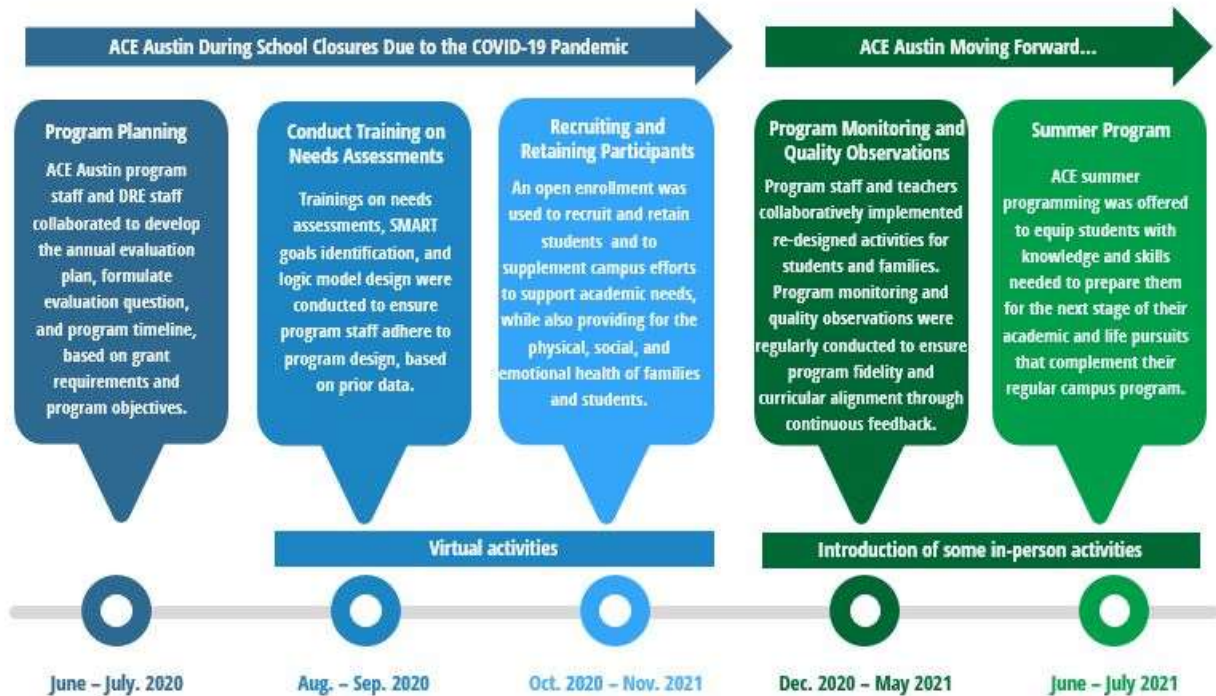
Program objective	Data analysis	Data collection/ source
Improve participants' academic performance in reading and math	An independent <i>t</i>-test was used to compare regular and nonregular targeted program participants' average grade change in reading and math.	Program participation file; AISD student grades
Improve grade average	An independent <i>t</i>-test was used to compare regular and nonregular program participants' grade average.	Program participation file; AISD student grades
Improve participants' school-day attendance	An independent <i>t</i>-test was used to compare regular and nonregular targeted program participants who had a school-day attendance rate at or below 90% in the prior year and demonstrated an improved attendance in the current school year.	Program participation file; AISD student attendance
Improve participants' discipline	Due to a very small percentage of students who experienced in-school suspensions, this outcome is not reported.	Data not available

PROGRAM TIMELINE

The ACE Austin calendar was full, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the opening of school year 2020–2021, DRE staff and ACE Austin program staff together reviewed the grant requirements and developed an evaluation plan and timeline for the program (Figure 2).

Equipping program staff with knowledge and skills on afterschool program management and implementation (e.g., needs assessments, recruiting and retaining participants, program monitoring and quality observations) through continuing professional development is key to quality afterschool programming. DRE provided a dashboard to monitor individual student progress for targeted students.

Figure 2.
ACE Austin Program Timeline



Goals that were specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound (SMART) were identified, and logic models were created for each campus. Additionally, DRE staff helped program staff to create an online registration form and interactive dashboards with up-to-date student-level data for effective recruitment and retention of program participants. For school year 2020–2021, staff determined that open enrollment was needed to optimally recruit and retain students and to supplement campus efforts to support students’ academic needs, while also providing for the physical, social, and emotional health of families and students. Guided by the continuous quality improvement cycle, program monitoring and quality observations were regularly conducted to ensure the quality of program implementation and curricular alignment through continuous feedback. ACE Austin offered a 6-week summer program to equip students with knowledge and skills, based on students’ needs and campus assets. It is hoped that providing additional learning time through the ACE Austin summer program would enable students to cushion the potential cumulative effect of learning loss due to school building closures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and would prepare them for the next stage of their academic and life pursuits.

ACE Austin Cycle 9 in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the first stay-at-home orders were issued in mid-March 2020, individuals across the state of Texas and the nation have experienced the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. As states enacted safety measures to combat this pandemic, families struggled with school building closures, job losses, food insecurity, and more. ACE Austin Cycle 9 program staff joined local and district efforts to address the urgent needs of children and families, while at the same time were dealing with their own uncertain future.

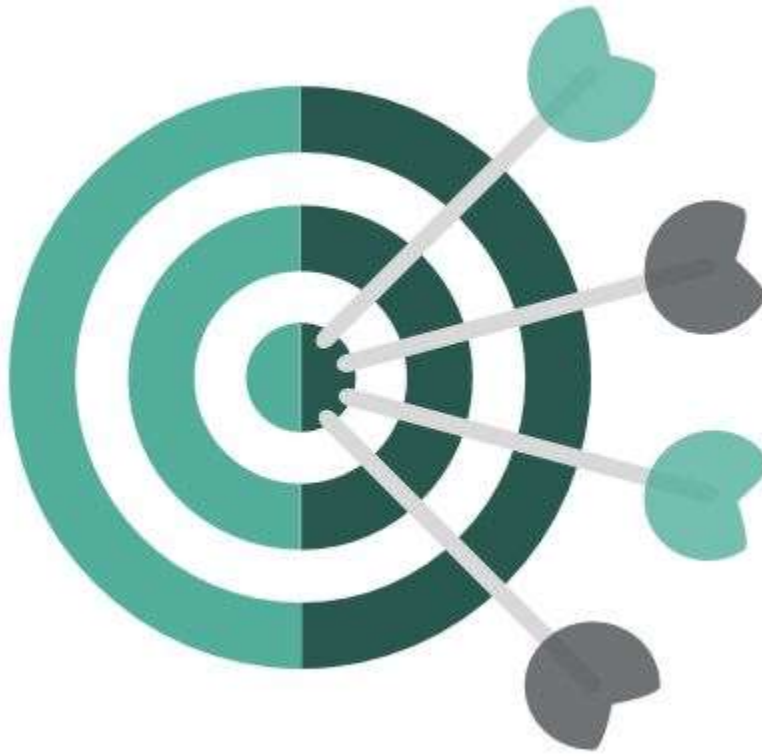
In response to this crisis, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program immediately switched gears and innovatively redesigned its afterschool programming to stay connected with students and their families and to keep them safe, healthy, and engaged in learning. Due to continuously evolving health and safety standards developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the reopening of schools—and consequently the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program—necessitated a radical rethinking of the way the program serves its students and families to meet their unique needs and circumstances. This required a collaborative approach that leans into community partnerships and builds on the campus's strengths and assets.

The program areas remained the same. ACE Austin Cycle 9 continued to offer targeted academic support, a variety of enrichment opportunities, and family engagement. Centers were also encouraged to intentionally integrate social-emotional supports, both through activities designed for social emotional learning (SEL) and by embedding SEL skills into other areas. To support the program throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ACE Austin staff and partners adapted services and activities that normally are conducted in-person, to meet the hybrid model. These program services and activities included (Figure 3):

- **Asynchronous anytime activities.** ACE Austin contracted with Bliss Kid Yoga, All Rhythms, Samurai School, Dancin' Jazzi, 4-H Capital, Variety of Texas, Campfire, and Creative Action to provide asynchronous activities. New prerecorded videos were posted weekly on the ACE Austin Google site; each contained 45 to 60 minutes of content for students to complete at the time that worked best for them. Participation was tracked, and students were encouraged to submit photos or videos to the site coordinator after they completed each activity. This format was used for both student- and family/parent-focused activities.

Figure 3.

Program Services and Activities ACE Austin Offered in the Time of COVID-19



Asynchronous Anytime Activities

ACE Austin contracted with a variety of vendors to provide asynchronous activities using pre-recorded videos posted weekly.

Synchronous Live Activities

Each ACE Austin center offered synchronous activities via Zoom, based on student and family needs as well as campus assets of each campus.

At-Home Kits

Centered offered activity kits for families to pick up and complete at home. This allowed students learning from home an opportunity to reintegrate in ACE Austin without being on screen.

In-person Activities

ACE Austin collaborated with campus principals to re-integrate in-person activities in alignment with the needs and assets of the campus.

- Synchronous live activities. Each ACE Austin center offered synchronous activities via Zoom. These activities were specific to the needs of each campus. Activities could be led by AISD teachers and teaching assistants, paid vendors, or volunteer-led community organizations. This format was used for both student- and parent-focused activities.
- At-home kits. Centers offered kits for families to pick up and complete at home. This allowed students learning from home an opportunity to participate in ACE Austin without being on screen. The contents of the kits were specific to the needs and assets of each center. This format was used for both student- and family/parent-focused activities.
- In-person activities. ACE Austin worked with campus principals to reintegrate in-person activities in alignment with the needs and assets of the campus. In-person activities were led only by AISD teachers and staff and were only offered to students, not parents.

Building on strong strategic alliances and tapping campuses’ assets, ACE Austin coordinated with AISD Food Service, Family Resource Centers, and other district department and programs to supplement the campuses’ efforts to provide for the physical, social, and emotional health of families and students. Clearly, the ACE Austin program offered a variety of services and activities that were designed to support students and families who experienced a negative impact from the COVID-19 pandemic.

GRANTEE AND CENTER OVERVIEW

During the 2020–2021 school year, ACE Austin Cycle 9 provided afterschool services at 10 AISD campuses: six elementary schools (Langford, Oak Springs, Rodriguez, T.A. Brown, Widen, and Wooten) and four middle schools (Bedichek, Dobie, Martin, and Mendez). District data indicated that the percentage of students at Cycle 9 campuses who had low socioeconomic status (SES; i.e., qualified to receive free or reduced-price lunch) was above district and state averages. Also, the percentage of students who were classified as emerging bilingual and the percentage of students who were considered at risk of dropping out of school were at least or above district and state averages at nine of the ten ACE Austin Cycle 9 schools (Table 3).

Table 3.

Cycle 9 Campuses Served and Relevant Demographics

School	Percentage low SES	Percentage emerging bilingual	Percentage at risk
Langford Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 526)	95%	57%	75%
Oak Springs Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 229)	97%	16%	48%
Rodriguez Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 471)	98%	54%	75%
T. A. Brown Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 292)	97%	72%	82%
Widen Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 446)	97%	49%	69%
Wooten Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 457)	93%	78%	85%
Bedichek Middle School (<i>n</i> = 849)	87%	31%	70%
Dobie Middle School (<i>n</i> = 665)	97%	61%	81%
Martin Middle School (<i>n</i> = 540)	93%	33%	81%
Mendez Middle School (<i>n</i> = 616)	96%	56%	89%
AISD	53%	28%	50%
State	60%	20%	48%

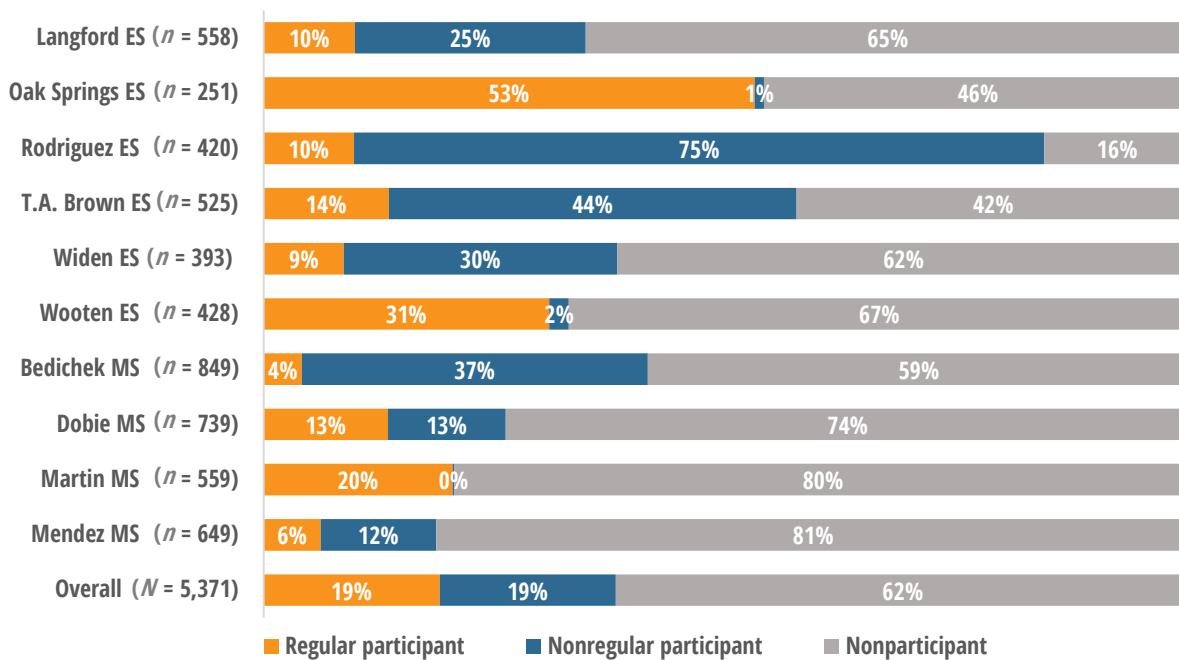
Source. 2020–2021 AISD student data; 2019–2020 *Texas Academic Performance Report*

Participants

The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program served 2,052 students and hosted events or activities for 514 families. Program participants were categorized as regular (i.e., attended the afterschool program for 45 days or more) and nonregular participants (i.e., attended the afterschool program for fewer than 45 days). Program participants represented over a quarter of the students enrolled at Cycle 9 campuses. Almost half ($n = 1,025$) of the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program participants were regular participants. Participation at the secondary schools was less consistent, with greater percentages of nonregular participants than of regular participants (Figure 4). Campus-level demographics mirrored the cycle-level demographics at 10 campuses (Appendix A).

Figure 4.

At the campuses served, 4% to 53% of the student body comprised ACE regular participants.



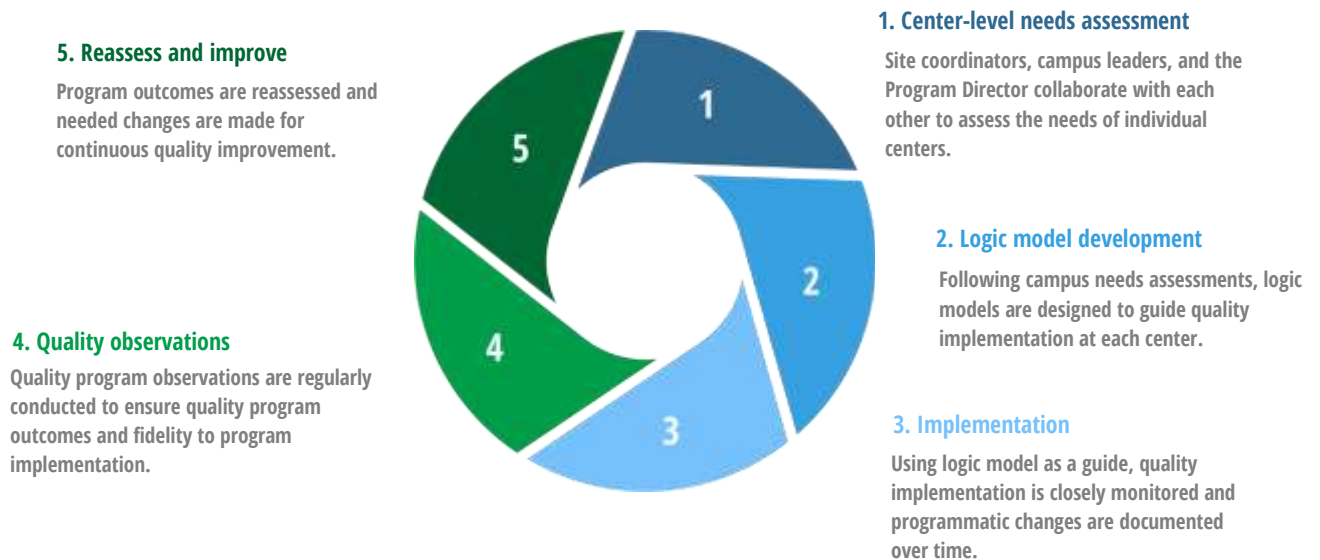
Source. TX21st student tracking system 2020–2021; AISD student records

PROGRAM QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION

Guided by the ACE Austin continuous quality improvement cycle, programming was developed based on the needs of each campus (Figure 5). Before implementation, the project directors met with each site coordinator to set goals in the following areas: program operations, communication, curriculum alignment, quality of instruction, and program evaluation.

Individual goals were reviewed mid-year, and adjustments were made. The project directors and site coordinator used the ACE Austin Quality Observation Checklist, which was adapted from the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool (Smith et al., 2016), to document program-quality observations. Recommendations for improvement were received by the site coordinator, who then met with the OST instructors. Observers looked for compliance in operational functions, program quality, and procedures. In addition, observers checked for fidelity to the project plan. Project plans included activity alignment, SMART goals, staff-to-student ratios, and student engagement strategies.

Figure 5.
ACE Austin Continuous Quality Improvement Cycle



Following campus needs assessments, logic models were designed to guide quality implementation at each center. Site coordinators, in collaboration with the project director, developed the logic models, which also served as a tool for documenting programmatic changes over time. Each center logic model included six components: resources, implementation practices, outputs/activities, outputs/participation, intermediate outcomes, and impact.

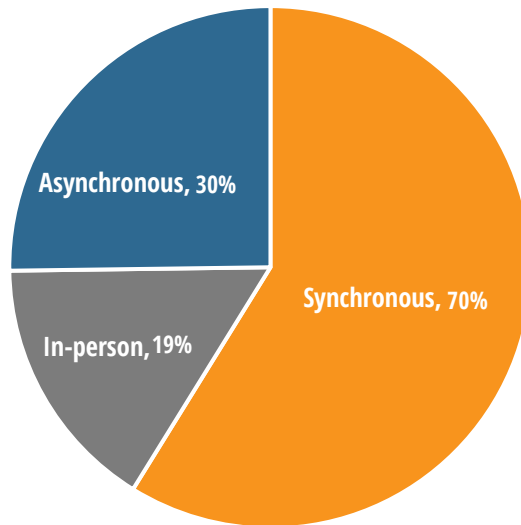
Program Quality Observations

ACE Austin Cycle 9 learning activities were designed to meet the students’ unique needs and campuses’ assets. These learning activities included in-person, synchronous live activities, and asynchronous anytime activities. For school year 2020–2021, fifty-four observations (2,211 total minutes) were conducted by the program director and site coordinators at ACE Austin Cycle 9 campuses: 70% were synchronous live activities, 30% were asynchronous anytime

activities, and 19% were in-person activities (Figure 6). Both in-person and synchronous activities were observed in real time, while asynchronous activities were observed at any given time.

Figure 6.

The majority of the ACE Austin Cycle 9 learning activities observed were **synchronous live activities**.



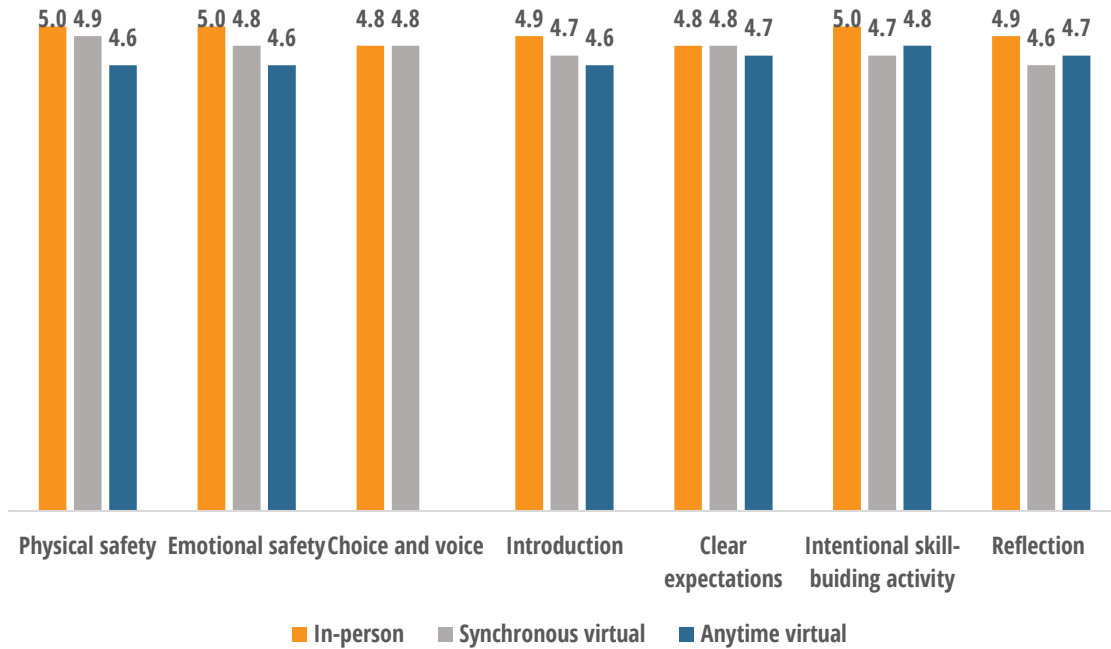
Source. 2020–2021 ACE Austin program quality observation checklist, $n = 54$ learning activities observed.

The observers used an electronic rating form, based on the YPQA, that covered seven program quality domains: physical safety, emotional safety, clear expectations, introduction, intentional skill-building activity, reflection, and choices and voices. The average global rating for each domain of the program’s quality observations was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, but framing for each program delivery format (i.e., in-person, synchronous live virtual, and asynchronous anytime virtual) was different because the preceding scaled items differed depending on the format (see Appendix B). Average global ratings that are closer to 5 indicate higher program quality observations for that domain. Note that the “choice and voice” domain was not rated for asynchronous anytime activities because the items in that domain were not relevant for the anytime format.

Overall, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program quality was rated very highly, regardless of program format (Figure 7). On average, all domains in all formats had a global average quality rating of greater than or equal to 4.6.

Figure 7.

The average global ratings for all program quality domains were very high, regardless of program delivery format.



Source. 2020–2021 ACE Austin program quality observation checklist

OUTCOMES

Across activities and centers, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 primary program goals were to improve academic achievement, increase school-day attendance, and improve discipline. Guided by these goals, site coordinators examined prior data and targeted students to provide them with a wide range of programming activities to improve outcomes. Because we expected the program would have a greater positive impact on students who participated more, we compared regular and nonregular program participants who were targeted for improvement on two of the student outcomes, i.e., academic achievement in reading and math and school-day attendance for school year 2020–2021. Targeting was not available for grade averages. Specific data analytic procedures and statistical tests, including targeting of program participants for improvement for each identified program outcome, are discussed in the following sections.

Academic Achievement Outcomes: Grades in Reading and Math

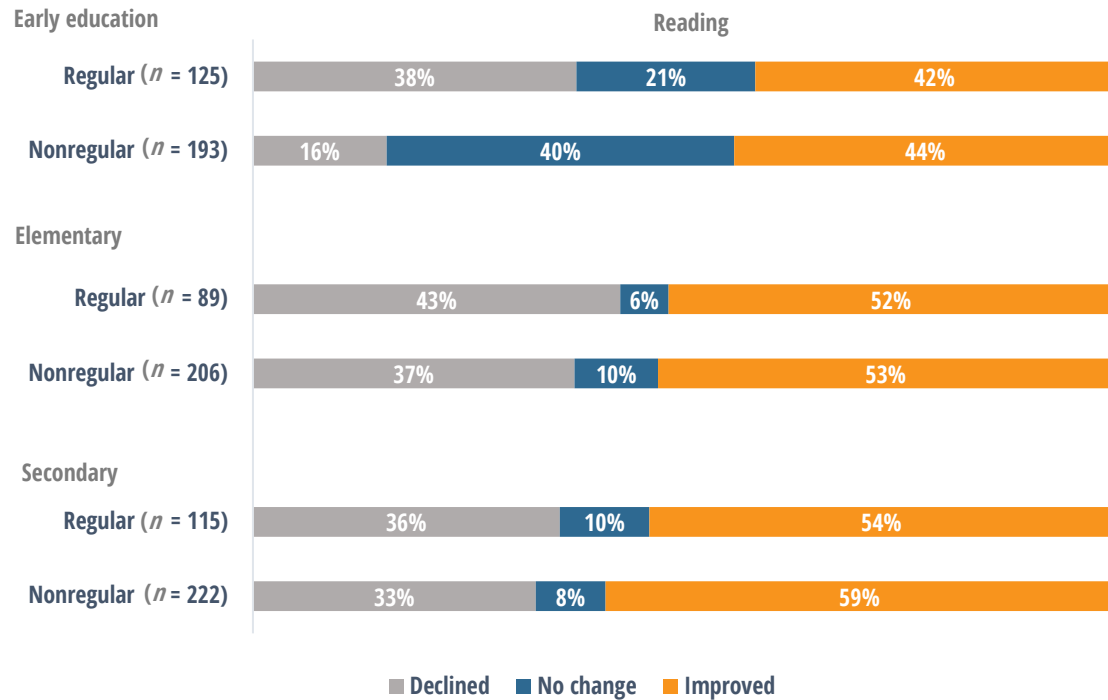
One of the ACE Austin program goals was to have a positive impact on reading and math achievement, based on program participation. Site coordinators focused recruitment efforts and offered programming activities to help students who needed assistance in those subject areas.

Prior to data analyses, ACE Austin Cycle 9 program participants were grouped by program participation status and grade-level categories to analyze academic achievement in reading and math. Grade-level categories were grouped as follows: early education included participants in prekindergarten through grade 2, elementary included participants in grades 3 through 5, and secondary included participants in grades 6 through 12. The change in grade average in both reading and math was calculated using students' first grading period grade average and their last grading period grade average for school year 2020–2021. Students whose average grades in reading or math fell below the campus grade-level average for reading or math during the first grading period of the school year were targeted for improvement. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare the grade average change between the first and last grading period for regular and nonregular targeted participants in reading and math.

Around half of all students improved their grades in reading over the course of the year, regardless of grade-level group or participation status (Figure 8). The remaining half maintained or did worse on their reading grades over time. It is therefore not surprising that, on average, there was no statistically significant difference in the average percentage grade change in reading between regular and nonregular targeted participants across grade-level groups. However, more regular participants than nonregular participants improved grades in math (Figure 9). In fact, regular participants who were targeted for improvement in math showed a greater average percentage grade change than did nonregular participants at the elementary level. This finding was not only statistically significant, but also was practical and meaningful (i.e., effect size of .53).

Figure 8.

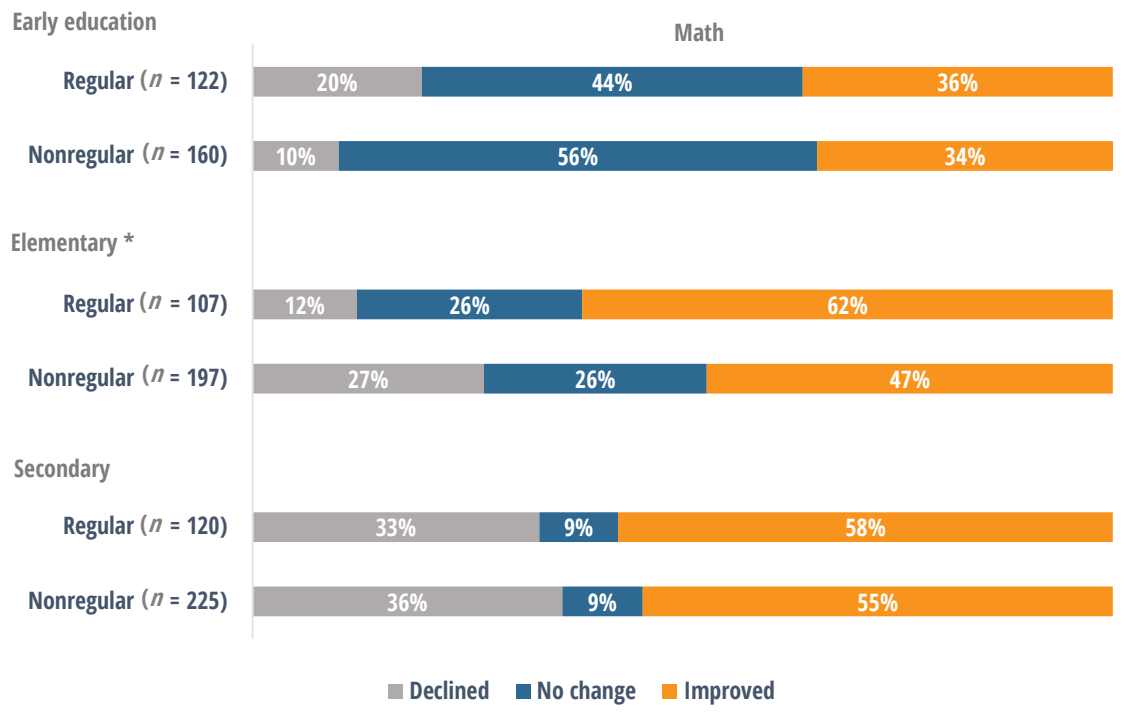
Across grade-level groups, around half of the students improved their grades in reading, regardless of their participation status.



Source. TX21st student tracking system 2020–2021; AISD student records

Figure 9.

More regular participants than nonregular participants improved grades in math at the elementary level.



Source. TX21st student tracking system 2020–2021; AISD student records

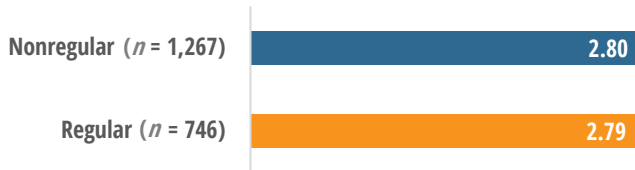
Academic Achievement Outcome: Grade Average

Another program goal was to improve students' grade averages. We expected that regular program participants would have greater grade averages than those of nonregular participants during the school year. In this report, only the core courses (i.e., English language arts, math, science, and social studies) were considered in computing the grade averages. Due to inconsistencies in the reporting periods from the prior school year, no targeting of students in their grade averages was done.

An independent sample *t*-test was used to compare participants' grade averages, based on program participation (i.e., regular participants and nonregular participants). Results revealed that the difference in grade average between regular and nonregular participants was not significant (Figure 10).

Figure 10.

The average grades of regular and nonregular participants were not significantly different.



Source. TX21st student tracking system 2020–2021; AISD student records

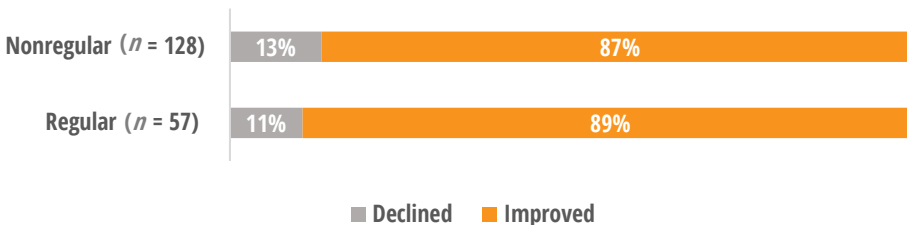
All grades were converted to numeric grades (4-point scale) and were coded as follows: 100 = 4.00, 99 = 3.9, 98 = 3.8... through 70 = 1.0 and 69 <= 0

Student School-Day Attendance

Another program goal was to improve school-day attendance. We expected that ACE Austin Cycle 9 regular participants would show improvement over last year in their school-day attendance rate during 2020–2021. Site coordinators looked at the prior year’s attendance data for all students in their schools. Students who had a school-day attendance rate at or below 90% in the prior year were targeted for improvement by site coordinators. The impact of program participation on the school-day attendance of targeted participants was compared using an independent sample *t*-test. Results showed that of the targeted students, a greater percentage of regular participants than nonregular participants improved (Figure 11). This finding is not only statistically significant, but also was practical and meaningful (i.e., effect size of .30).

Figure 11.

A greater percentage of regular participants than nonregular participants who were targeted for improvement in school-day attendance improved.



Source. TX21st student tracking system 2020–2021; AISD student records

Student Discipline

Discipline was also examined as one of the program goals. We expected students who regularly attended the program would show improvement in their discipline. Since very few students attended school in-person across the district, there was very little discipline. In fact, very few students ($n = 19$) of the 5,371 students enrolled at the 10 campuses served by the ACE Austin Cycle 9 experienced any PEIMS reportable discipline (e.g., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, removal to disciplinary school, etc.) during this school year. Therefore, there was not enough variance in discipline to examine this as an outcome this year.

Family Engagement

This school year, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 family engagement specialist served 514 families for 135 days throughout the 10 campuses. Families participated in at least one or more of the 180 meaningful family activities that included events (e.g., gardening class, Earth Day reuse class), clubs (e.g., Brighter Bites, Time Together), and adult education (e.g., English Second Language Maestro En Casas, fitness class). These family engagement activities were designed to provide opportunities for families to connect with their students' schools, spend quality time with their students, learn new skills, improve their students' social emotional skills, and support their students' education and life skills.

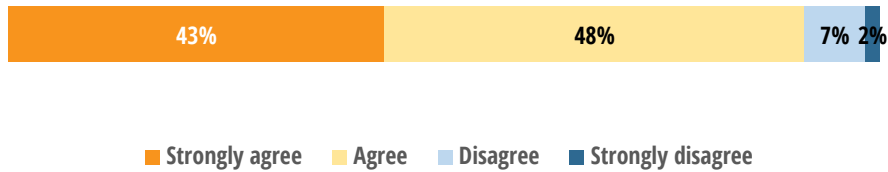
To gather feedback and insights from families and children who attended the family activities regarding their experiences of the program, participants were asked to complete a brief survey aimed at understanding family engagement. Only 14 participants responded to the survey from two campuses served by ACE Austin Cycle 9. Results are not reported; due to the very low response rate, results are not representative.

In addition, both the ACE Student Survey and the ACE Parent Survey were not administered to allow students and families with the opportunity to focus their attention on other priorities, needs, and issues deemed important during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the district-wide Family Survey included an item that was relevant to ACE Austin programming.

The purpose of the AISD Family Survey is to gather information about parents' and guardians' attitudes on various topics at the campus where their child is enrolled. This survey is administered annually each spring and is offered in multiple languages. For this year, the overall response rate was 33% (district $N = 16,333$). At ACE Austin Cycle 9 campuses, the majority (91%) of the parents and guardians who responded ($n = 692$) agreed that their child's school provided adequate opportunities to participate in activities and programs after and before school (Figure 12).

Figure 12.

The majority of parents and guardians agreed that their child’s school provided adequate opportunities to participate in activities and programs after and before school.



Source. AISD Family Survey, 2020–2021

STAFF’S PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM IMPACT

The ACE Staff Survey was administered to staff to gather information and feedback about their program experiences. From ACE Austin Cycle 9, 66 staff responded to the ACE Staff Survey. ACE staff agreed that the ACE program helped students perform better in attendance (100%), academic outcomes (98%), behavior (98%), college/career readiness (97%), and SEL (98%) (Figure 13). The majority of the program staff indicated a desire to continue synchronous live activities on Zoom (59%) and asynchronous anytime activities in BLEND (73%), should the program return to 100% in-person attendance in the future (Figure 14).

Figure 13.

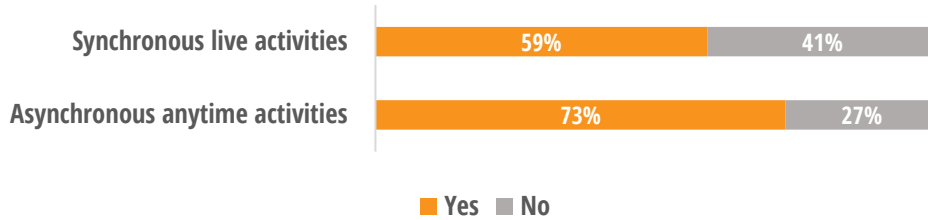
ACE program staff at ACE Austin Cycle 9 schools agreed that the program helped students perform better in academic outcomes, attendance, behavior, college/career readiness, and SEL.



Source. ACE Staff Survey, 2020–2021

Figure 14.

The majority of program staff indicated a desire to continue synchronous live virtual activities and asynchronous anytime activities in the future.



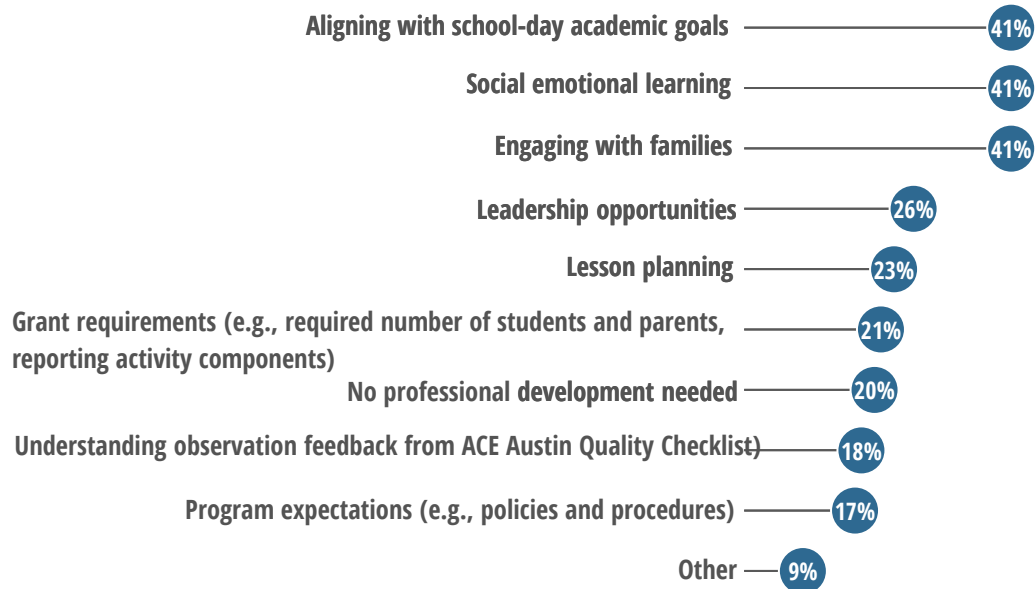
Source: ACE Staff Survey, 2020–2021

Recognizing the importance of professional development opportunities for program effectiveness and improvement, ACE staff were also asked about the areas for professional development opportunities. The top three areas of need that program staff reported were: aligning with school-day academic goals (41%), social emotional learning (41%), and engaging with families (41%) (Figure 15).

Figure 15.

ACE program staff indicated a high desire for professional development opportunities in: aligning with school-day academic goals, social emotional learning, and engaging with families.

Percentage of ACE staff who selected each professional development area...



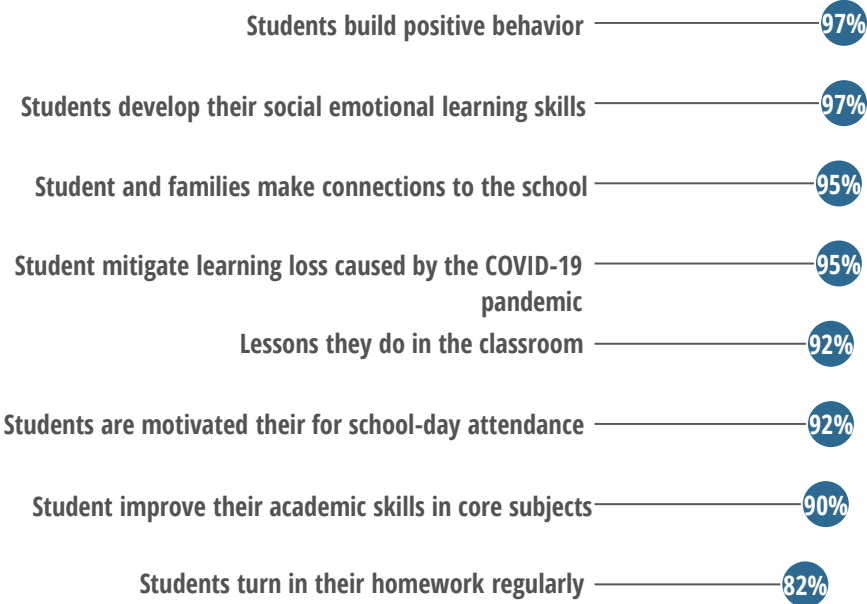
Source: End-of-Year Multi-Program Survey, 2020-2021

AISD is committed to understanding staff members’ feelings and perceptions about various work-related topics and district-wide programming aimed at improving employees’ well-being and program effectiveness. For this reason, DRE administered the End-of-Year Multi-Program Survey was administered in Spring 2021. One of the programming areas for which district employees were asked to provide feedback was the ACE program. Specifically, teachers (39 out of 103, 38% response rate) at ACE Austin Cycle 9 campuses were asked about the benefits of the ACE program to students and families. The majority of the teachers reported that the ACE program benefited the students and/or families in many ways, such as building positive behavior (97%), developing SEL skills (97%), making connections to the school (95%), and mitigating learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (95%) (Figure 16).

Figure 16.

The majority of the teachers at ACE Austin Cycle 9 school agreed that the ACE program benefited students and families.

Percentage of teachers who agreed that the ACE program benefited...



Source. End-of-Year Multi-program Survey, 2020–2021

ACE AUSTIN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Reopening campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic was unquestionably challenging in many ways. It was particularly challenging to implement and sustain the ACE Austin quality program that capitalized on whole child development, based on the unique academic and social-emotional needs of students. Challenges, however, also opened the door for some opportunities to refine and change program processes and structures to strengthen the ACE Austin quality programming and to creatively leverage campus and community assets.

1. Challenge: ACE Austin program participation was a major concern this school year. Some campuses struggled to recruit and retain participants.

When school started operating 100% virtually, some campuses struggled with students' attendance and retention during the school day. This translated into program participation issues during out-of-school time. Students were no longer interested in spending additional time online.

Opportunity: ACE Austin staff offered numerous participation opportunities and used accessible and user-friendly systems to recruit and retain participants.

Taking advantage of the flexibility of program recruitment, ACE Austin program staff innovatively offered numerous participation opportunities (synchronous live and asynchronous anytime virtual activities, take-home kits, and in-person instruction). While in-person activities were slowly reintegrated on a campus-by-campus basis in elementary schools, at-home kits allowed students to learn from home with hands-on activities away from the screen. In middle schools, ACE Austin worked to target the students most in need of academic support, by supplementing tutoring and credit recovery programs in collaboration with the campus teachers, counselors, and leaders. All these recruitment strategies helped to increase program participation, although numbers remained lower than in previous years. Additionally, the virtual format allowed ACE Austin to service more students, especially in asynchronous anytime activities that were not restricted to the number of students who could attend the program. All centers opened the program to the entire campus. Some campuses also targeted students for particular activities, using student-level data, including recommendations from parents, teachers, and campus leaders. To help facilitate program recruitment and retention, the DRE team created an electronic registration form with accessible, user-friendly dashboards in Qualtrics. This is also the platform ACE Austin uses to store and share data that inform program improvement, such as student-level academic and attendance records, survey results, and point-

of-service observations. By having all this information in one place, ACE Austin improved its ability to track students' retention and monitor progress.

2. Challenge: New learning activities to meet the students' unique needs had to be developed, built on campus assets.

At the beginning of the year, the implementation of virtual activities faced a steep learning curve. Many systems for program implementation had to be significantly redesigned. This was especially challenging for program staff because the COVID-19 pandemic led to fluctuations in policies and expectations at the district and state levels. As ACE Austin began reintegrating in-person activities, ACE Austin staff at some campuses were hesitant to teach in-person classes due to safety concerns. Additionally, classes that were held virtually faced the challenge of sustaining students' focus in a remote learning environment. The need to keep students actively engaged and participating intensified during remote learning.

Opportunity: ACE Austin creatively restructured the program processes to foster students' engagement in an online learning environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided program staff with opportunities to revisit the program's structure and processes to meet the program's goals and expectations. For example, ACE Austin site coordinators, family engagement specialists, and project directors attended training in best practices for implementing virtual programming and following COVID-19 safety measures, offered by AISD, Andy Roddick Foundation, Learn All The Time, and Texas ACE. The project directors created two working program guideline documents—one for paid vendors and community partners, and one for site coordinators and family engagement specialists. The program guidelines clearly outlined expectations and resources and were regularly updated and revised. ACE Austin required all ACE Austin frontline staff to complete a program orientation each term, at which time, information about the training and the program guidelines were disseminated to ACE Austin frontline staff by the site coordinators. Finally, ACE Austin and DRE staff modified the ACE Austin Quality Observation Checklist to monitor virtual activities, and site coordinators regularly conducted observations of frontline staff to be able to provide coaching and one-on-one support, as needed.

Relying on campus assets and partners, program staff afforded them the opportunity to collaborate with each other and creatively redesigned existing and/or new learning activities that foster students' engagement in a digital platform. Finding a space and dedicated time to share ideas, expertise, and experiences helped program staff to discuss and explore innovative tools and strategies to motivate and engage students in an online environment. When students are not engaged, boredom, stress, and anxiety are more likely to manifest. This ultimately results to low program participation and attendance. Knowing what tools and strategies to use, and how and

when to use them to engage students in newly redesigned online activities, made learning more meaningful and interesting.

3. Challenge: The COVID-19 pandemic created both a public health crisis and an economic crisis that necessitated ACE Austin support students and families with an unprecedented range of direct resource assistance.

ACE Austin exists within the schools and communities. Due to the economic and health crises, ACE Austin served as a community resource and information hub (e.g., serving as a meal distribution site or delivering meals; offering mental health services to cope with trauma and stress; providing care to children of working families; distributing other resources, such as technology; and offering the latest health updates). While this undertaking was laudable, this approach expanded the scope of responsibility for program staff and resulted in additional social and emotional stress for some program staff, who were balancing taking care of the program while concurrently attending to their own personal and family needs.

Opportunity: ACE Austin created an opportunity to deepen its community relations built on trust and partnerships.

This crisis undoubtedly created opportunities to develop stronger and more long-lasting community alliances and partnerships to support the community with a range of direct services. Building a network of support systems helped ACE Austin and its staff to support each other. With the community at the epicenter, ACE Austin not only legitimized its unique niche to assist students with academic needs, but more importantly, also was recognized as a critical agent and community partner to support social services and effect positive change. There is no doubt that ACE Austin created an opportunity to strengthen its program, which is built on community trust that promotes program relevance and sustainability.

SUMMARY

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program remained committed to providing quality programming that was accessible, flexible, and supportive of the development of students' full potential. The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program offered a variety of high-quality activities and services that were designed to support students and families who experienced a negative impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, ACE Austin provided programs and services that supported the holistic development of students they served.

Key Accomplishments

The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program is aligned with the campus needs assessments and goals identified in the campus improvement plans (CIP) of each center. The findings of this report were mixed. For example, regular participants who were targeted for math improvement had a greater average percentage grade change than did nonregular participants at the elementary level only. A greater percentage of regular participants than of nonregular participants who were targeted for improvement in school-day attendance improved. Almost all ACE program staff agreed the ACE program helped students perform better in academic outcomes, attendance, behavior, college/career readiness, and SEL. Additionally, the majority of the program staff indicated a desire to continue synchronous live virtual activities on Zoom and asynchronous anytime activities in the future. Many of the program staff selected the following three professional development areas: aligning with school-day academic goals, developing SEL, and engaging with families. Finally, the majority of the teachers at ACE Austin Cycle 9 schools agreed that the ACE program benefited the students and families. Despite challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program clearly remained committed to providing quality programming that was accessible, flexible, and supportive of the development of students' full potential. Table 4 summarizes the major key accomplishments, based on Texas 21st CCLC ACE component areas.

Table 4.

Summary of Key Accomplishments

Program measure and outcome	Result
Student population served	😊
Program quality	😊
Academics	
Reading	😐
Math	😊
Grade average	😐
School-day attendance	😊
Discipline	•
Family engagement	•
Program impact	
ACE staff perceptions	😊
Teachers' perceptions	😊

Note. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare program participants on each student outcome (i.e., reading and math grades, average grades, and school-day attendance rate) between regular participants and nonregular participants.

- 😊 Indicates a positive outcome for the measure
- 😐 Indicates a neutral or no change for the measure
- 😞 Indicates a negative outcome for the measure
- Indicates limited or no data available

Areas for Improvement

The ACE Austin Cycle 9 program staff remained committed to offering quality programming amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As we strive to go back to normalcy, the ACE Austin Cycle 9 program staff continue to identify opportunities to assist students in maximizing the benefits of program participation. While we achieved a positive impact on many student outcomes this year, program managers, site coordinators, and program staff should continue to examine best practices to recruit and retain students in the program. Working collaboratively with parents, school-day campus teachers, and administrators is key to ensuring that students who need assistance are identified and are recruited into the program to take advantage of this free-of-charge, quality afterschool programming. Professional development opportunities to improve program effectiveness should be provided to ACE staff in areas deemed important.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Campus-Level Participation

Table A.1.
ACE Austin Cycle 9 Campus-Level Participation

School	School enrollment	Number of participants	Number of regular* participants	Number of nonregular* participants	Average number of days of participation
Langford Elementary School	558	194	55	139	30
Oak Springs Elementary School	251	135	133	2	88
Rodriguez Elementary School	420	354	41	313	17
T. A. Brown Elementary School	525	302	71	231	23
Widen Elementary School	393	150	34	116	24
Wooten Elementary School	428	141	132	9	68
Bedichek Middle School	849	348	34	314	11
Dobie Middle School	739	193	99	94	29
Martin Middle School	559	114	114	0	133
Mendez Middle School	649	121	40	81	38
ACE Austin Cycle 9	5,371	2,052	1,025	1,027	46

Source. 2020–2021 AISD student records; 2020–2021 ACE data file

Note. Regular participants are those who participated in the ACE Austin program at least 45 days; nonregular participants are those who participated in the ACE Austin program fewer than 45 days.

Table A.2.
ACE Austin Cycle 9 Campus-Level Participants' Demographics

School	Female	Low SES	Emerging bilingual	At risk
Langford Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 194)	50%	95%	64%	77%
Oak Springs Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 135)	53%	96%	13%	40%
Rodriguez Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 354)	48%	94%	55%	64%
T. A. Brown Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 302)	50%	91%	74%	78%
Widen Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 150)	49%	93%	45%	61%
Wooten Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 141)	50%	88%	74%	80%
Bedichek Middle School (<i>n</i> = 348)	49%	83%	35%	73%
Dobie Middle School (<i>n</i> = 193)	43%	97%	63%	78%
Martin Middle School (<i>n</i> = 114)	43%	90%	25%	73%
Mendez Middle School (<i>n</i> = 121)	50%	94%	41%	83%
ACE Austin Cycle 9 (<i>N</i> = 2,052)	49%	92%	51%	71%

Source. 2020–2021 AISD student records; 2020–2021 ACE data file

Table A.3.
ACE Austin Cycle 9 Campus-Level Participants' Grade Level: Elementary

School	Pre-K	Kindergarten	1	2	3	4	5
Langford Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 194)		6%	13%	15%	26%	22%	16%
Oak Springs Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 135)	15%	15%	17%	12%	13%	13%	16%
Rodriguez Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 354)	16%	10%	14%	12%	14%	17%	17%
T. A. Brown Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 302)	5%	16%	18%	16%	17%	12%	17%
Widen Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 150)	9%	15%	18%	16%	11%	17%	14%
Wooten Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 141)	5%	13%	18%	24%	17%	13%	9%
ACE Austin Cycle 9 (<i>N</i> = 1,276)	6%	8%	10%	9%	10%	10%	10%

Source. 2020–2021 AISD student records; 2020–2021 ACE data file

Table A.4.

ACE Austin Cycle 9 Campus-Level Participants' Grade Level: Secondary

School	6	7	8
Bedichek Middle School (<i>n</i> = 348)	28%	39%	33%
Dobie Middle School (<i>n</i> = 193)	12%	32%	56%
Martin Middle School (<i>n</i> = 114)	32%	28%	39%
Mendez Middle School (<i>n</i> = 121)	27%	35%	38%
ACE Austin Cycle 9 (<i>N</i> = 776)	9%	13%	15%

Source. 2020–2021 AISD student records; 2020–2021 ACE data file

Table A.5.

ACE Austin Cycle 9 Campus-Level Participants' Race

School	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic	Two or more race	White
Langford Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 194)		8%	89%	2%	1%
Oak Springs Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 135)		34%	65%	< 1%	< 1%
Rodriguez Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 354)	< 1%	7%	90%	< 1%	1%
T. A. Brown Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 302)	7%	5%	81%	1%	5%
Widen Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 150)		13%	83%	2%	2%
Wooten Elementary School (<i>n</i> = 141)		6%	85%	1%	7%
Bedichek Middle School (<i>n</i> = 348)	< 1%	6%	87%	2%	6%
Dobie Middle School (<i>n</i> = 193)	3%	8%	85%		5%
Martin Middle School (<i>n</i> = 114)	< 1%	23%	69%		6%
Mendez Middle School (<i>n</i> = 121)	< 1%	12%	87%		
ACE Austin Cycle 9 (<i>N</i> = 2,052)	2%	10%	84%	1%	3%

Source. 2020–2021 AISD student records; 2020–2021 ACE data file

Appendix B:

Program Quality Observation Domains and Scales by Activity Format

	In-person	Synchronous live virtual	Asynchronous anytime virtual
<u>Physical Safety</u>			
Students enter the classroom quickly and safely.	X		
The space is free of health and safety hazards and suitable for the activity.	X		
Only staff open doors to program spaces (includes outside and inside doors).	X		
A system for monitoring bath breaks is in place.	X		
All students are signed into the ACE attendance sheet.	X		
The instructor's virtual space is classroom appropriate and professional.		X	X
No photos, videos, recordings, or screenshots are being taken during the duration of the activity without consent.	X	X	X
Instructions include necessary precautions (students know when to get parent involved; e.g., using scissors for pre-K).		X	X
Staff are not leading a 1-on-1 activity with a student (unless another adult is present).	X	X	
*Overall score for physical safety (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	X	X	X
<u>Emotional Safety</u>			
The climate is positive, encouraging and mutually respectful.	X	X	X
Staff communicate to students respectfully. Staff never belittle, talk down to, show bias toward, or yell at the students.	X	X	X
Staff ask about and acknowledges feelings of students	X	X	
Staff make time to talk with students individually and does not single out students in front of their peers.	X		
When managing feelings, staff help students to respond appropriately and allows them time to take a break if necessary.	X	X	
When students experience conflict, staff offer solutions for student to choose from or encourages them to come up with their own solutions	X	X	
Staff work side by side with students, participating if appropriate. Staff do not separate themselves to work on other tasks.	X		
Staff circulate and interact with every student.	X	X	
External online resources are classroom appropriate and reputable and have been vetted prior to the activity.		X	X
Staff use SEL strategies when necessary or appropriate (modeling coping strategies, deep breathing, brain breaks).	X	X	X
Materials and videos are culturally inclusive.	X	X	X
*Overall score for emotional safety (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	X	X	X

	In-person	Synchronous live virtual	Asynchronous anytime virtual
<u>Clear Expectations</u>			
Staff model appropriate behavior through actions and language.	X	X	X
Staff establish a reasonable classroom routine.	X	X	X
Students are allowed to take care of practical needs (get supplies, clean up). Very little time is spent managing behavior and students respond quickly to redirection when given.	X	X	
When consequences are given, they are logical and appropriate.	X	X	
Staff use attention-getters to quickly gain students' attention as needed.	X	X	
*Overall score for clear expectations (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	X	X	X
<u>Introduction</u>			
All materials and supplies are ready at the beginning of the session, and there are enough supplies for everyone.	X		
Activity requires no supplies or minimal household supplies.			X
Activity requires no supplies or minimal household supplies, unless supply kits have been provided in advance.		X	
Staff capture students' attention with an active icebreaker preferably related to the learning or skill building objective.	X	X	X
Staff make connections to prior knowledge.	X	X	X
Staff clearly state and post a specific learning or skill-building focus for the session.	X	X	X
*Overall score for introduction (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	X	X	X
<u>Intentional Skill-building Activity</u>			
Staff begin by briefly demonstrating the skill students will practice.	X	X	X
For the majority of activity time, staff support students in guided skill practice, assisting as necessary.	X	X	
Staff end the hands-on activity by stepping back and allowing students to practice the skill with minimal or no assistance while informally assessing their progress toward the learning objective.	X	X	
Throughout the activity, staff provide structured opportunities to talk about what they are learning by asking open-ended guiding questions.	X	X	
Throughout the activity, staff break difficult tasks into smaller steps.	X	X	X
Throughout the activity, staff allow "wait time" for students to solve problems on their own.	X	X	
*Overall score for intentional skill building (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	X	X	X

	In-person	Synchronous live virtual	Asynchronous anytime virtual
<u>Reflection</u>			
Staff reiterate the learning or skill-building objective.	x	x	x
Staff allow structured time for students to reflect on the activity and assess the progress toward the learning or skill building objective.	x	x	
Staff acknowledge accomplishments and challenges.	x	x	
*Overall score for reflection (global rating) 1 to 5 scale	x	x	x

Note: This table contains the quality program observation domains and the scaled items used by program director and site coordinators to observe the various program activities, based on the YPQA (Smith, et.al., 2016). The 'x's denote the items that apply for each of the domains of the program quality observations conducted in different delivery formats (i.e., in-person, synchronous live virtual, and asynchronous anytime virtual), using a 5-point Likert scale.

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