



21st CCLC and Rural Education Achievement Programs: Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program and the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), both of which are administered by the U.S. Department of Education (Department), aim to expand learning opportunities for students who face barriers to academic success. By aligning efforts and coordinating resources, local educational agencies (LEAs) can increase the overall impact of these Federal investments for students and families in rural communities. This fact sheet provides basic information about both programs and strategies for coordination.

21st CCLC



Program office: School Support and Accountability



Authorizing statute: ESEA Title IV, Part B



Program type: Formula grants to State educational agencies (SEAs), which administer competitive grants to eligible entities, including LEAs



Purpose/use of funds: Community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours



Number of students served: 1.4 million

Target population: Students attending high-poverty or low-performing schools



Funding cycle: 3, 4, or 5 years

- ✓ Are Federally funded
- ✓ Are administered by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE)
- ✓ Are authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)
- ✓ Foster strong family engagement
- ✓ Promote alignment of Federal, State, and local resources so they have the greatest impact without duplicating efforts

REAP

Program office: Division of Rural and School Improvement Programs



Authorizing statute: ESEA Title V, Part B, Subpart 2



Program type: Formula grants to eligible LEAs through the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program and to SEAs (which in turn award funds to eligible LEAs via formula or competition) through the Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) program



Purpose/use of funds: Rural LEAs to support activities authorized under ESEA Titles I-IV



Number of students served: 4 million

Target population: K-12 students attending schools in eligible, rurally designated LEAs



Funding cycle: Annual



The 21st CCLC Program

Nearly 10,000 program sites across the nation provide out-of-school time (OST) enrichment opportunities, including summer programs, with a focus on students in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Program Purpose

21st CCLC programs provide safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments for students outside of the regular school day. These programs provide academic enrichment and youth development opportunities that reinforce and complement school-day instruction while supporting overall student success and well-being. Activities may include targeted tutoring and homework support; hands-on experiences in STEM, literacy, and the arts; financial literacy; career exploration; and activities related to health and wellness. 21st CCLC programs also provide educational services and community connections to families of children enrolled in their programs.

21st CCLC Programs in Rural Areas

For thousands of students in rural communities where limited resources are stretched thin, 21st CCLC programs help fill critical learning and opportunity gaps, expanding access to academic support and enrichment that might otherwise be out of reach. According to the [Afterschool Alliance](#), about 21 percent of the nation's 10,000 21st CCLC programs are located in rural areas and towns, meaning roughly 2,100 programs serve rural communities. Without these programs, many students and families would lack access to OST programming. Building and sustaining rural OST programs requires a clear-eyed look at rural challenges and strengths.

21st CCLC Opportunities for Rural Areas

The 21st CCLC program can help rural communities provide high-quality OST programs that are tailored to local needs and build on local strengths. These programs support student learning, enrichment, and family engagement while leveraging community resources and partnerships. Contact your SEA for information about how and when to apply for 21st CCLC funding.

Rural Challenges



Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural OST programs face unique challenges that can negatively affect program access, quality, depth, and breadth. These challenges include:

- **Large service areas:** Rural OST program sites often cover big geographic regions, so students may face transportation challenges related to time, distance, and terrain. For example, in some parts of Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, a plane or boat is needed to get from one island to another. In sparsely populated areas, long bus rides and limited alternative transportation can make OST participation difficult for some students and families.
- **Resource constraints:** With fewer local revenue sources and community partners, rural OST programs often rely on Federal grants (such as 21st CCLC) and have limited supplemental funding. At the same time, they may face higher per-student costs due to sparse populations and geographic spread.
- **Staffing challenges:** Rural program sites may have difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff, especially in specialized areas such as STEM. Staff members often need to fill multiple roles and have limited access to professional development opportunities.

- **Unreliable or insufficient internet access/technology infrastructure:** Spotty broadband, limited bandwidth, outdated wiring, and lack of specialized tech support can limit access to virtual learning/participation for students, communications between OST programs and families, and virtual professional development for staff.



Rural Strengths

The challenges described above seem daunting, but rural OST programs have distinct strengths they can build on to create engaging and sustainable programming:

- **Close-knit relationships:** Programs can leverage strong community relationships to build trust, boost participation, and engage families.
- **Community-minded industries and partners:** Tapping into local expertise can enable rural programs to create hands-on, career-connected learning experiences.
- **Smaller program sizes:** Programs that serve a small number of students can offer personalized support and tailored activities to students' interests.
- **Place-based learning opportunities.** Designing activities that connect to the local environment, traditions, and institutions makes learning relevant and helps students discover new interests and possibilities.

Coordination, collaboration, and creativity are essential to sustaining OST programs in rural areas, where resources are limited and challenges are unique. Maximizing impact requires aligning Federal, State, and local supports to effectively meet students' needs.

Context Matters

Local coordination and planning are essential to the success of rural programs because not all rural areas are the same. Even within the same State, rural areas may vary widely in terms of geography, demographics, economic conditions, and opportunities. For example, rural communities near cities offer better access to resources than remote areas, which may lack reliable transportation, internet, and services. Economic conditions also vary: some areas may rely on agriculture, natural resources, and tourism, while others face higher poverty and fewer job opportunities. These differences shape the challenges students and families face and the types of support they need.



The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)

Approximately 6,000 LEAs (about one-third nationwide) participated in the REAP program in FY 2026.

Program Purpose

REAP is designed to help rural LEAs that (a) may lack the personnel and resources to effectively compete for Federal grants and (b) often receive grant allocations in amounts too small to be effective in meeting their intended purposes. REAP enables rural LEAs to participate more fully and effectively in many ESEA programs and to provide better educational services to their students.

Two formula grant programs are authorized under REAP:

[Small, Rural School Achievement \(SRSA\) Grant Program](#)

Under SRSA, the Department awards grants each year directly to eligible LEAs nationwide based on a statutory formula. The Department notifies all eligible LEAs but doesn't make the award automatically. To receive an SRSA grant, eligible LEAs must respond to the Department's invitation by submitting a streamlined online application form that indicates their intended use of funds. On average, it takes under 10 minutes to complete the form. In FY 2026, 99.8 percent of eligible LEAs applied.



Grantees may use their funds for various authorized activities and can exercise additional flexibility under the Alternative Fund Use Authority (AFUA). This authority allows LEAs with SRSA grants to use their Title II-A and Title IV-A funds to pay for activities under any of the allowable uses for SRSA grant funds, based on local needs.



[Rural and Low-Income School \(RLIS\) Grant Program](#)

Under RLIS, the Department awards funds to SEAs, which in turn make subgrants to LEAs. An SEA must award the RLIS grant funds to its eligible LEAs through a formula or a competition. Forty-eight States participate in the RLIS grant program. In States that do not participate, the Department may award RLIS funds directly to eligible LEAs, which are known as Specially Qualified Agencies (SQAs). Title IV, Part B reserves a portion of the RLIS program appropriation for Bureau of Indian Education-funded schools and for four outlying areas — American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Regardless of whether an LEA receives a subgrant from its SEA or a direct grant from the Department, the funds are used by the LEA to implement authorized activities that assist students in achieving rigorous State academic standards.

[REAP Eligibility Requirements](#)

The first table on the next page of this fact sheet highlights the key differences in eligibility requirements between these two REAP formula grant programs. An LEA may be eligible for both SRSA and RLIS; however, dual-eligible LEAs may receive an award under only one REAP program (i.e., either SRSA or RLIS) each fiscal year. Dual-eligible LEAs are strongly encouraged to review the requirements and provisions of each program to determine which best fits their needs. Although most LEAs choose the program with the larger

estimated allocation, other factors to consider include the application process, who will provide technical assistance for their award, and different reporting requirements and systems. Appendix A of the [REAP Informational Document](#) lists factors an LEA should consider when making its decision.

SRSA Eligibility	RLIS Eligibility
To be eligible for an SRSA formula grant, an LEA must be: both SMALL and RURAL (see ESEA Section 5211(b))	To be eligible for an RLIS formula grant, an LEA must be: both RURAL and LOW-INCOME (see ESEA Section 5211(b))
An LEA is considered SMALL if: - The LEA's average daily attendance (ADA) is fewer than 600 students. <i>or</i> - The LEA is located in a county with a population density of less than 10 persons per square mile.	An LEA is considered LOW-INCOME if: 20 percent or more of children aged 5-17 served by the LEA must be from families with incomes below the poverty line as determined by data from the Small Area Income Poverty Estimates of the Bureau of Census (SAIPE).
An LEA is considered RURAL for SRSA if: - All schools within the LEA have a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale code of 41, 42, or 43. <i>or</i> - The LEA is designated as "rural" by a governmental agency of the State.	An LEA is considered RURAL for RLIS if: - All schools within the LEA have an NCES locale code of 32, 33, 41, 42, or 43. <i>or</i> - The LEA is designated as "rural" by a governmental agency of the State.

Use of REAP Funds

REAP funds are intended to help rural LEAs enhance educational opportunities and address student needs. REAP funds may be used to support activities authorized under any of the ESEA programs and activities listed in the table below, but they must be used to supplement, not supplant, other Federal, State, or local funding sources.

SRSA	RLIS
Title I, Part A — Improving Basic Programs Operated by LEAs Title II, Part A — Supporting Effective Instruction Title III — Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students Title IV, Part A — Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants	
Title IV, Part B — 21st Century Community Learning Centers	Specific types of parental involvement activities*

*This could include certain parental involvement activities conducted by 21st CCLC programs. See below for details.

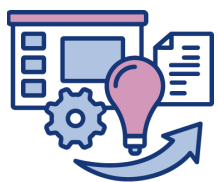
Allowable uses of REAP funds include supporting preschool programs, professional development, English learner services, technology and digital resources, expanded learning and enrichment programs, and family engagement activities. Under RLIS, allowable parental involvement supports include providing materials

that help parents support their children's academic progress, enabling parents to participate in school meetings or trainings, establishing parent advisory councils, and training school staff on effective family engagement strategies.

Exhibit 1: Examples of Allowable Activities Under SRSA



Opportunities for Collaboration Between 21st CCLC and REAP Programs



21st CCLC and REAP can coordinate to support student success, family engagement, staffing, and professional development. Aligned planning can help rural LEAs meet current needs while sustaining essential programs and services, including OST. When considering the following activities, a grantee must establish whether the suggested activity is allowable under 21st CCLC and/or REAP.

Student Success

21st CCLC supports academic enrichment and services outside the school day, while REAP funds can be used to strengthen both school-day and OST supports for students. Together, these programs can address learning gaps, expand hands-on learning, and build college and career readiness.

Collaboration Ideas

Coordinated 21st CCLC and REAP funds can bring local partners into OST enrichment and connect academic skills to real-world career pathways through activities such as the ones described below.

- **Rotating career exploration labs** in which students:
 - Engage in hands-on activities by working alongside local professionals in fields such as agriculture, ranching, mining, oil and gas, construction, health care, education, law enforcement and public safety, and the arts.
 - Practice career-focused reading and writing (e.g., community or business meeting summaries, public service announcements for radio or social media).
 - Complete project-based technology activities such as coding or digital media production.
 - Explore math-related careers through data analysis projects (e.g., water testing projects, crop sciences, survey results).
- **Academic enrichment initiatives** that reinforce core academic skills, such as:
 - STEM clubs with hands-on challenges supported by school-day teachers and local industry professionals

- Coding teams that use LEA technology resources and community expertise to explore programming, robotics, and digital design
- **High school student mentors** can lead younger 21st CCLC students in:
 - Painting or sculpture workshops
 - Dance sessions that teach simple choreography
 - Theater or dance activities that include the production of skits or readers theater programs (to strengthen literacy, fluency, and public speaking skills) or movement pieces

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a shared priority for 21st CCLC and REAP. Strategic coordination can strengthen communication with families and increase opportunities for families' participation in students' learning. By aligning engagement activities and outreach strategies, rural LEAs and OST programs can create a more consistent experience for families and build stronger partnerships among schools, community organizations, and local service providers.

Collaboration Ideas

- **Support for Families' Meaningful Engagement With Their Children's Education**
 - Create formal parent advisory councils.
 - Provide materials and services to help families support their children's academic progress (e.g., training on how to use school online portals).
 - Help families attend school meetings, events, or trainings (e.g., by providing childcare).
 - Jointly train school and OST staff on effective parent and family engagement strategies.
- **College and Career Exploration**
 - Coordinate exhibits or presentations about various career pathways, including the military, trades, entrepreneurship, and professions that require college degrees (e.g., doctor, lawyer, teacher, engineer).
 - Host career panels that feature local employers.
 - Invite CTE program leaders to share videos or stories about local CTE opportunities.
 - Have 21st CCLC programs coordinate childcare and meals for families in attendance.
- **Transportation**
 - Coordinate funds to run buses for evening events.
 - Partner with community organizations (such as faith-based organizations and sports leagues) that can possibly share vehicles, help coordinate rides, and provide trusted drivers families already know.
 - Stagger event locations across schools to reduce travel distances.



Staffing and Professional Development

Both 21st CCLC and REAP programs support professional development that strengthens instructional practices and improves student outcomes. Coordinating professional learning opportunities can help ensure that educators and program staff use aligned strategies to support student success.

Collaboration Ideas

- **Staffing:** To address persistent staffing shortages in rural areas, coordinate 21st CCLC and REAP funds to help recruit and compensate high-quality staff. Additionally, REAP funds can help support the LEA's capacity to manage existing partnerships between 21st CCLC programs, schools, and community organizations, leveraging those partnerships to expand the OST staffing pool by:
 - Engaging high school students as OST staff or mentors for younger students
 - Creating a grow-your-own-workforce teacher pipeline by partnering with local colleges and by providing paid internships through 21st CCLC programs
 - Bringing in community experts (industry, trades, technology, entrepreneurship)
- **Joint Professional Development Sessions:** Provide shared training for teachers, OST program staff, and tutors focused on:
 - Evidence-based instructional strategies
 - Continuous improvement informed by data and evaluation
 - Youth development, academic enrichment, and student engagement
- **Rural Educator Support Networks:** Use RLIS-supported training opportunities to strengthen collaboration among educators and OST staff serving rural students.



Collaborative Connections: Where to Start

At the SEA Level

SEA Coordinators for the 21st CCLC and REAP programs can break down silos and help coordinate resources within and among LEAs in a variety of ways.

- Conduct an annual virtual event for rural LEA program leaders to increase their awareness of:
 - Resources available to them
 - Application requirements and deadlines
 - The availability of priority points for rural 21st CCLC applicants
 - Ways to coordinate Federal, State, and local funding sources to build capacity and provide services in rural areas
- Create a rural community of practice cohort so that rural LEAs can collaborate to share ideas, resources, and solutions.
- Provide information, training, technical assistance, and resources to support rural LEAs in finding and using available resources strategically. For example:
 - Provide LEAs with information about REAP eligibility and application requirements.
 - Provide priority points for rural applicants in their 21st CCLC request for applications, as well as applicable State-specific definitions of “rural.”
 - Conduct outreach to make LEAs aware of how to qualify for priority points if they apply for a 21st CCLC grant.

At the LEA Level



The 21st CCLC program coordinators (e.g., the program administrator, director of Federal programs, or afterschool coordinator) and designated REAP contacts (typically the superintendent and the fiscal manager) can:

- Collaborate to identify specific ways 21st CCLC and REAP funds can be coordinated to address needs identified through local comprehensive needs assessments.
- Coordinate funding to fill resource gaps.
- Jointly recruit additional potential partners and resources to support mutually identified goals and priorities.

Strategic Coordination Ideas

Rural LEAs can strategically leverage 21st CCLC and REAP funds to strengthen and expand OST programming. For example:

- Writing a 21st CCLC grant proposal can be a significant undertaking for rural LEAs. An LEA considering applying for 21st CCLC funds could use SRSA funds as seed money to pilot OST activities, then describe these efforts and their outcomes in a 21st CCLC proposal, demonstrating how additional funding would support expansion. An LEA using RLIS funds to support family engagement could highlight those efforts in a 21st CCLC proposal.
- LEAs with an existing 21st CCLC program could use SRSA funds to expand or enhance current offerings — for example, by establishing a local student mentorship program to complement existing career-readiness activities.

Conclusion

Coordinating 21st CCLC and REAP can expand educational resources and opportunities, particularly for students in high-need rural communities. Together, these programs demonstrate a shared commitment to closing opportunity gaps, strengthening local capacity, and ensuring that all students have access to the supports they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Helpful Links and Resources

21 st CCLC Program	
21st CCLC Program Office Website	This website provides information about the 21 st CCLC program and links to relevant legislation and regulations.
21st CCLC Non-Regulatory Guidance	This document provides SEAs and LEAs with essential information about 21 st CCLC program eligibility and implementation.
Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities	This 2021 report from the Afterschool Alliance describes the unmet demand for rural OST programs and the need for increased resources.

REAP	
Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) Program Office Website	This website provides information about the REAP program and links to relevant legislation and regulations.
REAP Informational Document	This document supersedes the REAP non-regulatory guidance published in 2003 and provides SEAs and LEAs with essential information about REAP eligibility and implementation.
REAP Master Eligibility Sheet (MES)	This spreadsheet, which is updated annually, includes every LEA in the nation, its REAP eligibility status, estimated award allocations for eligible REAP programs, title program allocations used in the SRSA formula, and general LEA contact information.
REAP Uses of Funds Guide	This webpage includes a searchable list of examples of possible uses of REAP grant funds.
Rural and Low-Income School Program (RLIS)	This REAP program webpage provides RLIS applicant and eligibility information, performance reports, and resources.
Small, Rural School Achievement Program (SRSA)	This REAP program webpage provides SRSA applicant and eligibility information, performance reports, and resources.

For Additional Information About These Programs

21 st CCLC Program	REAP
U.S. Department of Education 21st CCLC Program Webpage 21stcclc@ed.gov	U.S. Department of Education REAP Webpage reap@ed.gov 202-401-0039
21st CCLC National Technical Assistance Center 21stcclcntac.org info@21stcclcntac.org	

This resource was developed in 2026 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the Federal government. The 21st CCLC project officers are Dr. La' Shawndra Scroggins and Ms. Andrea Jackson.