

## **The School of the 21st Century as a Year-Round Service Center for an Entire Community**

By Erin Deemer, Laura DeSimone, and Matia Finn-Stevenson

In 1987, Yale University's Edward Zigler introduced the School of the 21st Century (21C), a model designed to enable schools to provide family support and child care services for children from infancy to age 12 (Zigler and Ennis 1988). Skeptics told him it couldn't work. They doubted the ability of public schools, burdened by so many existing problems, to address a community's child care needs. Today, more than ten years later, the model is not only working in 500 school districts in 17 states, but it has helped redefine the relationship between schools and families.

The ultimate goal of 21C is to ensure optimal development for all children and to benefit all families, regardless of income. The model transforms the school into a year-round, multi-service center that is open when today's families need it most--from 6 in the morning until 7 at night. The core components are affordable, high-quality child care for preschool children ages 3-5, before- and after-school programs for school-age children; and health services, referral services, support, and guidance for parents of young children, from the third trimester of pregnancy to age 3. The 21C child care programs address all aspects of child development, including physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. The model encourages high standards for child care, including staff training, small teacher-child ratios, and developmentally appropriate activities that follow guidelines established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

### *Blending Education and Child Care*

In the decade since 21C's inception, school administrators have become increasingly aware of the vital link between a child's early experiences and later academic, social, and economic success. By eliminating the distinction between child care and education, 21C schools underline the reality that learning begins at birth and occurs in all settings, not just within a classroom. Given recent research linking brain development to stimulation received in a child's first five years, educators can no longer afford to wait until children start kindergarten. As the number of single parents and families with both parents working full-time continues to rise, it has become increasingly difficult for working parents to find good child care to fit their schedules. For these families, 21C schools offer invaluable support. By keeping their doors open a few extra hours each day and offering high-quality child care, these schools make a huge difference in the quality of life for many families.

### *Meeting Community Needs*

The 21C model is designed to meet the needs of individual communities, affluent and poor, urban and rural. Each community- conducts a thorough needs assessment in order to design a program tailored to its constituents. While no two programs are alike, all have the core components of before- and after-school care, preschool, and home visitation. For example, in Independence, Missouri, a receptionist is at the entrance to a local elementary school each weekday evening to direct visitors to locations where they

can attend a community meeting, take GED classes, play basketball, participate in a family activity, or seek medical care. A school in Connecticut offers English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for the community's large Haitian population, and a school serving a low-income, African-American population in Virginia has a family breakfast club that evolved into a book reading and discussion group. A 21C school in Missouri turned its cafeteria into a nutrition center and got children involved in menu planning. In Denver, family services at the 21C site include programs on teen pregnancy prevention and teaming at-risk youth with senior citizens.

### *Evidence of Success*

Yale University's Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy has closely documented the successes and challenges faced by 21C schools over the years. The results of a three-year evaluation of a 21C pilot site in Independence, Missouri, as well as continuous evaluation and feedback from other schools, confirm the program's positive impact on children, families, and schools. The child care component for preschool children has been especially praised by principals and teachers for increasing children's readiness for kindergarten, and for early identification of developmental problems. The Missouri evaluation shows that participation in 21C child care decreased parent stress and reduced from 30-40 percent to 0 the number of parents who missed work due to failed child care arrangements. One parent calls the program a lifesaver"; another says it was the "answer to my prayers." In fact, parent appreciation and positive public relations are prime benefits to their schools, according to the principals. Several also attribute other unanticipated benefits to 21C, including decreased vandalism and absenteeism, and increased parent involvement. One principal notes, "I feel that putting child care in my building has been one of the most important contributions I have made in my tenure as principal. It is helping parents and children; ultimately, it will help us educators because we will have a group of children who are happy and well adjusted, and who are familiar with the school environment."

### *Interacting with Parents*

The relationship that develops between parents and the 21C school also serves as a first line of communication for screening potential problems. As one child care coordinator observes, "We see the parents first thing every morning and last thing every afternoon, so we are usually the first to know if there are any problems at home or in the classroom." The program gives teachers an opportunity to interact with parents, even those who might previously have been difficult to reach. "One of the first things we need to do is help those parents who had a bad experience in school to develop trust," says a teacher. "We start by welcoming them when their children are still babies. We feel that if we can get to parents early, they'll tend to stay connected to the school." Another oft-cited benefit of 21st Century schools is the opportunity for older fifth and sixth graders to work and play with preschoolers in after-school programs. According to one program coordinator, these activities "got so popular that even kids who weren't attending the after-school child care wanted to be a part of the program."

### *Implementing a 21C Program*

Many educators who would like to adopt the 21C program in their schools question how they can make it work in their communities. Although every situation is different, the following common elements distinguish the most successful schools. Committed Leadership. Principals play a pivotal role in making each 21C school a success. In partnership with site coordinators and teachers, they integrate and oversee the operative programs and services, and generate enthusiasm and support among teachers and staff. How a principal approaches the roles of supervisor, facilitator, innovator, and perhaps most importantly, leader and communicator, has everything to do with how well the programs operate. While a School of the 21st Century could operate as a separate entity within the school building, it is most successful where it is fully integrated into the school and accepted by the principal and teachers. The principal's role in the program's support services in the building.

### *Diversified Funding*

Funding is always one of the toughest issues when it comes to child care, and it is a key concern of all 21C schools. The core child care components of 21C are designed to be funded on the basis of fee-for-service and state subsidies; but money is also needed for initial startup costs and for support services for which fees cannot be assessed. Funding differs by school and by district. In Connecticut and Kentucky, state funding covers necessary start-up costs. In most cases, these costs have been subsidized by community foundations or corporations. Other schools use a combination of local funds, district in-kind donations (such as building space, custodial services, bookkeeping, and insurance coverage) state funds (e.g., block grants), and federal funds (e.g., Title I). The programs in most sites are either supported or supplemented by sliding fees for child care. Successful 21C schools develop a diversified funding strategy to protect themselves from the loss of their initial "soft" foundation or government funding. They must take an entrepreneurial approach, continuously scanning the horizon for new funding opportunities while carefully cultivating a network of supporters in state legislatures, community foundations, and local businesses.

### *Don't Go It Alone*

Schools of the 21st Century' rely on Yale University's Bush Center and its network for support, direction, and guidance. The Center provides schools with technical assistance and training to design, develop, implement, monitor, and improve 21C programs. Schools can also call on the Center's network of 500 sites to share best practices and new ideas. An experienced university partner and a supportive network are critical to surviving the inevitable bumps and bruises that will occur as a 21C school redefines its mission. With such guidance and support, schools can do more for families. As 21C designer Edward Zigler points out, "We are compromising the growth and development of our children by putting them in inferior day care or assigning them latchkey status. Then we wonder where we have failed." If every school in the nation became a School of the 21st Century, we could begin to direct children from birth on, toward success. And while we're doing that, we're also doing something reasonable for the vast majority of working families."

*Reference*

Zigler, Edward; Ennis, Pamela. "Child Care: A New Role for Tomorrow's Schools."  
Principal 68:1 (September 1988): 10.