

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4930 | DECEMBER 20, 2018

Funding Education Savings Accounts for Military Families by Repurposing the “21st Century Community Learning Centers” Program

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Congress left unfinished business in 2018. Lawmakers considered proposals to create education savings accounts (ESAs) for children in military families, but they failed to agree on how to redirect taxpayer resources from existing programs to create the accounts. In a proposal introduced by Representative Jim Banks (R-IN) and Senator Ben Sasse (R-NE), a portion of federal Impact Aid funding would have been repurposed to help federally connected students in military families find quality learning options.

Impact Aid remains a promising path forward for funding ESAs for military families.¹ The 116th Congress should also consider repurposing funding from other federal education programs that have been slated for elimination or are otherwise not meeting program objectives so that students in military families can have more learning options. Such programs could include Education Innovation Research Grants (funded at \$120,000,000); Part A of Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, \$1.1 billion); and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program (\$1.2 billion annually).²

This *Issue Brief* will explain the problems with one such federal program, the 21st CCLC program,

and how the program’s spending could be used instead to help students in active-duty military families customize their learning experience.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program

Established as part of the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994—the Clinton Administration’s reauthorization of the ESEA—the 21st CCLC provides federal funding to support community learning centers that operate before-school and after-school programs. The goal of these federally funded centers, now authorized under Part B, Title IV, of the ESEA, is to help students meet reading and math standards and offer activities that complement their regular curriculum during the day.³

Congress awards funding for the 21st CCLC program via formula grants to states, which in turn make awards to local education agencies (school districts) on a competitive basis. Yet as the George W. Bush Administration explained in its final budget request for fiscal year (FY) 2009, “a national evaluation of the program and the program’s performance data to date cast doubt on whether the program is achieving results.”⁴

The FY 2009 budget requested \$800 million for the 21st CCLC program, down from \$1.08 billion in FY 2008.⁵ Yet Congress appropriated some \$1.13 billion for the program. Although the Obama Administration continued to fund the 21st CCLC program at historically high levels, its final budget, for FY 2017, suggested reducing the funding by 14 percent, from \$1.16 billion to \$1 billion.⁶

Recognizing the limited impact of the program, the Trump Administration has proposed eliminat-

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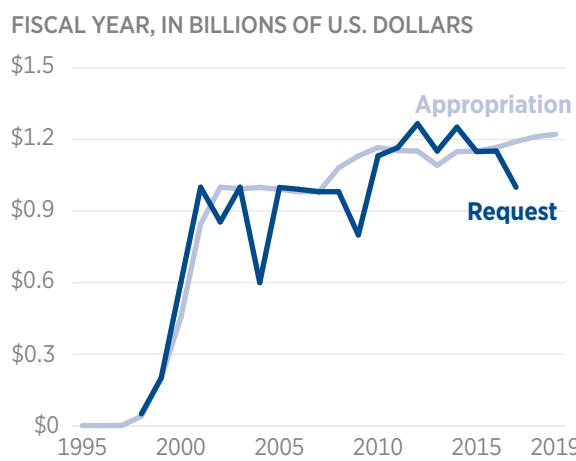
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CHART 1

21st Century Community Learning Centers

The Trump Administration zeroed out funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers in the FY2018 and FY2019 budget request.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, "Education Department Budget by Major Program," <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/edhistory.pdf> (accessed December 14, 2018).

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ing its funding. The Trump Administration's FY 2018 budget request cited the lack of improved learning outcomes among participants,⁷ and the FY 2019 budget similarly highlighted the program's shortcomings, saying, "this program lacks strong evidence of meeting its objectives, such as improving student achievement."⁸

Research Finds 21st Century Community Learning Centers Ineffective

In 2005, researchers Susanne James-Burdumy and colleagues evaluated the 21st CCLC program. The study's authors found that program participants were less likely to be with their parents after school, and that the program had no impact on homework completion, academic outcomes, or parental involvement, while having a *negative* impact on student behavior. It did, however, increase feelings of physical safety.⁹

The study by James-Burdumy and her colleagues is the most rigorous conducted to date. However, a review of the literature by the Government Accountability Office in 2017, which included non-experimental studies, also found that none of the studies found "consistently better scores in either math or reading in program participants' state assessments."¹⁰ In addition, according to the Department of Education's 21st CCLC Program Performance Plans and Reports, the program large-

1. "The purpose of the Impact Aid Program is twofold: (1) To support the provision of education services for federally connected children, and (2) To compensate local areas for lost tax revenue." Lindsey M. Burke and Anne Ryland, "A GI Bill for Children of Military Families: Transforming Impact Aid into Education Savings Accounts," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3180, June 2, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/BG3180.pdf>.
2. U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Summary and Background Information," <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget19/summary/19summary.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2018), and U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Summary and Background Information," <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget18/summary/18summary.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2018).
3. U.S. Department of Education, "Programs: 21st Century Community Learning Centers," <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html> (accessed December 19, 2018).
4. U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Summary," February 4, 2008, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget09/summary/edlite-section2a.html#clcs> (accessed December 19, 2018).
5. Ibid.
6. U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Summary and Background Information," <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/summary/17summary.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2018).
7. U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Summary and Background Information."
8. U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Summary and Background Information."
9. Susanne James-Burdumy et al., "When Elementary Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program," *Final Report*, U.S. Department of Education, April 2005, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/cclcfinalreport/index.html> (accessed December 19, 2018).
10. Government Accountability Office, "Education Needs to Improve Oversight of Its 21st Century Program," April 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/684314.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2018).

ly failed to meet academic improvement targets established by program administrators.¹¹

Repurposing 21st CCLC Program Funding to Provide ESAs to Children of Military Families

Military-connected families lack the educational opportunities available to many civilians. Regardless of their particular needs, military-connected children are often assigned to the public school nearest in proximity to the base to which their parent is assigned. More than half of military personnel reside in states that lack any school choice options.¹² Too many military-connected families have too few choices when it comes to their children's education, creating barriers to their children's academic opportunity and resulting in recruitment, retention, and ultimately, national security problems.¹³

ESAs would expand the K-12 learning options for children in military-connected families. Arizona lawmakers enacted the first accounts in 2011, and with an account, the state deposits a portion of a child's funds from the state education formula into a private account that families use to buy education products and services for their children. Families can pay for personal tutors, online classes, private school tuition, and educational therapy, to name a few options. Unused funds can even be rolled over from year to year and deposited in college savings accounts.¹⁴

Research finds that participating families report high levels of parent satisfaction. Ninety percent of Arizona parents of account holders reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their child's account.¹⁵ In Mississippi, 91 percent of parents of account holders reported these satisfaction levels.¹⁶

Furthermore, account holders in Florida and Arizona are using their accounts for multiple learning opportunities simultaneously, customizing a child's experience according to his needs. One-third of Arizona account holders were using their account for multiple purposes in two consecutive studies, covering the years 2011 to 2015.¹⁷ Just under half of all participants are using the accounts in this way in Florida.¹⁸

In general, research on private school choice and public school choice in recent years has found:

- Improved academic achievement among participants and non-participating peers,
- Improved academic attainment among participants,
- Improved civic education outcomes, and
- Higher percentages of families reporting that their children were in safe learning environments at their chosen school.¹⁹

11. U.S. Department of Education, "Programs: 21st Century Community Learning Centers-Performance," <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/performance.html> (accessed December 19, 2018).
12. Molly Clever and David R. Segal, "The Demographics of Military Children and Families," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 2013), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1018362.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2018).
13. Burke and Ryland, "A GI Bill for Children of Military Families."
14. For more information on the mechanics of ESAs, including accountability and transparency around how taxpayer funds are spent, see Jonathan Butcher, "A Primer on Education Savings Accounts: Giving Every Child a Chance to Succeed," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3245, September 15, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/BG3245.pdf>.
15. Jonathan Butcher, "A Primer on Education Savings Accounts," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3245, September 15, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/BG3245.pdf>.
16. Ibid.
17. Jonathan Butcher and Lindsey M. Burke, "The Education Debit Card II," EdChoice, February 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-2-The-Education-Debit-Card-II-WEB-1.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2018).
18. Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick, "Personalizing Education," EdChoice, February 2018, https://www.edchoice.org/blog/sdm_downloads/personalizing-education/personalizing-education-by-lindsey-burke-and-jason-bedrick/ (accessed December 19, 2018).
19. Greg Forster, "Win-Win Solution," EdChoice, May 2016, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/win-win-solution/> (accessed December 19, 2018); Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, "The School Choice Journey: Parents Experiencing More Than Improved Test Scores," American Enterprise Institute, January 26, 2015, <http://www.aei.org/publication/school-choice-journey-parents-experiencing-improved-test-scores/> (accessed December 19, 2018); and Patrick J. Wolf, "Civics Exam," *Education Next*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2007), <https://www.educationnext.org/civics-exam/> (accessed December 19, 2018).

Congress should repurpose the \$1.2 billion spent annually on the 21st CCLC program to provide ESAs to children from active-duty military families. Repurposing 21st CCLC funds could provide an ESA worth up to \$6,000 to each of approximately 200,000 children of active-duty military families.²⁰ Experience from Arizona and Florida—the first two states with ESAs—suggests that a \$6,000 ESA for military-connected children would provide an attractive option for service members and their children across the country.²¹ Not only would this step help with military retention and recruitment and save money for the Defense Department, it would, most critically, provide peace of mind for active-duty families that their children have access to education options that are the right fit for them.²²

Conclusion

Parents should look to family-based care, private learning providers, charter schools, and district schools for before-school and after-school care for their children. Federal spending for such programs expands Washington's reach, and as evidence demonstrates, has proven ineffective at achieving the programs' stated goals. Indeed, for decades, Washington has failed to create meaningful improvements in educational outcomes through the Department of

Education's increasingly complicated labyrinth of programs and spending. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers are no exception.

Some military families have to make a difficult choice between remaining in the armed services and accessing quality education options for their children. A *Military Times* survey found that one-third of respondents reported that dissatisfaction with their children's education was a significant factor in their decision to leave military service.²³

Although this *Issue Brief* explains how 21st CCLC spending could be repurposed, there is no shortage of other ineffective programs at Washington's disposal. Federal lawmakers should make the learning experiences of children in military families a priority, cite the research showing positive outcomes for children using public school choice and private school choice options, and redirect federal spending from failing education programs to help K-12 students from military families.

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20. U.S. Department of Education, "Programs: 21st Century Community Learning Centers."
 21. EdChoice, "School Choice: Arizona," <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/state/arizona/> (accessed December 11, 2018), and EdChoice, "School Choice: Florida," <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/state/florida/> (accessed December 11, 2018).
 22. Lindsey Burke, "School Choice for Military Families Will Save DoD Money," *Military Times*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2018/02/27/commentary-school-choice-for-military-families-will-save-dod-money/> (accessed December 19, 2018).
 23. Burke and Ryland, "A GI Bill for Military Families."