

# NYSCSS

## New York State Center for School Safety

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### RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Mobilizing Statewide Resources for a Peer Review Process

### A New York State Perspective

By Candace Mayer LaRue

Until 2002 the United States Department of Education administered the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) program, which was designed to support after-school programs and other extended learning opportunities (before-school, weekends, summers, etc.) for students and community members. Starting with an appropriation of \$40 million, the program grew rapidly and is now funded at nearly \$1 billion nationwide<sup>1</sup>. With the reauthorization in 2001 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the responsibility for administering this program was transferred to State Education Agencies.

New York received slightly more than \$29 million for FY 2002 and by 2005 is distributing nearly \$90 million per year. A significant aspect of administration for such a program is reviewing applications. Application review is designed to ensure that projects are high quality and that awards are fair and impartial. Because the new program guidelines required community partnerships and a competitive process for determining awards, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recognized a need for an inclusive statewide process for making decisions about the funding. Consequently, as part of the federally required state plan, NYSED proposed to conduct a peer review of the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC applications with coordination of the peer review process to be conducted by The New York State Center for School Safety (NYSCSS)<sup>2</sup>.

### Background

NYSED released its first 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Request for Proposals (RFP) on October 4, 2002 with a due date of November

15. RFP's were released annually for the next two years. Interest in the grant opportunity was high following technical assistance sessions that were presented across the state to representatives of community organizations and school districts. A large number of peer reviewers needed to be recruited, trained and if possible retained for future years.

The peer review process was supported from the beginning by the development of a statewide alliance for building after school capacity in New York State. The group had been previously convened by the State Education Department (SED) and had resumed meeting in August of 2002 as a statewide advisory board to 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC. This group has since developed into the New York State After School Network (NYSAN)<sup>3</sup>, funded through a Mott Foundation initiative. It is one of 25 such networks across the U.S.A.

Each of the stakeholders made a commitment to local, regional and statewide collaboration and joint planning around issues of quality, capacity building and sustainability. Members of the group include state agency staff and leadership of several large non-profit organizations with expertise in the field of after school programming. This group supported the peer review process at each step along the way: members of the group worked with NYSCSS to develop the concept, reviewed the recruitment letter, participated in the recruitment of reviewers, and provided advice and expertise in the training design.

### Recruiting Peer Reviewers

A diverse group of reviewers was sought by using existing networks to recruit individuals from throughout the state<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Congress has appropriated \$991.07 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The New York State Center for School Safety (NYSCSS) is a state government coordinating agency and information clearinghouse. The Center supports schools, families, communities and government organizations in creating safe and healthy environments. The Center is one of three statewide centers and seven regional centers that make up the Regional Student Support Services Network (SSSN). The Student Support Services Network is supervised by the Student Support Services Department of the New York State Education Department.

<sup>3</sup> The NYSAN is currently comprised of members from The After-School Corporation (TASC), The Association of New York State Youth Bureaus, The Children's Aid Society (CAS), The Coalition for After School Funding (CASF), Cornell University: The Cornell Early Childhood Program, the New York City Department of Education, the New York State Center for School Safety (NYSCSS), the New York State Education Department (NYSED), the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the New York State School Age Care Association (NYSSACC), The Partnership for After School Education (PASE), The Student Support Services Networks, and United Way of New York State.

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An application for peer reviewers was designed by staff from the NYSCSS and SED and posted on both agencies' websites. Strategies included:

- Announcements were made at proposal development technical assistance sessions held across the state each time the RFP was released for the new year of funding.
- Members of NYSAN participated in recruitment through their individual networks and also distributed the call for reviewers to NYSAN regional groups as they developed.
- All staff at the NYSCSS and all the Regional Student Support Services Centers were given applications to distribute at conferences and meetings
- The Extended School Day/School Violence Prevention newsletter had announcements requesting reviewers .
- The School Health Infrastructure Team (SHIFT), a state level collaboration between SED and the Department of Health (DOH) posted a request for reviewers on their listserv.
- A call for reviewers was prominently placed on the SED and NYSCSS websites.

As a result of the recruitment efforts 81 people submitted applications to become peer reviewers in the first year and by the third year there were 229 applicants. A database was developed during the first year by NYSCSS to keep track of the applicants. This database allowed for easy access to these individuals in each subsequent year, thus building additional capacity in each year. Every region in the state is represented and reviewers include men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as diverse affiliations<sup>5</sup>.

### Selecting and Training Peer Reviewers

Applications were screened by NYSCSS and SED staff members. The quality of applications to serve as a peer reviewer was very high and none of the applicants were screened out as unacceptable. Applicants came from schools, community agencies, faith based organizations, institutions of higher education, cultural organization – all of the types of organization intended to participate in community collaborations for 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC's. Examples of the typical applicants include current and retired superintendents and assistant superintendents of school districts, directors of funded programs, project directors, grant writers, program evaluators and parents. Less typical reviewers came from law enforcement, business and major arts organizations. Reviewers' background information was utilized as part of the criteria for selecting reviewers and constructing teams.

All correspondence with peer reviewers was conducted by email, allowing for a rapid distribution of information. Once selected and confirmed, reviewers received electronic copies of the RFP, the scoring rubric and a guidebook, adapted from the book used by the federally

administered 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program. During the training session reviewers received hard copies of all necessary documents along with background materials about the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program and a series of informational sheets on the topics of positive youth development, effective partnerships between schools and community based organizations, principles of effectiveness, the use of scientifically based research in after school programs and sustainability.

The first review process began with training at 9AM on the first day of the session. In subsequent years the training began with a dinner and training, allowing teams to form themselves during the first evening and then devote three full days to the review process. In all years the training included background information on the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program, as well as the specifics of how to conduct the review. Topics included confidentiality, conflicts of interest, the selection criteria, the team process, and scheduling, as well as a brief discussion of what makes for an effective partnership and what is meant by positive youth development. Training continued throughout the first day, with teams meeting in the plenary group after completing their first proposal and then again in the middle and at the end of the day. The reviewers' diversity allowed for rich discussions from a variety of perspectives during the actual proposal reviews and during the large group discussion sessions.

### Conducting the Peer Review

In the first year the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Peer Review Process was conducted on January 7 – 9 and 14 – 16 with a final session on January 28. The first session took place in Albany, the second was held in Westchester. A final session, reviewing eight proposals which were not completed during the initial sessions, was held in Liberty on January 28. Subsequent peer reviews followed protocols developed during the first year, allowing successful completion of the entire process in one session each time, held on November 4 – 7, 2003 and January 18 – 21, 2004.

Reviewers were assigned to a panel of three, each of whom read the same proposals and scored them against a rubric. In order to allow for a diversity of perspectives, panels were carefully comprised of at least one member each from a school district and a community organization with a third member who provided additional expertise to the team. Following the training, teams were instructed to set a meeting schedule and begin their reviews, and reminded not to leave the hotel with any review materials. Panels met frequently to discuss their scores before submitting them, reviewing no more than three proposals without coming together for comparison. The large group met each morning and afternoon for additional Q&A sessions, and at the end of the three days for feedback.

Teams were supplied a list of applications to review, copies of the scoring rubric, scrap paper, pens,

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix, Table 1

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix, Tables 2-4

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highlighters, “Post-its®”, and labels to affix to their completed score sheets. In the first year reviewers received their applications in boxes and then returned them to a central location. In subsequent years team leaders signed applications in and out of a central file.

Staff from the NYS Education Department and the NYS Center for School Safety were available for technical assistance throughout the review process. New York State Center for School Safety staff developed a database to keep track of all applications, with review results entered into the database on site, allowing for rapid reporting of results. Tracking scores throughout the process and maintaining lists of applications under review allowed state staff to monitor teams’ progress and offer assistance to any teams that required extra time.

### Results of the Peer Review

The reviewers completed a total of 216 eligible applications during the first year in three sessions, rating 80 of those applications with a score of over 75 and therefore potentially eligible to receive funding. Following the stated priorities and percentages of funding to be provided geographically, 60 applicants were awarded funds. In the second year, although a similar number of applications were received, only 10 were ineligible, leading to an increase in number of applications to be reviewed. Technical assistance had led to improved applications with 111 applications scored at a fundable level, 89 of whom actually received funding. By the third year, only 3 of the 287 applications received were ineligible, and 170 had been reviewed as being fundable proposals. In the third year there were 87 new grants awarded.

Prior to state administration of the funds only school districts could apply as lead agencies, and early responses to technical assistance sessions provided indications that many assumed that this money was for school districts only. It was intended by NYSED, NYSAN and the NYSCSS that the inclusive nature of the decision making process would lead to a diversity of types of groups receiving grants. Indeed, significantly less than half of the awards went directly to school districts (88 of 236) and regional education agencies (10 of 236). Of the remaining 138 grants, 117 went to local community based organizations, 21 of which were national affiliates with the remainder spread across faith based organizations, colleges and other institutions of higher education, city/county units of government, libraries, museums, and parks.

### Lessons Learned

At the conclusion of each of the peer review session a discussion was held in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the process. The feedback gained from the reviewers was invaluable in identifying areas of the entire funding process that needed improvement.

The peer review schedule was changed after the first year based upon reviewer comments (e.g. provide the training

during the night before the review session). There was general agreement that it was necessary to house the process at a hotel or conference center because of the long hours involved (most teams reported working well into the night).

Reviewers had a number of technical recommendations on the RFP (e.g. require a specific margin size and font, provide a sample MOU) and the scoring rubric during the first two years, significantly reducing the number of applications submitted in other than the prescribed format.

Reviewers also identified areas of weakness in proposals overall. Applicants were offered targeted technical assistance on areas of weakness and each year the quality of applications overall improved<sup>8</sup>.

Reviewers stated overwhelmingly that they would be willing to serve more than once and demonstrated that fact. Six reviewers served in both sessions of Round 1. Nineteen reviewers from Round 1 returned for Round 2 (two of whom had served twice before) and 23 veteran reviewers joined the total of 66 reviewers in the Round 3 process. Reviewers identified the experience as being valuable professional development. Without exception the scores of applicants who had served as reviewers increased between rounds. By Round 2 peer reviewers who had served during Round 1 submitted some of the highest scoring proposals in the state. Student Support Services staff took lessons learned during the peer review process and conducted technical assistance sessions in their regions, thereby improving the quality of applications overall.

Participation by a wide variety of stakeholders resulted in the process being generally considered as fair and impartial. Unsuccessful applicants, possibly having served as peer reviewers themselves, sought out technical assistance between rounds rather than asking for political considerations to be brought to bear on the decisions. Statewide partners from NYSAN were able to work strategically to effect change in proposals, especially with regard to development of partnerships.

Discussion both at the end of the process and during the sessions provided a great deal of information for future technical assistance to the regions. Although proposals varied greatly in quality, reviewers identified that there were generally issues with effective partnerships as well as sustainability and principles of effectiveness during the first two rounds. NYSAN’s Professional Development committee reviewed this information and technical assistance for Rounds 2 and 3 was designed accordingly. At the conclusion of Round 3 peer reviewers identified additional areas of weakness, particularly in the area of setting goals and objectives that will be addressed in future professional development opportunities provided to the grantees.

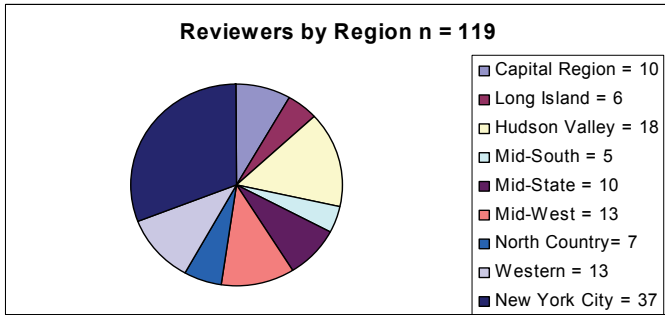
*Candace Mayer LaRue is the Program Specialist for the New York State 21 Century Community Learning Centers grant program, which is coordinated through the New York State Center for School Safety located in New Paltz, NY.*

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<sup>8</sup>see tables 5 – 7

Peer Reviewer statistics:

Table 1-Every region in the state was represented.



Tables 2 & 3 - Reviewers were somewhat diverse by race/ethnicity as well as by gender

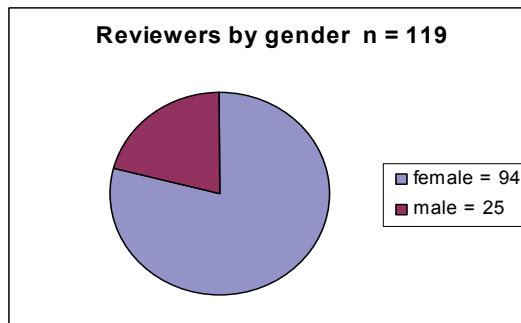
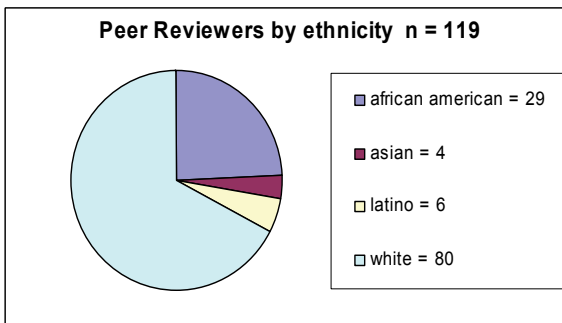


Table 4 – Reviewers were very diverse by affiliation

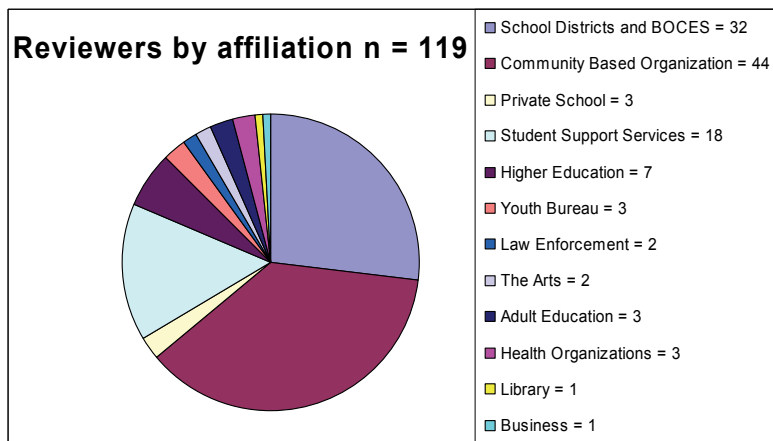


Table 5 – Overall number of applications increased in Year 3

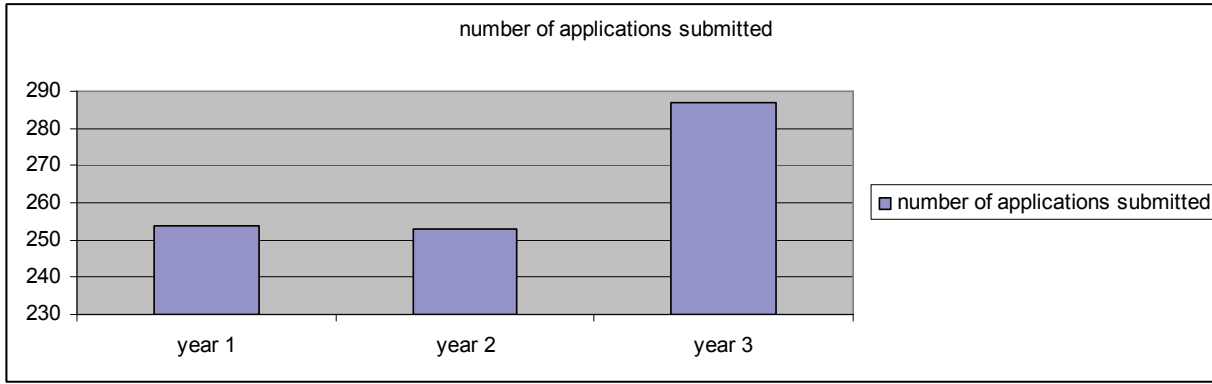


Table 6 –Eligible applications increased each year as did fundable proposals (Table 7)

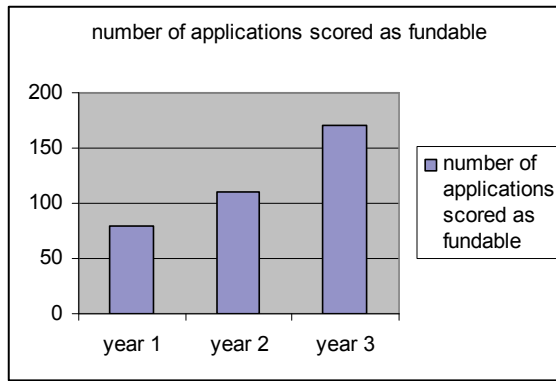
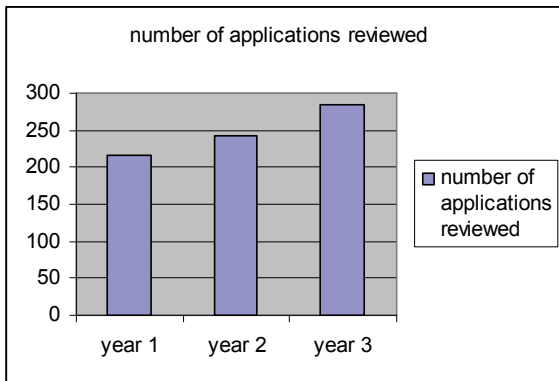


Table 8 – Number of applications funded increased according to available funds each year

