

21st Century Scholars Enrollment Best Practices

Context

Approximately 84% of students at Mayor-Sponsored Charter Schools serving eighth grade qualify for 21st Century Scholars (21CS). However, only about half of those students sign up to participate in the program. Given that 21st Century Scholars provides income-eligible students with up to four years of undergraduate tuition upon successful completion, it is paramount that more students enroll moving forward. Since the enrollment deadline is June 30th of a student's eighth grade year, much of the responsibility falls on middle school leaders to ensure students sign up on time. For this reason, OEI has curated this list of best practices for helping schools improve their enrollment so more of our students have the opportunity to attain a quality and affordable education.¹

Paperwork and Form Completion

Include 21st Century Scholars paperwork as part of eighth grade enrollment

The most effective practice for dramatically improving 21st Century Scholar enrollment is having parents complete the paperwork when they register their student for eighth grade. While some students may be ineligible, this ensures all those who do qualify have completed their enrollment well ahead of time. If all goes well, the rest of the school year can be spent educating students and families about the program instead of registering at the last minute.

Give parents PAPER copies of enrollment forms

Across multiple schools with high rates of enrollment, giving parents hard copies of paperwork has proven to be more effective than giving them a URL or web address. Although we are moving to a digital world, parents are more likely to fill out a physical document in the moment than go out of their way to log onto a computer when they get home.

Offer parents the text option for completing enrollment

In response to technical difficulties completing forms through ScholarTrack, 21CS now offers a text option where parents can complete enrollment on a smartphone using DocuSign technology. Similar to the benefit of paper copies, parents complete enrollment then and there without having to log on later. The other benefit is saved time not having to enter information manually. (Links: [English](#) [Spanish](#))

Family Engagement and Education

Host at least one event to educate parents

While an event exclusively dedicated to 21CS may work, best practice is to make it part of an existing school event where there will be strong attendance, such as back-to-school night, eighthgrade orientation, or an open house. The best approach is to have a formal presentation providing an overview of the program followed by a Q&A session with parents. A team member well-versed on 21CS may own this or someone like Esther Woodson from Indy Achieves may be invited to talk. Following the presentation, have a table with enrollment forms so parents can sign up immediately afterwards. It is

¹ The Office of Education Innovation collected data for this report through conversations with school leaders, parent focus groups, and an interview with Esther Woodson from Indy Achieves.

also best practice to stream and record the event so parents unable to attend have access to that information.

Communicate the dollar amount of the scholarship

Full tuition at an Indiana college equates to roughly \$40,000 over four years. The scholarship provided by 21CS can be life-changing for families in off-setting future student loan debt. The more parents understand the financial benefit of the program, the more likely they are to enroll their student.

Be consistent with parents and engage them in multiple ways

Simply hosting one event is not enough to engage parents and encourage enrollment. The key is to be consistent by regularly sending out communication about the 21CS program. This means starting in seventh grade, at eighth grade orientation, sending info home with students, having flyers and forms in the front office, etc. If parents have not signed up by a certain date, then start making phone calls home to talk with parents directly.

Student Engagement and Incentive

Incentivize students with a reward

Even if a student is not excited about the prospect of saving tens of thousands of dollars in the future, a short-term incentive might catch their attention. Rewards could include a gift card, credit at the school store, or even a permission slip for school privileges, such as wearing jeans on a Friday. Some schools have successfully partnered with organizations like McDonald's to give students \$5 gift cards when they enroll. If students are excited about the prize, they will make sure their parents fill out the paperwork.

Celebrate homerooms when they reach 100% enrollment

There is nothing better than good old-fashioned competition to get students motivated. The celebration can be a pizza party, dress down day, or any other event that students will enjoy. Make sure to celebrate each homeroom as opposed to only the first homeroom, that way everyone stays motivated and no one is left out. Partnering with a company like Domino's or Chick-Fil-A to provide free food, for example, would help lower celebration costs.

Incorporate 21st Century Scholars into the curriculum

Whether during homeroom, a college and career readiness course, or another appropriate class, have at least one lesson that focuses on the 21st Century Scholars program. The same way it is important to educate parents, students need to understand what the program is, why they should do it, and how they can complete it successfully. One school got creative and had eighth graders calculate the cost of college as a project for their math class, which showed students how important a scholarship through 21CS could be. Once students have completed the lesson or project, send a physical copy of the enrollment form home for parents to sign.

Start educating students in seventh grade

Since students may start enrolling in seventh grade, it is fruitful to begin educating them about the program in order to improve enrollment numbers. Building off the aforementioned best practices, students in seventh grade may be given the same incentives and learning opportunities as their eighth grade counterparts. The earlier students and parents are educated on the program, the more likely they are to enroll.

Project Management and Tracking

Designate a staff member to oversee 21st Century Scholars enrollment

This person may be a school counselor, family engagement coordinator, assistant principal, or another qualified stakeholder with the time and capacity to manage the project. By giving someone ownership over enrollment, they are able to coordinate outreach efforts, plan events, and take personal responsibility over the success of the program.

Identify a task force of team members to support the project manager in enrollment efforts

No one can go it alone. The person overseeing enrollment will need help reaching out to families, translating documents, preparing for events, and ensuring every qualified student completes an enrollment form. The task force should include no more than 4-5 team members, and may include front office staff, parent-school liaisons, EL instructors, eighth teachers, etc. The key is to ensure the team is able to reach every part of the school community so no students fall through the cracks.

Use a tracker to monitor student enrollment

Schools with high levels of enrollment use a tracker to monitor progress. The tracker does not need to be complicated—a simple spreadsheet in Google Sheets or Excel where the project manager can keep track of who has completed enrollment should suffice. Check enrollment on a monthly basis to stay up to date. [Here](#) we are linking a tracker template to help schools get started.

Leverage the expertise of Esther Woodson (ewoodson@employindy.org)

Esther Woodson is the Director of Indy Achieves, and her primary goal is to increase the number of students enrolling in 21st Century Scholars in Marion County. She is happy to meet individually with schools, speak at events, and provide support as needed to improve program enrollment.

Other Resources

[21st Century Scholars Toolkit from Indy Achieves](#)

Links to promotional videos: ([V1](#)) ([V2](#)) ([V3](#)) ([V4](#))