

Focus on Families!

How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School



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About This Guide and Its Collaborators

This guide represents a collaborative effort across several organizations. As lead partners in the Engaging Families Initiative (EFI), United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB) and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet) wanted to disseminate lessons learned from their 4-year initiative to the broader after school field. Concurrently, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), an EFI partner with a longstanding commitment to engaging families and building the capacity of after school programs, was releasing its new *complementary learning* approach to supporting children's learning and development. This approach recognizes families are key partners with after school programs, schools, and other contexts in which children learn and grow. A partnership between these two efforts made sense. HFRP staff, in their work across the country with 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other after school programs, heard repeated requests for information on how to engage families and recognizes the time is ripe for this guide. EFI's rich local knowledge, coupled with HFRP's national perspective and reputation on family engagement and after school programming, was brought to bear to produce this guide.

To learn more about these agencies visit:



United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB)

uwmb.org

Harvard Family Research Project

hfrp.org

Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet)

bostnet.org

About United Way of Massachusetts Bay

Since 1935, United Way of Massachusetts Bay has brought people and resources together to improve lives and strengthen the neighborhoods of Greater Boston. We believe that children are our region's greatest asset. By helping each child reach his or her full potential, we will build the foundation for a strong, stable region and vibrant economy with the promise of a brighter future for everyone.

United Way is leading change throughout Greater Boston by advocating for and driving public awareness of critical issues, empowering volunteerism, building partnerships across the region, and collaborating with a network of more than 250 partner agencies. The perspective gained through these relationships and the ability to unite and apply resources where they are needed most is a critical role uniquely served by our organization.

In 10 years, Greater Boston will be regarded as the best place in the country to raise a child. We will achieve this vision by helping adults find family-sustaining jobs and affordable housing, by ensuring that basic needs are met, by creating opportunities for youth, and by strengthening the environments that nurture the healthy development of children.



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About Harvard Family Research Project

From our beginning in 1983, Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) mission has been to promote more effective educational practices, interventions, and policies for disadvantaged children and youth. We do this by conducting research and then disseminating it widely through our publications and website. Our work focuses on three areas where we have the expertise, authority, and knowledge to make a difference: out-of-school time programming, family and community involvement in education, and evaluation.

HFRP recognizes that for children to be successful in school and life, there must be an array of learning supports around them. These supports and opportunities, which must reach beyond the school, should be linked and work toward consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children. HFRP calls this network of supports *complementary learning*. Examples of these supports include families, out-of-school time programs, early childhood education programs, universities, and community institutions.

This publication provides guidance on how to create one of the key linkages of *complementary learning*—the connection between after school programs and families.



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About Build the Out-of-School Time Network

Over the past 18 years, Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet) has built a network of resources that advance out-of-school time (OST) program quality and accessibility and opportunities for all children and youth, including those from low-income families and youth with disabilities. BOSTnet addresses the need to enhance and provide access to OST resources by reaching out to three critical audiences:

1. Low- and moderate-income families, who require information about OST services
2. Individual and institutional providers, who want to sustain and grow their programs
3. Local and state policymakers, whose decisions affect the quality and availability of OST resources

BOSTnet reaches out to these audiences in the common goal of ensuring that all families have access to OST opportunities that challenge, inspire, and enrich school-age youth.

The OST programs BOSTnet works with provide opportunities for school-age children and older youth to engage in a range of learning opportunities, including completing homework and building academic skills. BOSTnet's initiatives strengthen OST provider capacities to build stronger programs and improve services to families.



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- Bruce Wall Ministries, Inc.'s Project 21 After School Program
- East Boston YMCA After School Program at the Curtis Guild Elementary School
- Grace Renaissance After School Program (GRASP)
- Greenwood Shalom After School Program
- Hyde Square Task Force After School Program at the Kennedy Elementary School
- Roxbury Presbyterian Church After School Program at Leon de Juda
- Roxbury YMCA After School Program at Blackstone Elementary School
- Roxbury YMCA After School Program at Curley Elementary School
- Twelfth Baptist Church After School Program

The authors would especially like to thank the staff and parents at the Greenwood Shalom After School Program, East Boston YMCA After School Program at the Curtis Guild Elementary School, and Hyde Square Task Force After School Program at the Kennedy Elementary School, who shared their ideas and time during field interviews with HFRP staff to prepare for the profiles for this guide.

The authors would also like to thank the following institutions who partnered with EFI: Boston Museum of Science, Boston Public Schools, New England Aquarium, and Boston Children's Museum.

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The Engaging Families Initiative

The Engaging Families Initiative (EFI) is one of four national Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiatives, which are funded by the Wallace Foundation and focus on improving learning outcomes for children ages 6 to 10 through activities outside traditional school. The goals of EFI are to increase family involvement, engagement, and leadership in children's academic achievement and informal learning. The initiative works with nine Boston-based after school providers that primarily serve Black and Latino students, ages 6 to 10. Over the past 4 years, BOSTnet has provided technical assistance, operational support, and connection to community resources from local organizations. BOSTnet conducts regular meetings for EFI program coordinators to share best practices.

The Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE) has collected data on EFI-affiliated programs and has found that since the inception of EFI, programs have increased their number of parent engagement activities, they have made efforts to reach a linguistically and culturally diverse group of families, and parents and staff are communicating with each other on a greater level. For more information on EFI go to www.bostnet.org or www.uwmb.org/ourwork/efi.htm.



For more information on EFI go to:

Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet)
bostnet.org

United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB)
uwmb.org/ourwork/efi.htm

The Wallace Foundation
wallacefoundation.org

Introduction

“Rochelle Hines is a single parent who works full time and feels burned out. Her daughter, Shakeira, is an energetic and open-minded girl who is willing to get involved in anything. ...When Rochelle began to work longer days, it became very hard to find time to do things with her daughter in the evenings, such as evening trips or dinners (sponsored by the after school program).

That all changed last year, when Rochelle took an evening off and participated in Family Fun Night at the Museum of Science. Rochelle was excited to attend because she and her daughter had never been to the Museum of Science. It was a plus that dinner was served and she didn't have to leave to eat. Rochelle and Shakeira not only spent much-needed time with one another at the event, they also did something new together. While roaming the museum, Rochelle found information about the museum and upcoming family events. She later began to look for information about family events around the city. Now this family [has] set a goal that they can live with forever—to try something different once a month and do more things together, even if it is at home. ...They both feel that the trip to the Museum of Science changed their lives and the way they do things. I hear that they even started cooking dinner together.”*

**—Joao Martins, Director of the YMCA After School Program
at the Curley School in Boston, Massachusetts**

*Sponsored by the Engaging Families Initiative

Introduction

The story of Rochelle Hines illustrates the potential benefits of engaging families in after school activities. Rochelle and Shakeira's special trip to the museum strengthened the parent-child relationship and exposed both child and parent to new learning experiences.

When after school programs build relationships with families and engage them in children's time after school, children, families, schools, and after school programs all stand to benefit.

Partnering with families to support children's education and engaging them in children's activities after school involves a variety of strategies. When practitioners, including teachers and after school providers, think about family engagement, they often think only about activities—like parent classroom volunteering—that are located at the program site and serve the program's aims.¹ But other activities and relationships that occur in children's homes or elsewhere in the community serve parents' interests, needs, and capacities for leadership, and provide opportunities for meaningful engagement, must also be considered. For example, engaging families also can mean providing opportunities for parents to spend time with their children, learn more about children's schooling, receive support with life needs, and participate in program decision making.

Furthermore, family engagement must be considered across children's development. Although families tend to be more engaged when their children are young, engagement with older youth is equally beneficial.² Although this guide offers examples mostly from programs serving elementary-school-aged children, program providers can apply family engagement strategies that are appropriate for each stage of a child's development.



Engaging Families Initiative Family Fun Night 2005: Kenneth Garcia, Jerome Mitchell, and Jerome's grandmother enjoy an evening of learning at Boston's Museum of Science. Photo courtesy of BOSTnet

Introduction

For example, younger children may cherish a surprise visit to the classroom by their parent or a nighttime ritual of book reading. Older youth, on the other hand, may prefer engagement that respects their desire for independence, such as seeing their parents at the after school program only among a group of parents attending a formal event or discussing future college aspirations with their parent.

Such a broad definition of family engagement holds the potential to reach, engage, and support a larger community of families, children, and youth. For the purposes of this guide, the term *family* is meant to acknowledge that many children are raised not just by mothers and fathers, but also by aunts and uncles, grandparents, guardians, and siblings. The term *engagement* is intended to capture a wide range of participation in children's learning, including:

- **Involvement** – This describes activities that a child's caregiver does on a daily basis that impact the child's life. Examples include parenting, advocating for one's child, securing health care and other supports when necessary, signing one's child up for activities or after school programming, communicating with the child's teachers, and helping one's child with homework.
- **Engagement/Interaction** – This describes activities that a child's caregiver does with the child and the other adults who work with the child in school, after school programs, churches, and other settings. Examples include attending parent-teacher meetings, bringing food to a potluck dinner at a church, donating money, helping chaperone a field trip at the child's after school program, and attending a parent workshop.
- **Leadership** – This describes activities that a child's caregiver participates in or leads with others who work with the child or programs (school, church, after school, etc.) that the child participates or has participated in. Examples include organizing a parent workshop or social gathering, participating in a parent-teacher organization in which parents play a significant role, or sitting on the board of the child's after school program.*

Using a multifaceted definition of family engagement suggests that families' participation in their children's learning can move from more basic to more advanced engagement. A program may eventually aim to offer workshops on children's learning or train parents as leaders in education, but they must first develop relationships with families, convey the importance of family involvement, and build a culture that supports families' engagement in education. Using this definition can also help programs assess their own contributions and supports to families as well as areas in need of work.

* This definition is adapted from the Engaging Families Initiative.

Introduction

This guide focuses on engaging families in after school because children learn and grow in a variety of contexts and with the help of many significant adults. When after school programs connect to families, schools, and other community organizations, students experience consistent and continuous environments that nurture their development.

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) calls this approach to thinking about the connection between families and other contexts where children learn and develop *complementary learning*. This approach acknowledges the significant contributions not just of schools, but also of families, after school programs, and other community supports for increasing children's success in learning and in life.³ Complementary learning also recognizes the importance of strong links between these people and settings.

The purpose of this guide is to help after school programs become more effective in their efforts to engage families after school in benefit of children's social development, informal learning, and academic growth. The guide has three sections. Section I presents current research on the benefits and challenges of engaging families after school. Section II describes four strategies that after school programs can use to engage families, drawing from current research and program examples to detail and illustrate these strategies in action. Section III offers in-depth profiles of three after school programs actively working to engage families. As our definition suggests, engaging families is a journey, and practitioners need the skills and tools to track their progress in this work. For this reason, Section IV offers an approach and related tools for collecting information that can improve family engagement efforts. Additional information at the end of the guide includes a list of suggested readings and websites for engaging families.

Program planners and leaders can use this guide to inform the design and implementation of a comprehensive or targeted family engagement component in an after school program. Other program staff can use this guide to gain general ideas and specific practices to apply to their own interactions with families. Finally, people interested in understanding how to improve their family engagement efforts can use the evaluation tools in this guide to conduct a needs assessment and document their practices as they relate to four key engagement strategies.



Why Engage Families?

In a recent survey of urban African American and Latino parents, most parents said that spending more time with their children would help them be better parents. Most also felt that they were doing well as parents but were doing so in the face of multiple challenges in their communities. Furthermore, most parents reported that they had little support beyond their immediate family to help them as caretakers. The study's authors clearly stated the implications of the findings:

“Perhaps the more important message in this study is a call for the broader society to reflect on and rethink how it views and supports parents. ...Instead of leaving them to their own devices, how can we be there for them as trusted friends and allies in the vital task of raising this society's youngest generation to be healthy, caring, and responsible? The answer to these kinds of questions points toward creating communities, organizations, and systems that recognize strengths of parents, regardless of their family composition, cultural background, or other individual differences, and that understand that parenting is best done in the context of a supportive, engaged community.”⁴

According to this view, community settings, such as after school programs, can play a critical role in families' lives. What else does research tell us about engaging families after school? This section of the guide provides the latest research on the benefits and challenges of engaging families.

What are the benefits of engaging families in children's after school time?

Decades of research point to the benefits of family involvement in children's learning. Family involvement in children's education in school and at home has been shown to boost school grades and test scores, improve school attendance, foster social skills, and increase graduation rates and postsecondary education attainment.⁵

More recently, research and evaluation findings are demonstrating the benefits of engaging families in after school time.⁶ Such engagement is associated with:

Increased family involvement in children's education and school

A review of program evaluations in the HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database (see box on page 13) finds that family involvement in after school programs is associated with greater involvement in school events and affairs and increased family assistance with children's homework.⁷

Why Engage Families?

HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database

The HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database contains profiles of out-of-school time (OST) program evaluations. Its purpose is to provide accessible information about previous and current evaluations to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs in the OST field.

Types of Programs Included in the Database

Evaluations in the database meet the following three criteria:

1. The evaluated program or initiative operates during out-of-school time.
2. The evaluation(s) aim to answer a specific evaluation question or set of questions about a specific program or initiative.
3. The evaluated program or initiative serves children between the ages of 5 and 19.

Types of Information Included in the Database

Each profile contains detailed information about the evaluations as well as an overview of the OST program or initiative itself. Web links to actual evaluation reports, where available, are also provided, as are program and evaluation contacts.

How to Use the Database

The database is located in the OST section of the HFRP website at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html. The search mechanism allows users to refine their scan of the profiles to specific program and evaluation characteristics and findings information.

Improved relationships between parents and children

Findings show parents and children argue less and have more trust in one another. One extensive study of 78 after school programs in Massachusetts also found that youth who attend programs with significant levels of parent involvement had improved relations with adults.⁸

Improved implementation and outcomes for after school programs

For example, one evaluation of the Virtual Y programs in New York City found that communicating with families is associated with improved program outcomes.⁹

What are challenges to engaging families through after school programs?

Despite its benefits, engaging families after school can be challenging. Families and program staff both face obstacles in building relationships with each other.

Lack of time

For families, lack of time can pose a real barrier to engagement. After all, many parents seek after school programs because they work, attend school, or have other responsibilities beyond traditional school hours. A recent survey of program coordinators of several 21st Century Community Learning Centers confirms that parents' busy work schedules

Why Engage Families?

inhibit family involvement. Likewise, after school program staff are overextended as they face limited resources and increased demands to demonstrate outcomes to funders. Hence, engaging families may feel like a daunting task in the face of other priorities, such as safety, behavior management, program planning, and budgeting.

Focusing on problems rather than assets

For program staff, interactions with families often focus on families' problems,¹¹ without recognizing families' assets or creating a collaborative environment. Staff may assume that if parents are not visible in the program that they are uninvolved or don't care about their children's learning.¹²

Lack of family engagement programming

Perhaps due to the many challenges they face, the majority of after school programs today lack a family engagement component. A review of 100 after school program evaluations across the nation found that only 27 mentioned family engagement.¹³

Despite these challenges, program documentation and evaluation indicate that after school programs can and do use a variety of strategies to successfully engage families in their children's lives after school. The next section describes four key strategies for engaging families that address the challenges families and after school providers confront. The strategies were developed based on prior research, HFRP field visits to after school programs affiliated with the Engaging Families Initiative (EFI), and outreach to national organizations and websites to cull their promising practices that have been documented in program evaluations and case studies. The strategies are paired with sample activities and grounded by real-life examples.

Promising Practices to Engage Families



A multigenerational family from East Boston attends the Engaging Families Initiative Family Fun Night 2005. Photo courtesy of BOSTnet

This section presents four overarching strategies that after school programs can employ to engage families after school:

- Support families.
- Communicate and build trusting relationships with families.
- Hire and develop a family-focused staff.
- Build linkages across individuals and organizations.

Within each broad strategy, specific activities and ways of relating to families that programs can use to overcome challenges and boost family engagement are discussed and illustrated with examples from real-life practice. The strategies and examples presented in this section are based on information generated during HFRP field staff interviews and site visits to EFI-affiliated programs, a review of the HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database (www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html), a scan of the Promising Practices in Afterschool website (www.afterschool.org), and HFRP's Web-based resource, the Family Involvement Network of Educators (www.finenetwork.org; see box on page 16).

To learn more about these agencies visit:



HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html

Promising Practices in After School
afterschool.org

Family Involvement Network of Educators
finenetwork.org

Promising Practices to Engage Families

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE; www.finenetwork.org) is a Harvard Family Research Project initiative to support people who have a common interest in strengthening partnerships among families, schools, and communities. Through a diverse offering of materials and tools on its website, FINE equips educators and other professionals to partner with families and informs families and communities about leading-edge approaches to full partnership with schools and community-based organizations.

Resources on the FINE website include:

- **Workshop materials** to incorporate into training and conference presentations
- **Research briefs, reports, and papers**
- **Bibliographies** of current family involvement research literature
- **Teaching cases** for teacher training with real-life narratives on difficult home-school-community situations
- **FINE Forum e-newsletter** that features promising practices and practitioner perspectives on themes of interest to the family involvement field
- **Member Insights** in which members exchange opinions and provocative ideas
- **Monthly email announcements** with updates on what's new in the field of family involvement and on the FINE website.

FINE membership is free—to join go to www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Professional standards also reinforce these positive strategies. The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) has issued quality standards for quality school-age care, and family engagement figures prominently in these standards (below).

Professional Standards for Family Engagement in After School

The National AfterSchool Association has developed six standards for quality school-age care.* Two standards, Human Relationships and Administration, offer keys to quality that support family engagement. One of the eight keys laid out in the Human Relationships standard is that “staff and families interact with each other in positive ways” (p.18). Specifically:

- Staff make families feel welcome and comfortable.
- Staff and families treat each other with respect.
- Staff share the languages and cultures of the families they serve and the communities they live in.
- Staff and families work together to make arrivals and departures between home and child care go smoothly.

Four keys in the Administration standard focus on families and communities. “The program builds links to the community” (p. 49), “program policies and procedures are responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families in the community” (p. 66), and “staff support families’ involvement in the program” (p. 45), such that:

- There is a policy that allows family members to visit any time throughout the day.
- Staff offer orientation sessions for new families.
- Staff keep families informed about the program.
- Staff encourage families to give input and to get involved with program events.

Furthermore, “staff, families, and schools share important information to support the well-being of children and youth” (p. 47), such that:

- Program policies require that staff and family members communicate about the child’s well-being.
- Staff, families, and schools work together as a team to set goals for each child, and they work with outside specialists when necessary.
- Staff and families share information about how to support children’s development.
- Staff and families join together to communicate and work with the schools.

*Roman, J. (1998). *The NSACA standards for quality school-age care*. Boston: National AfterSchool Association.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Strategy 1: Support Families

Many of the programs described in this guide embody a philosophy of family support. They know that healthy child development requires strong nurturing families that in turn are nurtured and supported by individuals and institutions within the community.¹⁴ The field of family support has shown that efforts that are truly supportive view families from a strengths-based perspective, are responsive to their needs and interests, and empower parents to act on their own and their children's behalf.¹⁵ Program evaluations point to support and service provision as one way to engage families in their children's learning.¹⁶ Services and activities to support families include parenting workshops, adult education classes, and other support services such as health, housing, and financial support.

Yet family support is more than meeting families' basic needs. After school stakeholders agree that programs need to support and build on the strengths of families. Specifically, programs can do the following:

Focus on families' assets.

Some programs' approaches to family engagement take a deficit perspective, aiming to "save" youth from the negative influences of families or to "cure" families by teaching them about societal and school norms.¹⁷ Although parents can benefit from adult learning opportunities, such as English, GED, and parenting classes, these classes should not be the sole focus of a family engagement program.¹⁸ In fact, some program coordinators have found the term "parenting classes" to be very unpopular with families.¹⁹ Perhaps it is because parents do not want to be perceived only as needing assistance but also as positive contributors to their children's development.

The Math and Parent Partnerships Program (MAPPS), which began in Phoenix, Arizona, takes a strengths-based approach to parent education. MAPPS offers workshops that address parents' desire to gain new math skills in order to help their children with schoolwork. Workshops simultaneously appreciate parents' knowledge base and offer them leadership opportunities. Specifically, parents' knowledge and lived experience with math are explored in the workshops. For example, building tables becomes a way to explore ideas of geometry while drawing on families' own expertise, such as construction and mosaic tile work. Parents are also supported to later lead the workshop for other parents.²⁰

Consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served, in addition to one's own programmatic needs and mission.²¹

This may be accomplished in part by offering a wide variety of opportunities for families to be engaged. For example, in the Greenwood Shalom After School Program profiled in section III, trips to museums and theaters appeal to parents seeking enrichment opportunities, while math and literacy workshops appeal to parents who want support for

How to Support Families

- Focus on families' assets.
- Consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served.
- Solicit family input.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

helping their children with homework. This range of activities and strategies helps the program reach more families.

Addressing families' most critical needs may also be of great value, even if it seems to be outside the scope of the program. Capital Kids is an after school initiative in Columbus, Ohio, serving 2,800 children in 35 sites. The four initial pilot sites serve children and families in the most vulnerable neighborhoods. Many of the children come from female-headed, African American families living below the poverty level. Many are homeless. The program participates in a Take Home Grocery Program that engages parents and children in a fun learning activity while meeting families' critical needs. The Mid-Ohio FoodBank delivers a large supply of food to Capital Kids bimonthly. After the program allocates its share for daily snacks, enough groceries remain to send some home with every family. Families come to the after school site to pick up a box of groceries, and sorting and distributing the food becomes an interactive activity for children and parents.²² In an evaluation of the program, 95% of parents mentioned the food bank as a valuable service offered.²³

Solicit family feedback on current programming and implement their ideas for new programming.

Ideally, after school programs will ask families what they think about the program, how they can contribute to the program, and how they can be served in return. By including the ideas of families in programming and improving what families think could be better, after school program staff may see improved program outcomes.²⁴ Families' ideas and feedback can be sought regarding the services programs provide to parents, how the program operates, and the program curriculum and activities for children.²⁵ Such ideas can be gathered through surveys, focus group discussions, one-on-one meetings, and even suggestion boxes. This strategy allows families to feel that they can have a role in shaping program goals and activities.

Parent Services Project (PSP), a family support organization in San Rafael, California, worked with several local elementary schools to increase family engagement and leadership. PSP hosted a series of parent meetings to invite reflection and visioning about children's learning. Parents in one school identified safety and homework assistance as key issues and came up with the idea for a homework club to address these issues. Over the course of 3 years, with support from PSP, this group of parents shared their concerns, developed a vision, successfully applied for a grant, implemented a homework club, and gained valuable leadership skills. As parent Alma Martinez explained,

Easy Things You Can Do to Support Families

- Have a parent suggestion box.
- Conduct formal and informal surveys about the program on a regular basis.
- Host parent forums or discussion groups that allow parents to meet one another and discuss their concerns about child rearing and other family matters.
- Strike up conversations with parents that focus on them. Give them time to talk about themselves instead of their children.
- Work with the children to plan and host a family appreciation event.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

“Parents need this kind of [leadership] support to discover who they are and what they can do.”²⁶ This example shows how from program inception families can not only give feedback, but lead the design and implementation of after school opportunities for children.

How to Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

- Communicate frequently and in positive ways.
- Be there for families.
- Provide leadership opportunities for families.

Strategy 2: Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

Successful family engagement efforts depend in part on the level of trust families feel for program staff. Communication is a building block of family involvement in part because it can help build trust with families. Letting families know that they are welcome and keeping two-way lines of communication open are fundamental communication strategies.²⁷ Using a variety of communication strategies can help reach a larger group of parents, as well as allow parents to discuss whatever concerns they have, whether or

not they are program related. Many programs may never achieve 100% participation in workshops and events because of parents’ busy schedules, a common challenge. However, through telephone calls or letters, programs can send a general message that families are welcome. A communication log can help programs track and improve their communication efforts (see box on page 21 for a sample log).

Once basic communication has been established and families begin to feel more trust toward the program, staff can begin to foster deeper kinds of family engagement and parent leadership. The strategies below focus on basic communication as well as more elaborate practices to solicit families’ input regarding program governance and leadership.

Communicate frequently and in positive ways.

Program evaluations reveal that communication about program mission, goals, and strategies are one way to engage families. This information can be conveyed through orientations, open house events, newsletters, email, and participation in class activities. Communication can also happen more informally.²⁸

At the Hyde Square Task Force After School Program profiled in section III, staff members talk to parents about children’s progress at parent meetings, at pick-up time, and over the phone. Speaking to parents on a daily basis makes for a warm, welcoming environment. All EFI coordinators find that informal conversations and sharing good news about their children make parents feel valued and connected. Having gregarious staff who feel comfortable with parents can also help build staff–family relationships.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Public School 253 in Brooklyn, New York, which serves a large immigrant population, offers an after school program with the support of the YMHA/YWHA. Language barriers prevented the administration and teachers from connecting with families. In response to the communication problem, the after school program hired staff who reflect the backgrounds of the students and relied on a variety of communication strategies, including flyers, telephone calls, and conversations during pick-up time. The program has an open door policy that allows parents to discuss any concerns with the coordinator. Program staff act as mediators when parents and school staff are having problems, and the staff teach parents how to advocate for themselves to the school. Staff are also trained on how to “smile and chat with parents to encourage openness.” The school now relies on the after school program to advertise events and communicate with families. Teachers go to program staff to learn more about children and their families, which teachers find particularly useful when they are addressing students’ challenging behavior.²⁹

Tracking Communication With Families

A communication log can help after school programs track their communications with families, especially as it promotes families’ involvement in the after school program and their child’s broader learning. Programs can use a log to assess how often they are reaching out to families, the nature of their interactions with families, and with whom they are communicating.

For example, program staff might log communications with families that meet the following criteria:

- Interactions that last over 5 minutes
- In-depth individual conversations (but not brief chats at pick-up)
- One-on-one meetings with families (but not group flyers or emails)
- Personal emails and phone calls (but not event reminders)
- Personal letters or notes (but not calls regarding attendance)

For each interaction meeting these criteria, program staff might provide the following information:

- Date of contact
- Name of child
- Family member contacted
- Staff member who contacted
- Type of contact
- Length of contact
- Reason of contact
- Nature of contact

Reasons for contact might include:

- Providing information about the child’s progress
- Asking for family’s opinion/feedback
- Discussing family strategies to support child’s learning/development at home
- Talking about child’s problems with behavior, academics, emotions, etc.
- Other reasons for communication not listed

The nature of contact might include what was shared or talked about during the contact, such as family issues at home or emotional problems that the child was experiencing. For confidentiality purposes, this information does not need to be very detailed in the log.*

*This sample communication log was adapted from the Engaging Families Initiative.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Easy Things You Can Do to Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

- Make a regular effort to share positive news with each parent about their child.
- Welcome parents. Greet them in the front of the room or building when they arrive. Always call parents by name and make a point of smiling.
- Offer informal social events or activities that are fun, such as craft nights, potluck dinners, and weekend trips to museums, theaters, and other cultural institutions.
- Conduct periodic family orientations to familiarize new families with the program. Ask current program family members to help you present the materials.

Be there for families.

Programs can be in a position to offer families' personal support and need not limit their communication with families to program matters or children's progress. At the Greenwood Shalom After School Program described in section III, parents talk about their personal concerns and life challenges, such as relationship problems, immigration troubles, and financial concerns, knowing that staff will listen, provide advice if appropriate, or direct them to the proper resources. Likewise, the Beacons community centers in New York City provide formal support groups and counseling for parents in addition to their programs for youth.³⁰

Camp Success is a multisite after school program in inner-city Huntsville, Alabama. The program partners with Second Mile, a family engagement organization, to support family events and activities. Camp Success offers a variety of classes, including a GED program and presentations on nutrition, drug awareness, and social services. In addition to their adult-education approach to family outreach, parents attend a Family Night Share

Talk at each site to share experiences and discuss topics such as first-time home purchasing. Later in the evening, children and parents eat dinner together and participate in a family activity.³¹

Provide leadership opportunities for parents in order to build community.

Parents are likely to feel more investment in and ownership of a program if given the chance to participate in decision making. Parent councils and governing boards can provide mechanisms for this kind of participation. However, not all programs feel ready to implement these kinds of partnerships with families, and several programs have yet to realize parent leadership goals. Many EFI program coordinators, for example, want to form parent councils but cite competing time demands as barriers to realizing this more advanced type of family engagement.

The Bob Lanier Center for Educational, Physical and Cultural Development has partnered with Poplar Academy in Buffalo to serve 200 students, predominantly African American, in an after school program. All parents must sign on to the program's board, and 10 parents are recruited to form the Core Members Committee. The core

Promising Practices to Engage Families

members serve as the liaison to the board and schedule monthly meetings to discuss important issues. Core members have several responsibilities, including finding parent volunteers and scheduling speakers. The inception of this after school board has spurred many other positive changes: The school itself has formed a parent–teacher organization, teachers report that a higher percentage of parents are attending parent–teacher conferences, and students’ behavioral problems have decreased.³²

Strategy 3: Hire and Develop a Family-Focused Staff

Staffing is a critical component of any program; without positive family–staff relationships, even the best-intentioned program will not succeed. Increased involvement, engagement, and leadership of families depends on the initiative and approach of staff. Welcoming families requires staff sensitivity toward families developed through staff’s prior experience or professional development and often someone who will make a deliberate effort to connect with families.³⁴

Designate a staff member who has, as part of his or her duties, responsibility for engaging families in the program.

A study of 21st Century Community Learning Centers found that programs with a designated family involvement staff member were more likely to encourage families’ support in students’ learning, offer services and classes to families, and have families contributing to program governance and leadership, compared to other programs.³⁵ However, Donna Walker James and Glenda Partee warn that a dedicated staff member should not serve as an excuse for other staff to not work with families.³⁶

Understanding that engaging families requires time and planning, EFI allocated funds for programs to have staff time dedicated to working with families. An Outreach Specialist line item was created midway in program budgets so that sites could compensate staff for conducting family outreach, assessing family needs, and planning for family social activities and learning opportunities. The goal of these concrete changes was to enable after school program staff to be more intentional in their work with families. Programs could either create a part-time position for a parent to reach out to families or increase hours for part-time staff members to do this work, which in turn helps reduce staff turnover.

Hire staff with family engagement experience.

When hiring staff, ask if they have experience working with families. At the Hyde Square Task Force After School Program, one tutor, who has extensive experience in family empowerment training, also serves as the parent liaison. She tutors children, but when staff need to discuss concerns with parents, she also offers her assistance.

How to Hire and Develop a Family-Focused Staff

- Designate a staff member with family engagement responsibility.
- Hire staff with family engagement experience.
- Hire staff who share parents’ experiences and backgrounds.
- Foster professional development.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Easy Things You Can Do to Develop a Family-Focused Staff

- When interviewing potential staff, consider candidates' experiences working with families and ask them how after school programs can engage families.
- Invite a family engagement expert from a local K–12 school, university, family support agency, or guidance center to speak to staff.
- Offer programs, such as exercise classes, first aid courses, and art workshops, for both parents and staff.

Hire staff who share parents' perspectives and back-

grounds. Having one or more staff members who are parents themselves can bring a valuable perspective to family outreach and communication efforts. Recruiting parents as regular volunteers can send a similarly positive signal to other families. Consider one parent at the Greenwood Shalom After School Program who makes use of her accounting background to volunteer as the program bookkeeper. She describes the program as “a family” and plans to continue volunteering even after her son stops attending. Her lasting commitment to the program is obvious and appreciated by staff. Likewise, hiring staff who share families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can foster cultural congruence and remove language barriers.

The Somali Community Services of Seattle's Child Development Program is an after school and weekend tutoring and family support program specifically

targeting children and families from Somalia. Though recruiting teachers from the community is a challenge, Somali teachers are central to the program's strength. Parents feel that the Somali staff understand the challenges their children face in a new educational system. The teachers help parents overcome language barriers by linking families to schools. During Saturday education classes, parents learn how to use resources provided by schools, such as counselors and health care. The program also invites speakers to talk about immigration services and other relevant topics.³⁷

Foster professional development through a network of after school programs committed to family engagement. After school programs can serve as a resource for one another as they foster family engagement in learning and development after school. Through regular meetings and conversations, programs can share success stories and offer suggestions for overcoming obstacles to family engagement.

The Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiative of New Haven, Connecticut, has brought together community organizations to promote children's and families' learning at home and in the community. Participating organizations include museums, parks, libraries, and recreational centers. Key staff and volunteers, including parents, hold meetings every other month to discuss best practices and ways to improve learning programs.³⁸

Promising Practices to Engage Families

How to Link With Individuals and Organizations

- Collaborate with local organizations.
- Act as a liaison between families and schools.
- Help parents develop advocacy skills.

Strategy 4: Build Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations

As the complementary learning concept proposes, partnering with community organizations and working with schools benefits a program's relationships with families and fosters meaningful engagement. Program coordinators who meet with school administrators and teachers can better express school concerns and children's academic needs to parents. Program coordinators can also accompany families to school meetings, serving as advocates, mediators, or transla-

tors. Programs can connect with community organizations to build a strong network of community supports for children and families. Janyce A. Justice, former program director at the Twelfth Baptist Church After School Program, states that the program has been able "to expose our families to opportunities that they wouldn't necessarily participate in as a family" through linkages with the community.

Collaborate with local organizations to boost family engagement.

Programs can partner with local cultural institutions to plan family outings and field trips. Other community organizations can provide resources and ideas programs need to engage families. For programs that work with an ethnically diverse population, seeking information and advice from community organizations serving ethnic populations can help program staff connect with families.³⁹ Also, if a program does not have the capacity to sponsor family workshops, they can refer families to organizations that welcome community members to events. Many programs benefit from community partnerships to improve programming.⁴⁰

At Kimball Elementary School in Seattle, one parent initiated a relationship with Jack Straw Productions, an audio arts center. The school serves a bilingual population, and with the help of Jack Straw, families created an after school project integrating oral histories and technology. Students and their parents wrote family stories in English and Spanish and posted them on a website with audio accompaniment. The final product is a bright and celebratory collection of the children and their families' cultural backgrounds.⁴¹

Act as a liaison between families and schools.

After school program staff can accompany families to school meetings to strengthen the linkages between home, school, and program. At a Capital Kids program site, the director escorts children from their school classrooms to the community-based after school program a block away. She uses the opportunity to check in with classroom teachers about children's homework, school progress, and any specific concerns. This allows her to better articulate school and after school experiences to parents who are unable to go to the school due to their work schedules.⁴²

Promising Practices to Engage Families

The Transition to Success Pilot Project (TSPP) in Boston provided after school programming for elementary and middle school students who did not perform well on standardized tests, and emphasized family involvement in education. The TSPP Program Coordinator facilitated communication among each child's teachers, parents, and after school staff. A large majority of the parents felt that the program improved their child's schoolwork and understanding of basic skills. Parents reported greater involvement in their child's school, increased communication with teachers, and better understanding of their child's schoolwork due to the program.⁴³

Help parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.

After school programs are in a unique position to help families navigate schools and develop parents' self-advocacy skills. First, program staff may see parents more often

than classroom teachers do and, as a result, develop close relationships with parents. Second, after school programs can serve as a neutral ground where families learn how to deal with the troubles they encounter in school systems.

Easy Things You Can Do to Link With Individuals and Organizations

- Encourage parent leadership by inviting parents to help you locate resources in the community to support program activities, whether they be field trip sites, philanthropic organizations, or support services for families.
- Ask a classroom teacher to talk to parents about grade-level expectations and developmentally appropriate activities for children in different subject areas.
- Invite a family advocate to offer workshops on how parents can obtain the services their children need and how they can develop relationships with schools.
- Offer to attend parent-teacher conferences with families who feel that they need support in discussing their concerns and asking teachers questions.

The Children's Aid Society's After School Program at Public School 5 in New York City has made great efforts to reach out to families, most of whom are Spanish-speaking. Many of the parents have great respect for education but often felt unwelcome by the school. The program has implemented initiatives to help after school parents become advocates for their children's education, including Parent Day visits to the program and regular school-day classrooms. The program has also hosted an Expo Night—a biannual exhibition of students' art and enrichment work. Also, parent leadership workshops led by the program have taught parents about the school system, academic standards, and how to become involved in school leadership. Parents have told staff members that they now feel more empowered to advocate for their children.⁴⁴



Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

This section details the family engagement efforts of three after school programs in the Boston area and illustrates ways in which programs can engage families.* Each profile highlights engagement strategies from section II in context, showing how an actual program with specific needs, strengths, and goals, implements and benefits from certain strategies to engage families:

- A profile of the Greenwood Shalom After School Program highlights the strategy of supporting families, both formally and informally, to help families engage in their children's lives and learning and to foster their own well-being as adults.
- A profile of the Hyde Square Task Force After School Program at the Kennedy Elementary School highlights the strategies of communicating with families and designating staff to work with families.
- A profile of the East Boston YMCA After School Program at the Curtis Guild Elementary School highlights the strategy of building linkages between the program, families, school, and other community organizations.

After school providers interested in carrying out a specific strategy to engage families, can read these program profiles to learn about concrete engagement practices that they might adapt to their own situations.

Greenwood Shalom After School Program: Supporting Families

The Greenwood Shalom After School Program operates in the basement of a church, which is located in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood and has a large West Indian congregation. The program is affiliated with the Black Ministerial Alliance, a larger network of Black churches, and bases its mission on the traditional role of the Black church in supporting and strengthening families. The program serves 43 students from kindergarten to 10th grade. The students are African American, West Indian, Cape Verdean, and Latino and come from low-income to middle-income homes. The program

*The three programs featured in this section are all part of the Engaging Families Initiative (EFI), described in the Acknowledgements section. EFI focuses on engaging the families of children between the ages of 6 and 10 years, although many of the programs also serve younger and older children. We selected these three EFI programs for case studies based on their strong and established engagement efforts, as well as their collective representation of key organizational and racial/ethnic groups. The three programs are all licensed care programs, operating in several inner-city neighborhoods of Boston and serving primarily low-income Black and Latino children and their families. To create the program profiles, HFRP field staff conducted two site visits to each program, in-person interviews with the program coordinator and a staff member from each program, in-person interviews with a parent from two of the three programs, and a review of program evaluation data collected by the Intercultural Center for Research in Education. Program directors reviewed a draft of their program's profile for accuracy.

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

provides homework support, computer instruction, arts and crafts, and literacy lessons. More than a third of the students receive special education services at school, and two speech and language therapists work with students in reading and math literacy at the program. Twenty paid staff work at the program, along with volunteers from churches and a local university.

Program at a Glance: Greenwood Shalom

Strategies to support families:

- Supporting family involvement in children's schooling
- Supporting family involvement in children's broader development
- Supporting parents' well-being and education

Setting: Church**Population served:** African American, West Indian, Cape Verdean, Latino**Number of children enrolled:** 43**Number of core staff:** 6**Age range of children:** K–10th grade**Content:** Homework, literacy, computers, arts and crafts

At the end of the day, everyone at the program, children and adults, stands in a circle for sharing and reflection. Parents also can be seen lingering to talk casually with staff. There is a great deal of light joking and discussion among staff members and parents that demonstrates the comfortable nature of their relationships. As one parent said, "Even if I have a problem at home, I can go and talk to them."

The director's definition of family engagement reflects a holistic approach to families and emphasizes the multiple roles that parents play in their children's lives. Greenwood Shalom's family engagement program is designed to support families' involvement in their children's lives beyond school, and the program offers workshops and informal support for parents' own needs and concerns. In addition to the on-site educational support they provide children, the staff members make a point of connecting with every child's school, a task not easily undertaken.

Supporting Family Involvement in Children's Schooling

Parents report satisfaction with the program, particularly its academic assistance, and report improvement in their children's school performance. The program increases family engagement in school partly through a parent advocacy and education component. According to the director, a retired teacher of the Boston Public School system, many "parents don't know their rights," so the program holds workshops on how to advocate for children at school. The program also offers parent workshops on the district curriculum and on how to encourage academic learning at home.

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

The director and staff coordinator also offer to accompany parents to any school meeting regarding their child's performance. They are often met with resistance by schools, but as former teachers, the director and site coordinator recognize that parents often do not understand the school district's policies and need assistance. The director also obtains the students' records with parents' consent so that the program is aware of each child's performance and the services he or she receives.

The program also offers one-on-one help to parents whose children are struggling. This help is not always well received by parents, especially when it pertains to special education matters. As a staff member explains, a parent may be "in denial" that their child needs additional help when approached by a concerned staff member. The director responds to such resistance by reassuring parents that the staff has his or her child's best interest in mind. Staff members are also patient and respectful in these circumstances. They are sensitive to families' concerns and viewpoints and discuss children's needs when the opportunities arise, rather than constantly approaching parents about a problem with their child.

Supporting Family Involvement in Children's Broader Development

The program offers many opportunities for families to be involved in their children's cultural, social, emotional, and physical welfare. Bimonthly workshops, events, and trips for children and families often extend beyond children's school education. Workshops and events, which are well attended even on the coldest nights, have included information on asthma, doll-making lessons, setting boundaries with children, picnics, and Thanksgiving dinner. The program has planned apple-picking field trips and visits to the theater. The director feels that the trips allow parents who are "stretched to the limit" to spend time with their children without "the other kinds of anxiety of fixing supper and getting to work on time or doing overtime." The director schedules such group activities in advance to allow parents to plan ahead and enjoy special activities with their children. Furthermore, the director feels that the trips provide families with experiences they may otherwise not have, as many children in the program have never explored areas and cultural institutions beyond their own neighborhoods.

Supporting Parents' Well-Being and Education

The director finds that the biggest success they have in family engagement is that parents are "trusting us enough to let us into their lives and tell us really what's going on." Parents come to staff to discuss a variety of personal matters, including immigration, relationship troubles, child custody, and finances. The program staff have expertise in working with families on a multitude of life matters and offer emotional support to them in times of need. One teacher sums up this approach in her advice to other after school programs, which is "just listen."

The program fulfills its goal of supporting families through other means as well. Staff members use the program's connections to other community organizations to refer families to appropriate services when needed. The program also holds information sessions for parents interested in attending college and even helps parents register to vote.

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

Hyde Square Task Force After School Program at the Kennedy Elementary School: Communicating With Families and Designating Staff to Work With Families

Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF), a Boston-based multi-issue community organization, sponsors an after school program at the Kennedy Elementary School for first through fourth graders, in addition to its work on youth organizing and community development. The after school program has operated in the Kennedy Elementary School in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston for the last 10 years and enrolls 40 children, almost all of whom attend the host school and are of Latino heritage. The program provides homework support and instruction in the arts and literacy. The director is the only full-time staff, but 14 part-time tutors and a parent liaison work at the program. The program has a great deal of structure and keeps students occupied, whether they are working with an adult or doing their homework together. The students have playful and relaxed interactions with the tutors, many of whom are high school and college students. The director reports high levels of family engagement and has a clear commitment to families and communities. In interviews, program staff describe two key ingredients for engaging families: communicating with parents and having a competent and sensitive parent liaison.

Program at a Glance: Hyde Square Task Force

Strategies to communicate with families and build staff capacity:

- Communicating with parents about their concerns
- Communicating with parents about the program
- Finding an experienced parent liaison
- Locating professional development for staff

Setting: Elementary school

Population served: Latino

Number of children enrolled: 40

Number of core staff: 4

Age range of children: first–fourth grade

Content: Homework, literacy, arts

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

Communicating With Parents About Their Concerns

Letting families know that their opinions and concerns matter is an important basis for forming trusting relationships. The program director articulates this as one aspect of the program's broad and empowering vision of family engagement. In keeping with HSTF's organizing agenda, the director describes the importance of families understanding that "they have a voice in the happenings of the after school program." For example, during parent conferences, staff members ask parents if they are satisfied with the program and what they would like to see the program do with their child. The director explains that parental input is considered when deciding on what instructional support to give a child. The director and parent liaison also describe communicating frequently and openly with parents and believe that this increases parent attendance at events and improves parent-child relationships. One parent compared the program to a "family" because families and staff communicate with each other regularly.

Communicating With Families About the Program

Familiarizing families with the program is another key element of communication and a high priority for HSTF. Every family is given an individual orientation to the after school program when their child enrolls. During the orientation, the family receives a parent handbook and learns about the program's rules and procedures. The program also features a family bulletin board with four distinct areas of information: staff profiles, a calendar of program events, resources and workshops in the geographic community, and news from HSTF. The director is committed to keeping families abreast of community events and encourages their involvement in campaigns run by another part of HSTF. The program's relationship with its umbrella organization can serve as a catalyst for families' involvement in the community beyond the after school program.

Finding an Experienced Parent Liaison

An experienced parent liaison can draw from his or her repertoire to communicate and build relationships with families. Before coming to the after school program, the parent liaison at the HSTF after school program worked with families in a variety of parent empowerment programs at the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. The parent liaison's experience working with families who struggle with emotional and financial concerns has increased her sensitivity in approaching after school families. In fact, she believes that how staff members approach parents strongly influences parents' participation. Though she is not Latina herself and struggles with Spanish, the liaison has found other ways to connect with parents. She makes sure to have face-to-face daily contact with nearly every parent who picks up his or her child. She is also a parent herself, which she believes gives her an empathetic understanding of parents' concerns. At the time of the interview, she was planning a workshop for parents on how to promote family bonds through communication and activities.

The liaison's extensive experience may explain why she is willing to broach matters with parents that others might avoid. For example, when the liaison believed that a

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

stepfather was disciplining his child in an unproductive way, she approached him as a fellow parent, describing similar challenges she had faced in disciplining her own child and offering suggestions for how he might approach his son differently. The stepfather was very receptive to her advice, which the other staff members did not expect.

The parent liaison also believes that when children feel respected and loved by program staff, families will be more likely to support the after school program and staff. In an interview, one parent confirmed the program's respect for children by discussing how her daughter likes how she is treated by program staff.

Locating Professional Development for Staff

When working with families, it is important that staff demonstrate respect and humanity. In addition to hiring a skilled liaison, the after school program hones these staff qualities through professional development opportunities. For example, the staff recently planned a Family Night event that featured cooperative and family games. In order to prepare for the event, the director contacted Peace Games, a national program that promotes safer communities through youth education, to train the staff on how to facilitate the games.

East Boston YMCA After School Program at the Curtis Guild Elementary School: Building Linkages

East Boston YMCA After School Program at the Curtis Guild Elementary School is located in a section of Boston that was for many years a predominately Italian community but is now also home to a significant number of Latino and North African families. The after school program enrolls students from the host school and schools in the surrounding areas. The program serves 75 children ages 5 through 13, and separates children into three groups by grade (K–first grade, first–third grade, and third–sixth grade). Each group has its own space for work and play. Students also engage in activities in the music classroom, library, and computer room. The program employs 10 people, but some staff members also work in the school, including the program coordinator. This is a program where adults have a relaxed rapport with the children; an observer can see children and adults joking with one another and playing games. Children engage in a variety of activities from playing basketball to reading books, from doing homework to working on computers.

Linking With Program Families

Program staff connect with families in multiple ways. In an example that represents both linkage and communication, staff engage in frequent informal conversations with parents. As one after school teacher says, staff members “love” to have parents come to their rooms and chat awhile. The coordinator also manages to talk to a few parents every day at pick-up time. Both the coordinator and teachers give positive news and updates to parents, and feel such feedback is important to fostering relationships with families. Also, parent–staff conferences occur on an as-needed basis. The coordinator

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

Program At A Glance: East Boston YMCA

Strategies to communicate with families and build staff capacity:

- Linking with program families
- Linking with the host school and its families
- Linking families to other community organizations

Setting: Elementary school

Population served: Latino, North African

Number of children enrolled: 75

Number of core staff: 8

Age range of children: K–sixth grade

Content: Homework, literacy, science, math, arts, computers, and sports

notes that even the youngest staff member is able to connect and communicate with families, using her gregarious personality to make parents feel comfortable. Parents also volunteer at the program and are welcome to observe classrooms.

Linking With the Host School and Its Families

Lead staff members hold multiple professional and personal roles, which contributes to a close working relationship between the after school program and its host school. The school principal sends his child to the after school program, so he holds both a school leadership and after school parent view. Also, the after school program coordinator, an employee of the YMCA, often covers for the school secretary when she is at lunch. These dual roles facilitate a myriad of connections. The school principal and after school staff codesign the after school curriculum, which highlights the school's curriculum and focus on standardized test preparation. Based on their close relationship, the coordinator felt comfortable telling the principal—who prefers a strong academic focus for the after school program—that the schedule was too rigid and academic-focused, and the students were not enjoying the program. Together they changed the schedule so that children would have more time to explore enrichment topics.

The relationship between the school and after school program also helps link families across both contexts and as such is a good example of complementary learning. The program has been able to use a corner of the school gym to display family resources, to hold meetings, and soon to offer computers. The coordinator also translates parent–teacher meetings for parents who speak Spanish. Parents who see the coordinator in the school office know that she is affiliated with the after school program and feel comfortable telling her their concerns and asking her to facilitate meetings with teachers. Teachers also rely on the coordinator and will often tell her what academic services the students need.

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

The program does not limit its family engagement efforts to its own families. Rather, events such as International Food Night are open to all families in the community, including other parents of children in the school. Though the program's responsibility is to the families of the after school program first, as a YMCA, the program does not distinguish family participation in events and activities between after school and non-after school families. The coordinator, who is bilingual, teaches an English as a second language class twice a week for parents whose children attend the school whether or not their children attend the after school program. The coordinator views her relationships with these other parents as opportunities to expand community.

Linking Families to Other Community Organizations

The program's YMCA affiliation places it in a unique position to connect with a diverse group of families and community organizations. The program advertises workshops and events for parents offered by YMCAs in other locations. The program offers workshops for parents to support children's academics and refers parents who want or need such services to other resources beyond what the program provides.



Greater Boston YMCA staff member with a parent. Photo courtesy of BOSTnet

Profiles of Programs That Engage Families

Tips for Designing a Family Engagement Component: Lessons From the Engaging Families Initiative

The following goals, strategies, and structures, developed by BOSTnet for the Engaging Families Initiative for use with its programs and families, may help other programs plan and reflect on their own family engagement efforts.

Consider setting the following *goals* for after school providers:

- Develop “action plans” that are sustainable and support objectives of your lead organization, including assessing parent needs and reducing barriers to parent involvement.
- Develop consistent communication with families in order to exchange information about their children’s interests and needs at home and school and during out-of-school time.
- Increase the levels of family involvement, engagement, and leadership opportunities at after school programs.
- Increase utilization of community organizations and resources that support children’s out-of-school time learning and family engagement.
- Increase awareness of school calendar and activities that would complement what happens in the school day.

Consider setting the following *goals* for families:

- Increase familiarity and utilization of cultural institutions and other community organizations in support of children’s informal learning.
- Increase understanding of school expectations, opportunities, and resources available to parents through the school system.
- Increase engagement in children’s informal learning.

Consider employing *strategies* that help providers engage families after school:

- Connect with community partners to plan training for staff, host family nights, and provide resources for after school programs.
- Identify and develop needed resource materials such as strategy tip sheets, communication logs, and action planning sheets for program use.

Consider putting helpful *structures* in place to facilitate family engagement:

- Form an advisory board that includes administrative representatives of relevant agencies.
- Hold regular monthly meetings to coordinate project activities and assess progress on an ongoing basis.



Using Evaluation to Improve Family Engagement Efforts

Evaluation is an essential process for any program that would like to improve or assess its program strategies. Evaluation provides a systematic self-assessment of family engagement practices that can serve to strengthen and improve the program's connection with families. However, like most other program aspects, there is no one best way to evaluate family engagement. After school programs should select an evaluation approach that helps them to answer their most pressing questions, based on the information needed to make program improvements and meet funders' requirements. For example, an after school program whose mission includes a goal to build support and promote communication with families might document the frequency and type of communication its staff has with family members, as well as the opportunities the program provides for informal dialogue with family members (see sample communication log on page 21). Similarly, a program aiming to strengthen family-school-youth relationships might interview school staff, families, and youth to determine the degree of continuity these stakeholders perceive among the home, school, and after school programs.

Despite the variation in how after school programs are evaluating family involvement practices, there are some basic evaluation approaches that can help programs collect information to better understand how to serve and engage the families of the youth that participate in their programs. While a program's information needs will determine the evaluation approach it chooses, thinking carefully about each of the four strategies for family engagement laid out in this guide allows the program to broaden its scope of inquiry and study those aspects of family involvement that are most relevant to its programming.

Drawing on HFRP's previous work in after school program evaluation, this section of the guide offers some basic evaluation advice for programs interested in better understanding their families' engagement levels and interests and in reflecting on their current family engagement practices.⁴⁵ First, information on conducting a needs assessment is provided. Next, the guide describes how to document program services in each of the four key family engagement strategies. This section ends with an evaluation tool that can be adapted to individual program needs.

Needs Assessment

In the context of a needs assessment, *need* is defined as "the gap between the problem and the existing efforts, resources, and programs to deal with the need."⁴⁶ When assessing needs, a program must acknowledge the services already available and identify those that could potentially be of help if provided to the youth and families

Using Evaluation to Improve Family Engagement Efforts

participating in the after school program. It is equally important to identify the strengths of the families and communities the program serves and assess the ways in which these strengths can be capitalized on for maximum benefit to program participants. A needs assessment to better understand the needs of families could inform four areas:

1. How are families already engaged in their children's after school program?
2. How are families' needs being met through the after school program?
3. How could families' and youth's needs be addressed by engaging families in after school programs or, more broadly, in children's out-of-school time?
4. What are the strengths of families and the community and how can these strengths be harnessed?

After school programs can use several methods to carry out a needs assessment, including interviewing and surveying families about how they want to be engaged in their children's time outside of school. Programs can also interview and survey other community members, businesses, cultural organizations, and religious associations. Furthermore, other youth-serving organizations may provide valuable information about how they engage families and what they perceive the community needs. Although needs assessments are commonly associated with programs just starting to serve youth and their families, they can be conducted at any time in a program's development when staff members want to step back and assess the evolving needs and capabilities of participants and their families. Families can also be involved in continuous assessment and improvement of program offerings.

Service Documentation

After school programs may document their services to gather valuable information about the frequency, content, and quality of program activities offered in each of the four dimensions of family engagement. Programs can then report these data to multiple stakeholders, such as program staff, funders, parents, and community members. Many funders, including the U.S. Department of Education through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, require that after school programs provide documentation of services. However, even programs whose funders have no such requirement can benefit from systematically assessing and describing the services they offer. Family involvement services and activities may be documented and measured as part of a larger effort to document all after school services.

The questions that after school programs can use to guide the documentation of their family engagement services relate to the kind of family involvement that the program practices. On the following pages are some service documentation questions to guide after school programs in documenting their family engagement services in each of the four areas outlined in section II. Note that the items preceded by an arrow indicate examples of the types of responses.

Using Evaluation to Improve Family Engagement Efforts

1. Support Families

a. Support Services

- What types of services do you offer to support families?
 - Assistance with parenting
 - GED classes
 - Counseling services
 - Food sent home with children
- What are the attendance rates for these supports, and do they vary by activity?

b. Program/Staff Accessibility to Parents

- What opportunities are provided to families to give program feedback?
 - Parent satisfaction surveys
- Are parents provided opportunities for leadership/decision-making roles?
 - Parent advisory boards
- How do program staff make themselves available/accessible so that families feel comfortable approaching them with questions/concerns?
 - For programs serving non-English speakers, efforts made to provide program communication in families' native language

2. Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships With Families

a. Events/Activities to Engage Families

- What type of family events/activities do you host to engage parents with the program?
 - Family dinners
 - Youth presentations of their work/accomplishments
 - Program orientation
 - Meetings
 - Open houses
 - Family math or science nights
- How many of these events/activities do you host each year?
- What are the attendance rates at these events/activities on average?

b. Program Communication With Parents

- How often do program staff communicate with parents about:
 - Their child's needs, interests, or progress?
 - Parents' own needs or interests?
 - Program mission, goals, and strategies?
 - Program activities and updates?

Using Evaluation to Improve Family Engagement Efforts

- How do staff communicate with parents?
 - Phone calls to parents
 - Face-to-face contact when parents pick up children
 - Flyers, newsletters, and bulletins sent home with children
 - Email

3. Hire and Train a Family-Focused Staff

a. Hiring Practices

- Is experience with family engagement taken into consideration in staff selection?
- Does the program make an effort to hire staff of the same cultural and linguistic background as the families served?
- Do parents work as program staff or volunteers?

b. Job Functions/Responsibilities

- Do staff job descriptions include family engagement as one of their responsibilities?
- Does the program employ a staff member whose main duty is to engage families?
 - Parent liaison

c. Professional Development

- Are staff provided with training/professional development on how to better engage families?

4. Building Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations

a. Partnerships

- How is your organization partnering with schools and/or other organizations to boost family engagement?
 - Accompany parents to school meetings
 - Meet with school staff to represent school concerns/academic needs to parents
 - Work with community organizations to plan family activities

b. Parent Advocacy

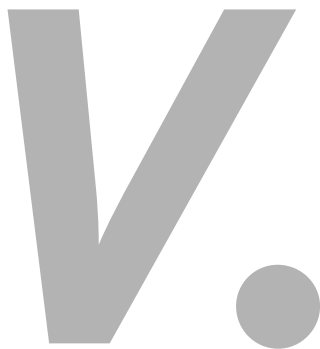
- How are you working with parents to help them develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children?
 - Provide parent leadership workshops

Based on the questions in the section above, the worksheet on page 40 is designed to help after school programs assess the ways in which they engage families in after school time hours and to develop new ideas and strategies for strengthening this component of your work.

Using Evaluation to Improve Family Engagement Efforts

Improving Family Engagement After School: A Tool for Self-Reflection and Learning

Strategy 1. Support Families	What are you doing now?	In what ways can you be more effective?
a. Support Services		
b. Program/Staff Accessibility to Parents		
Other:		
Strategy 2. Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships With Families	What are you doing now?	In what ways can you be more effective?
a. Events/Activities to Engage Families		
b. Program Communication With Parents		
Other:		
Strategy 3. Hire and Train a Family-Focused Staff	What are you doing now?	In what ways can you be more effective?
a. Hiring Practices		
b. Job Functions/ Responsibilities		
c. Professional Development		
Other:		
Strategy 4. Building Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations	What are you doing now?	In what ways can you be more effective?
a. Partnerships		
b. Parent Advocacy		
Other:		
Other Strategies:	What are you doing now?	In what ways can you be more effective?



Additional Resources

Books, Articles, and Reports

Bhattacharya, J., Jaramillo, A., Lopez, L., Olsen, L., Scharf, A., & Shah, M. (2002). *Our roots, our future: Affirming culture and language in after school and youth programs*. Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow.

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Websites

BOSTnet (Build the Out-of-School Time Network)

www.bostnet.org

BOSTnet provides help for parents and caregivers in finding after school programs. BOSTnet, formerly Parents United for Childcare, is an organization of low- and moderate-income parents, child care providers, and other community residents committed to increasing the supply of quality, affordable child care in Massachusetts.

Center for Parent Leadership

www.centerforparentleadership.org

CIPL is an initiative that trains and supports parent activists to help improve achievement in their schools and to be advocates for statewide reform in Kentucky. Their services consist mainly of large-scale consulting, workshops and seminars, and publications.

EPIC – Every Person Influences Children

www.epicforchildren.org

EPIC is a national not-for-profit organization that provides effective programs and resources for parents, teachers, and school administrators that help adults raise responsible and academically successful children.

Family Literacy and Math

Email: alevine@thehome.org

These programs focused on helping parents of populations traditionally left out of higher mathematics to develop their own skills, confidence, and enthusiasm for math.

Family Support America

www.familysupportamerica.org

Family Support America has been the nation's catalyst, clearinghouse, and thought leader in family support, based on a bedrock belief: If you want to help families, ask parents what they want.

FamilyEducation

www.familyeducation.com

Program staff can direct parents to this website designed for families for academic and parenting tips.

Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

www.finenetwork.org

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of over 5,000 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. Online resources include an e-newsletter and announcements of current ideas and new resources.

Harvard Family Research Project's Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html

The Out-of-School Time (OST) Program Evaluation Database is a compilation of profiles of evaluations of OST programs and initiatives. It provides accessible information about evaluation work of both large and small OST programs to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs in the OST field.

Institute for Responsive Education

www.responsiveeducation.org

IRE provides training and technical assistance to help administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members to develop skills to implement and sustain partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

MegaSkills Education Center of the Home and School Institute

www.megaskillshsi.org

The MegaSkills Education Center is dedicated to building achievement, developing within each student confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense, problem solving, and focus.

The National AfterSchool Association

www.naaweb.org

The National AfterSchool Association, formerly the National School-Age Care Alliance, is a professional association with a membership component that includes more than 7,000 practitioners, policy makers, and administrators representing all public, private, and community-based sectors of after-school and out-of-school time programs, as well as school-age and after-school programs on military bases, both domestic and international. As the leading voice of the after-school profession, NAA is dedicated to the development, education, and care of children and youth during their out-of-school hours.

National Center for Family Literacy

www.famlit.org

The mission of the National Center for Family Literacy is to create educational and economic opportunity for the most at-risk children and parents.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

www.ncpie.org

NCPIE is a coalition of major education, community, public service, and advocacy organizations working to create meaningful family-school partnerships in every school in America.

National Community Education Association

www.ncea.com

NCEA provides leadership to those who build learning communities in response to individual and community needs by providing its members with national and regional training conferences and workshops; specialized periodicals, publications, and products; opportunities for peer support and networking; and information and referral services.

National Institute for Literacy & Partnership for Reading

www.nifl.go

The National Institute for Literacy's activities to strengthen literacy across the lifespan are authorized by the U.S. Congress under two laws, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) in the Workforce Investment Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

National Network of Partnership Schools

www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000

Established by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, the National Network of Partnership Schools brings together schools, districts, and states that are committed to developing and maintaining comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnerships.

Parent Involvement and Resource Centers (PIRCs)

www.pirc-info.net/pircs.asp

PIRCs were created by the Department of Education in 1995 to provide parents, schools and organizations working with families with training, information, and technical assistance to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in school.

Promising Practices in Afterschool

www.afterschool.org

The Promising Practices in Afterschool website features programs' best practices in a variety of areas, including community and family involvement, programming, and financing.

PTO Today

www.ptotoday.org

PTO Today provides tips and tools on family involvement in schools.

Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers

www.taalliance.org

The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers supports a unified technical assistance system for the purpose of developing, assisting, and coordinating Parent Training and Information Projects and Community Parent Resource Centers under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Endnotes

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