Meaningful Family Engagement Strategies for Expanded Learning Programs

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"family engagement is about reaching families where they live, especially those who might be most underserved, **creating meaningful and trusted relationships** with families, **raising up their concerns and strengths**, and **expanding opportunities and resources** for how families love and learn with their children...

-Family Engagement Core Competencies,
National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement

Overview

Expanded learning programs (academic and recreational enrichment taking place outside of school hours) provide opportunities for children to thrive. Activities offered in safe, supportive environments can spark **social, emotional, and academic growth** in participants.

A cornerstone of success in out of school time (OST) programs is a strong sense of partnership with parents and families. Programs operating before and after school, on weekends, and during the summer, have a unique platform to **connect with children, families, and communities**. In addition to academics, OST programs prioritize the whole child, offering various support services, community connections, and referrals.

Families may be more responsive and involved in traditional school environments because of built in accountability structures and daily interaction. OST programs have the unique challenge of **helping parents see the importance and benefits of their offerings.**

This document provides insights, examples, and resources to support family engagement efforts within expanded learning programs and OST programs. Staff can **use these tools to foster meaningful relationships and build inclusive offerings for families**.

Promising Practices

Establish trust and build authentic relationships

Parents and families need to feel valued, included, and connected within a program culture. Building trust and maintaining authentic relationships with individuals is crucial to program success. Consider ways to promote a sense of inclusion and belonging:

- **Establish a solid foundation** - indicate program values and the importance of a successful parent partnership (e.g. materials designed for families that are easy to use/read)
- Recognize the apprehension some families may have with school systems or establishments - **acknowledge their experiences** and approach interactions with sensitivity (e.g. ask families what they need, and what mode of communication works best for them)
- **Demonstrate consistency and transparency** around programming, policies, and communication (e.g. create ongoing check-ins for family input, share staffing or program updates)
- Devote resources to coordinate with family members and **facilitate community connections** (e.g., designated staff position or process)
- Ensure that program communication and engagement is **accessible to everyone** (e.g., documents and support in various languages, outreach via phone/email/flyers)

Featured Resource:

Edutopia outlines 20 Tips for Developing Positive Relationships With Parents.

Promising Practices

Identify and understand family needs

In order to help families feel respected and part of the community, programs should prioritize collecting feedback and acknowledging parent perspectives. Intentional outreach demonstrates investment in families and also gives staff valuable insight about community concerns. Programs can explore the following strategies:

- Engage in **active listening** - make sure all staff approach conversations and interactions with care (e.g. train staff on reflecting back for understanding)
- **Conduct a needs and assets assessment** to understand pain points, challenges, and priorities for students and families (e.g., logistical issues, academic goals) - data collection can include: focus groups, surveys, town halls, and informal conversations
- **Utilize daily interactions** to capture anecdotal feedback or insights (e.g., student pick-up times, phone calls, emails)
- Adjust or adapt initiatives as needed - **communicate how the program will address relevant issues** (e.g. clear communication plan that is announced for accountability)
- Take into account the **various family members** that may play a pivotal role in students' lives (e.g., grandparents, extended family)

Featured Resource:

Explore You for Youth's Family Satisfaction Survey, for sample tools to understand family perspectives.

Promising Practices

Collaborate and co-create experiences with families

There are a number of potential barriers to family engagement (e.g., parents feeling unwelcome, distrust within a school environment, family obligations or capacity limitations), which is why an authentic partnership is essential. If parents and families feel a sense of trust and comfort with program staff, they are likely to be more engaged. The methods below can support purposeful collaboration:

- **Include family members in the planning process** - sharing power and ownership in the development of activities (e.g., organizing a community service initiative or program-wide art project)
- Invite family members and caretakers to **share their skills, interests, and talents** (e.g., reading to students, showcasing a special dance, presenting about career pathways)
- **Connect families to each other** - building connections within the community can enhance the parent/guardian network and generate ideas for program improvement (e.g. leverage open houses and information nights to promote interaction
- **Recognize and thank families** for their input (e.g., volunteer appreciation, committee spotlight)

Featured Resource:

Youth.gov describes strategies for Engaging Families as Partners in Decision-Making.

Promising Practices

Develop meaningful and equitable opportunities for engagement

Family participation can occur in various formats, and staff should think creatively about ways to connect with parents and caretakers. Consider providing a range of offerings and experiences that reinforce an inclusive program culture:

- Create spaces and activities where staff can **get to know parents/guardians** or engage in relevant activities (e.g., fall "meet and greet", peer networking and learning opportunities)
- Lift up community voices and experiences to build a program culture that **represents all families** (e.g., holiday celebrations, special events, inclusive language around family structures)
- Arrange **virtual and in-person programming** to accommodate different schedules or preferences (e.g., gallery walk, Zoom presentations with a program slideshow)
- Offer home visits or **plan gatherings in community spaces** where people feel comfortable and have an established routine (e.g., library, local park, place of worship)
- **Coordinate with community organizations and institutions** to link families to helpful resources and platforms (e.g., mental health supports, free adult education services)

Featured Resource:

Afterschool Alliance outlines how Afterschool Providing Key Literacy Supports to English Language Learner Students.

Develop meaningful and equitable opportunities for engagement

Consider providing a range of offerings and experiences that reinforce an inclusive program culture:

- Create spaces and activities where staff can get to know families or engage in relevant activities
- Lift up community voices and experiences to build a program culture that represents all families
- Offer home visits or plan gatherings in community spaces where people feel comfortable and have an established routine
- Coordinate with community organizations and institutions to link families to helpful resources and platforms
- Ensure that all program and communication materials are translated into the family's language of comfort
- Implement summer programming to keep students and families engaged all year round

Promising Practice: Family engagement in rural communities

Family engagement strategies in rural communities must adapt to the barriers faced by the community. With limited transportation options, community resources, employment opportunities, and even internet access, many rural families are unable to access the supports they need to be successful. Asking rural families about the barriers they face to participation allows the program to adapt to increase engagement and attendance rates. Some creative solutions may include providing gas cards as an attendance incentive, collaborating with the school to establish WiFi hotspots to provide internet to families, conducting home visits to limit transportation needs, collaborating with

Featured Resource:

Afterschool Alliance outlines the ways schools can provide key literacy supports to English Language Learner Students.

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Tools & Resources

Explore additional platforms and guidance below:

- Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement, *State Support Network*

- Family and Parent Engagement Resource Guide, *Afterschool Alliance*

- Family Engagement Resources and Templates, *You For Youth*

- The ABC's of Family Engagement, *National Afterschool Association*

- Promising Partnership Practices, *National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University*

- Family Engagement: A Guide to Tools, Strategies and Resources, *ExpandED*

- Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Programs Toolkit, *Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet)*

- Engaging Families as Partners in Decision-Making, *Youth.gov*

- 20 Tips for Developing Positive Relationships With Parents, *Edutopia*

- DEI Resource Portal, *NYSED Community Schools Technical Assistance Center*