



A Compendium on Expanded Learning

This article is one of more than 40 in an upcoming Compendium on the opportunities and potential of expanded learning opportunities and the importance of afterschool and summer programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers. With support from the C. S. Mott Foundation and under the leadership of executive editor Terry K. Peterson, PhD, the Compendium comprises eight sections with articles authored by thought leaders, policy officials, researchers, practitioners and other professionals in the field. Articles from the Compendium are available for download from the new website **Expanded Learning & Afterschool: Opportunities for Student Success** at www.expandinglearning.org

Effective Strategies for Engaging Parents: Real-Life Experiences That Make a Difference

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As almost all school- or community-based educators will admit, one of the biggest challenges they face is that of engaging parents or other adult caregivers meaningfully and consistently in their children's learning. Despite this challenge, educators deeply desire that parents become more involved in their children's education, as research clearly shows that there is a strong positive relationship between a student's success in school and the level of engagement by his or her parents with the school (Epstein, Clark, Salinas, & Sanders, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis, 2001).

While it is important to have parents and other adult caregivers actively engaged in their children's education—not only in what is offered in school but also in afterschool and summer programs—what may work in one community or school to engage parents may not necessarily work in another setting. School and afterschool leaders must identify the barriers within their particular communities that prevent parents from being more active in their children's education. Is there a language barrier? Are there transportation issues? Do outside commitments and responsibilities, such as working more than one job to make ends meet, affect the amount of time available for parents to be involved? Are there negative attitudes toward the school system? Do families only hear from the school when their child is in trouble or having difficulty?

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To address these and other challenges, Henderson and Mapp (2002) suggest the following action steps to establish effective family engagement programs:

- *Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, want to be involved in their children's education and want their children to do well in school.*
- *Link family and community engagement efforts to student learning.*
- *Create initiatives that will support families to guide their children's learning from preschool through high school.*
- *Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families.*
- *Focus efforts to engage families on developing trusting and respectful relationships.*
- *Embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that parents and school staff understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise.*

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers are based on improving student learning by more extensively engaging the community and families with schools and expanding opportunities after school. Clinton, Iowa, is one example of communities across the nation that takes seriously the potential of combining these purposes to enhance and improve student success.

Family Engagement in Clinton, Iowa

The Student Adventures Afterschool program in Clinton was established in 2003 with support from a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. Prior to receiving the grant, Clinton Community Schools had already established strong community partnerships, which laid a solid foundation to launch the new afterschool initiative and to build upon in its future years.

Clinton's Student Adventures Afterschool program currently serves students at six sites, four at the elementary level and two in middle schools. The program employs a combination of three strategies to help families become more engaged in its afterschool programs: partnerships, volunteerism, and regular and frequent communication.

PARTNERSHIPS

Clinton's afterschool and summer programs are very fortunate to have developed supportive partnerships with a set of community-based organizations that themselves are also committed to encouraging and promoting family engagement in a child's educational experience. These partnerships are founded on the premise that afterschool and summer program providers will be much more successful in engaging families by collaborating with community partners that already enjoy positive relationships with students and families.

One such example is a partnership with the local YWCA, which has developed a “Family Get Fit” program. The primary objective of this program is to have families “get fit” together through a set of fitness and nutrition activities facilitated by the local YWCA. Families who are involved with this program will have four opportunities to meet with a YWCA staff person as their motivational coach to help them through the program. All families involved will also listen to fitness and nutrition experts. Families have the chance to earn a free membership to the YWCA and to participate in four family fun events during the course of the program.

The afterschool program in Clinton also works with the local substance abuse council in conjunction with its “Eat With Me” campaign to promote wellness and family meal time together. The afterschool program advertises the campaign as part of the afterschool registration process; additionally, afterschool program staff participate on the committee that oversees this program.

An additional partner that has supported family engagement is Mighty Books, Jr., which provides family literacy activities. This program allows parents to access a website from home and spend quality time with their child, reading at their own convenience. The afterschool program tracks the use of the website, and to date, the initiative has received a positive response from parents.

VOLUNTEERISM

The Clinton afterschool and summer programs offer the parents of participating children the opportunity to play an active role by asking them to volunteer to assist with some of the academic enrichment activities, especially field trips. To date, this strategy has met with moderate success largely due the demands on many parents who must work multiple jobs to make ends meet in the current economy; however, the afterschool and summer programs are committed to giving parents this opportunity to see firsthand what their child is learning so that they can be an active participant in the learning process.

These programs offer a variety of academic enrichment activities on a weekly basis for students and their families. As part of their regular responsibilities, program staff members regularly communicate with parents regarding upcoming activities to encourage their involvement. Enrichment activities offered to families include, for example, trips to a local “family” museum, science and environmental activities through the county conservation office, and safety activities through the local sheriff’s department. The primary emphasis is to give parents the opportunity to be involved in their child’s educational growth outside of the regular school-day classroom and to see some of the enriching things their child is learning. For the parents who have volunteered, this has been a great way to see school in a more positive light.

COMMUNICATION

One of the most important aspects of the Clinton programs is communication, both internally and externally. Program staff regard communication as a major responsibility, to assure both that parents of children in the programs know the value of afterschool and that the community is informed of program activities and successes on a regular basis to help promote the benefits of the afterschool and summer programs.

One staple of the afterschool programs for the past 7 years is the annual Lights On Afterschool event in the fall. Not only is this event well attended by families who have children in the afterschool program, but also by the community as a whole, drawing close to 1,000 people every year. This event not only helps bring awareness of the value of afterschool programs to the community, but it also gives families the opportunity to spend quality time together by sharing a meal and other fun activities.

The Clinton program also utilizes monthly newsletters at each site to highlight success stories, upcoming events, and opportunities to volunteer. For example, the newsletter is regularly used to promote “Family Nights.” During the Family Nights, families first enjoy a meal together, and then program staff update parents on afterschool issues. Additionally, one of the program’s community partners regularly provides a family activity and explains what it offers students in the program. Parents also have the opportunity to share their thoughts or concerns with staff in order to give them a voice in the program.

The Clinton afterschool and summer programs have found that, collectively, three engagement strategies have worked well for all program stakeholders: community partnerships, volunteerism, and regular and frequent communication with parents and adult caregivers. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers have as core principles expanding learning opportunities after school and during the summer and engaging community organizations and families. This powerful combination of essential elements reinforces Clinton’s program strategies for helping more students succeed in these challenging times.

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Conclusion

The Clinton programs are firmly committed to continue using these three strategies, but program staff also realize that they will need to fine tune and explore additional strategies so as not to become stale. The program has just begun, for example, to explore a “Parent University” program as a component of the Family Nights events. Staff have identified three possible courses: “A Father’s Owner’s Manual,” “Developing Family Traditions,” and “How Do We Know What Children Need?” Implementing this concept will integrate all three engagement strategies: partnerships (community partners will help present identified topics), volunteerism (parents will help implement and deliver the program), and communication (parents will have access to a wealth of new information).

All such efforts, both present and future, are directed towards helping parents see school in a more positive light, leading to more involvement in their child’s education and to a greater capacity to support their child’s success in school and life.



Resources

Epstein, J. L., Clark, L., Salinas, K. C., & Sanders, M. G. (1997). *Scaling up school-family-community connections in Baltimore: Effects on student achievement and attendance*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL.

Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

Van Voorhis, F. (2001). Interactive science homework: An experiment in home and school connection. *NAASP Bulletin*, 85(627), 20–32. Retrieved from <http://www.sagepub.com/kgrantstudy/articles/10/van%20Voorhis.pdf>



About the Author

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