



# Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

## Section 5: Afterschool and Summer Programs as Catalysts for Engaging Families

Leveraging

**the Power of Afterschool  
and Summer Learning  
for Student Success**

A compendium of studies, reports, and commentaries by 100+ professionals and policy leaders on the best practices, impact, and future of expanded learning opportunities

Terry K. Peterson, PhD, Executive Editor

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# Building Powerful Partnerships With Parents and Communities: Integrating 21st Century Community Learning Centers With Education Change and Reform

What if parents and the community came *first* in education reform? The current test score accountability movement—birthed by the *Nation at Risk* report, followed by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, reinforced by the No Child Left Behind law, and reaffirmed by the Race to the Top reforms—has relegated parents and community to a low priority in policy, low priority in practice, and low priority in partnership.

There is one program, however, that should serve as a signature element of the next version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA): 21st Century Community Learning Centers. It is one of the few programs at the federal level that requires a deep partnership between the school, community, and parents as a condition for funding.

Even as ESEA is being considered for reauthorization, both the Obama administration and Congress continue to resist robust support for parent involvement, community engagement, coordination of services, and partnership building, relegating them to the back burner as strategies for increasing achievement or reforming schools. In an over 800-page ESEA proposal passed by the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee in October 2011, community partnerships and parent engagement are mentioned, sadly, as mere afterthoughts but are never required or considered as priority elements of reform. Yet, at the same time, public opinion polls conducted by Gallup, and other research conducted over more than 40 years, find that involving parents or engaging families in their children's education and schools is one of the highest priorities for improving American education (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011; Public Impact, 2007).

While a national debate rages about how to “fix” America’s schools and improve public education, many public schools and their communities have already realized that there is no silver bullet. Yet, one thing is crystal clear in the swirl of evolving and often conflicting reform efforts: Failing to engage parents and the community dramatically lowers the prospect of increasing the number of students going to college or being prepared for a 21st century career.

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The research over the years is both extensive and conclusive regarding the importance of parents and community engagement related to increased student learning (Sanders, 2006). It was the 2009 research that came out of the Chicago Consortium, led by Dr. Tony Bryk, however, that should have been a wake-up call to policy makers to move parent and community partnerships from rhetoric to reality, making these partnerships a core element of change essential to increased student achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In short, research reveals that *good things happen when the public is involved*—citizens feel ownership, share responsibility and accountability for results, and support sustaining change, no matter how many principals or superintendents come and go.

The wheel does not have to be reinvented, however. Established in 1994, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program has spawned almost 11,000 centers nationwide. As part of their core purpose and function, these centers bridge school-based learning with its natural counterpart, *community-based learning*, through partnerships with parents, United Ways, 4-H groups, libraries, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, higher education, nonprofits, museums,

educators, parks and recreation departments, municipalities, businesses, and other community organizations. These partnerships not only advance learning and use time wisely before and after school and during the summers, they also help build strong public schools and community demand for sustaining change. Drawing on the strengths brought by partner organizations, each center includes a range of services tailored to the needs of each school community. Services provided by centers typically include several of the following: health care, tutoring, afterschool programs, English as a second language classes, parent training, college-access services, and math and reading classes.

Given both the significant need for and interest in these services in communities across the country, wouldn’t it be a remarkable achievement if, in the reauthorization of the ESEA and in subsequent appropriations measures, 21st Century Community Learning Centers were to be expanded to support more school-community partnerships, from the current nearly 11,000 to possibly as many as 20,000 to 30,000?

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1. Bryk’s most recent research gives evidence from Chicago on how the organization of schools and community context influences the capacity to enhance student engagement and advance student learning.

Cincinnati provides a good case example of why this would make a lot of sense. Deciding a number of years ago that there was a pressing need to reconnect the public with its public schools, the community developed community learning centers in 31 of the district's 43 low-income schools. Each of the programs focused on academic enrichment opportunities for students, and the first nine centers in Cincinnati were funded with federal grants in 2004.

Both the Cincinnati chapter of Parents for Public Schools (PPS) and the Cincinnati STRIVE Partnership, a local affiliate of the national Public Education Network (PEN), came together, along with dozens of other community-based organizations in Cincinnati, to support the leadership, implementation, evaluation, accountability, and sustainability of each of the centers. PPS and STRIVE were natural partners to strengthen public education in the community by mobilizing, engaging, and training parents through partnership connections—and notably, they were provided the incentives to do so by the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative.

As Cincinnati's community learning centers continue to grow, they will need to be able to measure their impact. Aware of the importance of demonstrating accountability to the community through the use of quantifiable metrics, the local centers have developed a Learning Partner Dashboard through funding provided by the school district, Microsoft, Proctor & Gamble, and the STRIVE Partnership.

The dashboard provides individualized student academic and developmental data to the school resource coordinators.

The dashboard uploads student data from the school system database, and then program coordinators add data about the services that each student currently receives. The coordinators then match students with the additional services they need based on an analysis of gaps between student performance and behavior on the one hand and received services on the other. If a student fails the state math tests, for example, the student is flagged in the system, and the coordinator matches the student with a math tutor. If a student has trouble getting to school on time, a match is made with a social worker to support to the family.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative should not be confused with the recent push for extended school time, although the two are not mutually exclusive. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers are intended to bridge school and community and to build the resources, supports, and community buy-in that are essential to making expanded school time successful. Depending on the community, the initiative provides vitally important opportunities to students and their families, such as:

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- *tutoring*
- *college access*
- *mentoring*
- *internships*
- *health and wellness*
- *parenting classes*
- *community engagement*
- *hands-on, creative learning in areas such as STEM, the arts, and sports*

Efforts to extend time in school should therefore complement the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative in order to ensure wise and creative use of time and partnerships. Unfortunately, many plans for extending time in school often focus only on adding small increments of time—for example, 30 to 60 minutes a day. The school day still ends well before parents come home from work, which means that many children in those schools still need care and support after school, and of course, during the summertime. If a school or community wants, therefore, to extend the school day or year, decision makers should work with families to make sure the additional time is actually more engaging, interesting, active and relevant than the typical school day. In addition, programs like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and similar efforts (e.g., community schools) should not be destroyed in the process. That would be a huge net loss, not a net gain. Indeed, we know that schools alone—without the academic supports, enrichment, and personalization provided by 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs and other afterschool and summer learning programs—will not lead us to 21st century achievement.

Crystal Hoffman is a parent and a parent leader/volunteer at her children’s school, Pleasant Ridge Montessori in Cincinnati. She talks about how the school’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers resource coordinator brings together partners from the community to support academic success and to make the school more open and accessible to the community. She notes that:

- *local businesses volunteer in the school,*
- *a GED program is available for families,*
- *the gymnasium is used for a table tennis club several nights a week,*
- *there is an afterschool program that offers motivating experiences for students, and*
- *the program offers both homework tutoring and enrichment activities and reaches out to the student and family’s unique learning and support needs.*

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The work of 21st Century Community Learning Centers was recently validated by an independent study that concluded that these programs do, indeed, contribute to increased achievement for the PreK through eighth grade low-income students whom they serve (Brown, 2011). Schools that reach out to parents and the community and that integrate community supports into the school day show increases in student learning. Moreover, parents feel more satisfied, and the public is assured that their efforts are making a meaningful contribution to their students and their community (Brown, 2011). For PEN and PPS, as national organizations with community-based affiliates, the study reinforces the value of deep collaboration with their local members in support of reform efforts.

Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville and Teachers College/Columbia University Professor Jeffery Henig sum it up when they say: “When thinking about their own families, parents take it as a given that nonschool factors—good health, good food, emotional well-being, safety, stability, enrichment activities, positive peer influences, parental encouragement, and guidance—affect whether their children will thrive” (Henig & Reville, 2011). With their richly diverse afterschool and summer learning program offerings, their school-community partnerships, and their emphasis on family engagement, 21st Century Community Learning Centers should be significantly expanded, not have their funding diverted for other purposes. As the economy starts to recover, school districts, local governments, states, and the federal government should be investing in this collaborative, cost-effective approach to improving education and strengthening communities and schools. 21st Century Community Learning Centers are not just good policy; indeed, they are good common sense as well.

### **Cleveland Afterschool Program Opens Doors for Parents**

Spread across eight sites in Cleveland, Open Doors Academy (ODA) believes that “it takes a community to raise a child” and provides a multitude of ways for parents to be involved. This includes participating in project-based learning and team building among students, attending family events with their children, and volunteering on field trips and/or a variety of educational workshops that teach parents how to recognize their child’s learning style.

This unique program begins in the sixth grade and has a 7-year curriculum plan for participating students. ODA serves 300 middle school and high school students that live in high-risk environments. For those students who completed all 3 years of the middle school program, 100% of them went on to graduate from high school.

Parents are viewed as critical partners and are required to contribute at least 16 service hours every year to their child’s programming. Through activities such as calling parents when their children are excelling, ODA is successfully working to create a positive, supportive atmosphere for students and their parents. This positive reinforcement led to 98% of parents completing the service requirements in 2011.

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## Family Involvement as a Critical Element of Quality Expanded Learning Opportunities

Take the time to bond with families. To some we are like a second parent, and we are seen as a partner as we watch their children grow. The parents want you to feel what they feel and what they've been through and take the time with them.

**- Chicago Afterschool Provider**

The relationship between providers, parents, and youth should be circular—communication should flow openly.

**- Chicago Afterschool Parent**

They (staff) do keep me involved, but you know what? I put myself out there...you (staff) need anything, call me up.

**- Washington DC Afterschool Parent**

Quality expanded learning opportunities after school and during summers not only build youth's academic and social skills, they provide the opportunity for them to contribute to their communities' development. Particularly for Latino students, who are often some of the most vulnerable and underserved in the educational system, these programs can be their connection to a variety of sources of support in their academic and developmental growth. The core of successful programs is a close connection to their families and communities.

... providers should make it a priority to understand the values and needs of the families served.

These fundamental lessons have emerged over the last 5 years, as the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has strengthened its efforts to build the capacity of its network of affiliated schools and community-based organizations to provide quality expanded learning opportunities programs for Latino students. During this period, it has become increasingly clear that certain strategies and practices make the most positive difference.

The following best practices, based on a review of the literature and the experiences of NCLR practitioners in the field, can and should be applied across expanded learning programs working with vulnerable populations:

- **Communication and trust between parents and program staff should be consistent.** *Maintaining regular communication and accurately conveying program goals to parents and families can be challenging; however, providers should make it a priority to understand the values and needs of the families served. An NCLR provider in the Rio Grande Valley uses home visits, for example, as an effective way to develop and maintain relationships with families and to learn first-hand what is important to them and their children's education and development.*
- **Wrap-around services accessed through a school or a community-based organization can offer invaluable opportunities for engagement for any program.** *Approximately 70% of NCLR affiliates offer wrap-around services, including counseling, snacks and meals, fitness and nutrition education programs, and classes for parents. Parents in these programs especially appreciate the opportunity to support their child's learning by participating in many of these activities. The higher a family's engagement with an organization, the more trust that is built and the higher the possibility for their sustained participation in programs.*
- **Programs should operate as a bridge between parents and schools.** *Parents who lack information about the education system, or whose level of engagement is otherwise limited during regular school hours, often rely on afterschool and summer learning programs to learn about their child's progress. Afterschool and summer programs can provide parents the tools and resources to become active advocates for their child's education. One NCLR affiliate in Los Angeles ensures parents have a voice in the program by circulating a survey that asks parents to list the core values they want their kids to be taught during the life skills portion of the afterschool program. The selected values are then featured in weekly programming. Another NCLR affiliate program involves parents through a Consejo de Padres (parent council) that helps reach out to other parents to get them involved as volunteers and in planning special events.*
- **Programming can be enhanced through community partners.** *Expanded learning programs represent a critical opportunity for youth, particularly underserved youth, to gain competitive skills, such as global literacy and problem solving, and to develop their creativity and capacity to innovate through additional academic supports and enrichment activities. Community partners can*

enhance the effectiveness and reach of an afterschool program's activities. An NCLR-affiliate school in Houston seamlessly integrates community art and music resources by working with a local nonprofit organization that offers a mariachi afterschool club, providing not only music instruction but access to musical instruments. Close collaboration with families and community groups makes it more likely that the participating students will receive the full range of learning opportunities they need to be successful, and they'll get them in a positive, engaging environment.

- **Active family involvement can help parents understand a program's value and provide critical support for their child's attendance and engagement.**

*Some afterschool and summer programs have poor attendance because the programming may not be engaging or interesting to youth. Programs may also be poorly subscribed because parents have little knowledge or involvement in these programs, so they do not understand the value of the programs and do not encourage or expect their children to attend. The Big Thought afterschool and summer programs in Dallas, for example, have high attendance rates, especially among hard-to-reach, low-income Latino students. Program leaders assertively reach out to families through a variety of community- and faith-based organizations to encourage their children to participate and attend regularly. The powerful combination of Big Thought's highly engaging programming, which integrates the arts through all subjects, and its extensive family and community outreach efforts has resulted in a nearly 90% attendance rate for its programs.*

Afterschool and summer programs can provide parents the tools and resources to become active advocates for their child's education.

In a time of severe constraints on public financing and deep budget cutbacks, it is very important to examine the key elements that maximize program impact for students and their families. Families and community partners are invaluable in ensuring that the components of effective programming for students are in place in afterschool and summer programs. They help elevate the program's value and raise awareness about the necessary resources to implement it effectively. Everybody wins!

### **Wausau, Wisconsin**

In Wausau, Wisconsin, the school district's summer program was poorly attended by youth from some student subgroups, including struggling, low-income white students, as well as Hmong and Latino students, who needed additional learning support the most. The summer learning coordinator and principals of the participating schools turned this situation around by communicating directly with the families and by working through community intermediaries to explain both the specific types of assistance that students would receive to help them catch up and keep up and also the wide selection of fun, broadening experiences that students could choose.

## For More Information

Additional resources for effectively engaging families in afterschool and summer programs can be found at the following websites:

- The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has published *Core Qualities for Successful Expanded Learning Time Programs*, which builds on existing research and assessment tools to address the unique needs of community organizations and schools serving Latino students and their families. [http://www.nclr.org/index.php/issues\\_and\\_programs/education/programs/extended\\_learning\\_time\\_programs/](http://www.nclr.org/index.php/issues_and_programs/education/programs/extended_learning_time_programs/)
- With a grant from the New York Times Foundation, TASC has developed a guidebook for parent engagement, *Increasing Family and Parent Engagement in After-School*, which outlines 15 examples of how site coordinators and staff are successfully engaging parents at their after-school program. It also contains sample materials that program sites can use to improve parent involvement. <http://www.tascorp.org/content/document/detail/1455/>
- Child Trends has published a research-to-results brief, *Building, Engaging, and Supporting Family and Parental Involvement in Out-of-School Time Programs*, that discusses elements of family involvement and why it matters for out-of-school-time programs. The brief also examines some of the issues that programs face when attempting to engage parents, and it offers suggestions for how programs and staff can encourage family and parental involvement. [http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child\\_Trends-2007\\_06\\_19\\_RB\\_ParentEngage.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_06_19_RB_ParentEngage.pdf)

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## Evidence-Based Strategies for Supporting and Enhancing Family Engagement

Family engagement should be a vital component of any strategy to expand learning opportunities for children and youth after school and during the summertime—whether at the organizational, community, state, or national level. Under current federal guidelines for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, “family engagement” takes the form of activities to support parental involvement and family literacy. All centers are required to track and report the number of family members who participate as part of the annual Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS). Consistently those data indicate that the majority of centers do, indeed, provide these important activities for families.

In 2010 alone, 9,139 centers (approximately 85% of all centers funded) served over 250,000 family members; the average adult attendance at adult activities was almost 28 family members. Further, data indicate that of the centers funded in 2010, over 60% served students eligible for free and reduced lunch, indicating that these centers are supporting some of the most economically needy families in the country. Summary data from the past 5 years of reporting indicate that the centers have cumulatively served over one million family members, with the average adult attendance per center rising each year.<sup>1</sup>

[21st Century Learning Centers] are supporting some of the most economically needy families in the country.

1. The data presented here are part of an unpublished data set archived at the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS).

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 Figure 1. 21st Century Community Learning Centers adult family member participation, 2006–2010.

APR Year	School Year Only	Summer Only	Both	Total	N Centers	Avg. Adult Attendance per Center
2006	148,193	14,680	40,170	203,043	9,353	21.7
2007	165,960	12,537	34,249	211,192	8,987	23.5
2008	183,560	12,429	30,554	223,042	9,053	24.6
2009	173,791	14,031	27,199	213,552	8,704	24.5
2010	201,410	13,796	40,936	253,404	9,139	27.7
5-Year Total Parents Served				1,104,233		

Despite impressive numbers of families served, however, many 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other afterschool and summer programs struggle with more fully engaging families. This article presents six research-derived strategies that afterschool programs can and do use to engage families. A set of additional resources for educators and program managers is also included, along with examples drawn from several programs that have experienced noteworthy success in engaging families.

What can afterschool and summer learning programs including 21st Century Community Learning Centers do to support and improve family engagement? The following are six research-based strategies that 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar programs can use to improve their family engagement efforts (Bouffard, Westmoreland, O’Carroll & Little, 2011; Little, 2011).

- 1. Have adequate and welcoming space to engage families.** Helping families feel welcome is an important first step on the road to building trusting relationships with families. 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar afterschool and summer programs can help families feel welcome by establishing a “family corner” in which family members can find resources about the program and services in the community. They can also make sure the signage at the center is welcoming and accessible in the languages spoken by the families served.
- 2. Establish policies and procedures to promote family engagement.** To ensure that family engagement is a priority, afterschool and summer programs should include a section on family engagement in their operations manuals, laying out their strategies for engaging families; they should also consider including family engagement as part of their program quality standards. At minimum, this should include conducting at least one family open house per year. Many programs also have created a Family Handbook that helps family members understand the goals and purposes of the center.
- 3. Communicate and build trusting relationships.** Frequent and positive communication with family members is critical to effective family engagement. This means treating family

Frequent and positive communication with family members is critical to effective family engagement.

members with respect; asking them about their own lives and interests, as well as those of the students in the program; and ensuring that interactions with family members are not solely in response to negative student behaviors or performance. Some programs use a communications log to monitor the frequency and nature of communications with family members.

- 4. Be intentional about staff hiring and training to promote effective staff-family interactions.** At the heart of quality afterschool programs are the staff who run them. Core components of effective staff-family interactions include hiring staff who reflect the demographics of the families served and who are trained in respect for cultural differences, including an examination of their own biases. Once hired, it is important to provide ongoing training and support to ensure that family engagement is part of a staff member's daily duties. In addition to external training, programs can set aside a time at staff meetings to reflect on and improve their family engagement strategies.
- 5. Connect families to each other, to the program staff, to schools, and to other community institutions.** Afterschool and summer programs can play a vital role in facilitating connections, both within the program to other families and outside the program to schools and other community institutions. This role is emerging as particularly important for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which have the opportunity to support a more holistic approach to education—one that requires afterschool programs, schools, and families to partner to provide expanded opportunities for learning throughout a longer learning day and across the entire calendar year.

### **Find Out What Families Think and Need**

New Settlement's afterschool program at CES 64 in the Bronx decided that parent focus groups would be a good way to elicit information and initiate a strong platform for parent decision making in the afterschool program. To attract participants, flyers in Spanish and English were posted around the school and community. When the response was minimal, the site coordinator realized that this was not reaching her families. Since many parents had a history of feeling unwelcome, she had to take a different approach. She began direct outreach with a few parents, who in turn, gave her the names of others who may want to participate. She spoke to them individually, explaining the mission of her program and the need for parental input. In the end, 15 parents signed on to participate in the focus group sessions (The After School Corporation, 2006).

### **Case Management to Support Families' Basic Needs**

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds a Boys and Girls Club in Buffalo, New York, that recognizes the critical role it can play in helping its participants attend the program and school healthy and ready to learn by supporting families' basic needs. It has created a full-time, salaried staff position at each clubhouse to help families deal with social issues, providing triage, case management, and referral services. It has also leveraged other resources to build an on-site kitchen that provides free meals and snacks to the program participants as well as deliberately cooks a surplus of meals and offers them to caretakers in "to go" boxes when they come to pick up their children (Manhattan Strategy Group, 2011).

- 6. Help support families and their basic needs.** Support for families and their basic needs runs the gamut from providing access to community resources to hosting forums and discussion nights to address topics of concern to families to providing training on leadership and advocacy. At minimum, afterschool programs need to help families overcome logistical challenges, such as transportation, that may affect their children's participation. Many programs have community school partnerships. These partnerships can be enhanced in order to provide families with information about community resources to address particular social service needs.

While each of these strategies can serve to engage families, some research indicates that it is the constellation of many strategies that may best support participants. In a recent study of engaging older youth in afterschool, summer, and other out-of-school-time programs researchers found that programs for older youth that were successful in retaining at least 50% of the participants for 12 months or more utilized, on average, eight different family engagement strategies (Deschenes et al., 2010).

Also from the research we know that engaging families is a win-win for programs, families, and afterschool and summer learning program participants. Moving forward, as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative and other efforts to expand learning beyond the school day continue to grow, it is imperative that the spotlight on family engagement, so evident in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, continues to shine throughout the expanded learning movement.

## For More Information

### Family Engagement in Afterschool Programs Resources

Several research-based toolkits and resources have been developed to help educators both in schools and in afterschool programs work more effectively with families.

- **Family Engagement in After School Inventory**  
Developed for 21st Century Community Learning Centers in Texas, this research-based inventory can be used as a self-assessment tool to help programs gauge their current and future capacities to engage families.  
<http://www.texasace21.org/content/prime-blueprint-texas-ace>, (see Appendix 11)
- **Focus on Families: How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School**  
A joint publication of United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Harvard Family Research Project, and BOSTNet, this resource provides four overarching strategies that programs can implement to engage families.  
<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school>
- **BOSTNet Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Tool Kit**  
The Engaging Families Toolkit is aimed at afterschool programs and provides templates for assessing family engagement practices, developing an action plan, and designing a family engagement program.  
[bostnet.org/matriarch/documents/EngagingFamiliesToolkit.pdf](http://bostnet.org/matriarch/documents/EngagingFamiliesToolkit.pdf)

- **Increasing Family and Parent Engagement in After-School**

In this document TASC provides a guide for engaging parents in afterschool programs. TASC explains the importance of engaging families, offers advice and materials for effective outreach to parents, and highlights examples of successful family engagement methods.

[http://www.tascorp.org/files/1455\\_file\\_parent\\_engagement\\_03082006.pdf](http://www.tascorp.org/files/1455_file_parent_engagement_03082006.pdf)

- **Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships**

This comprehensive family engagement resource examines, among other things, how to know whether a school or afterschool program is really open to partnerships and how to develop trusting relationships with families.

[www.thenewpress.com/bakesale](http://www.thenewpress.com/bakesale)

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

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?

School and afterschool leaders must identify the barriers within their particular communities that prevent parents from being more active in their children's education.

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.

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#### *Partnerships*

Clinton’s afterschool and summer programs are very fortunate to have developed supportive partnerships with a set of community-based organizations that 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.

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*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 to 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.

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*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.

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.

## 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.

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# Engaging Families in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs for Middle School Youth

For over 30 years, research evidence has been growing that engaging families in children’s learning has a powerful, positive, and lasting impact on students’ academic outcomes and life prospects (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Most of this research has been done in schools, but there is ample reason to consider applying what has been learned to programs that provide expanded learning opportunities to children and youth after school hours and during the summertime.

## Research and Background

Consider the important new study *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). This study identifies “close ties with families and the community” as one of five “essential ingredients” that characterize schools that have improved significantly compared to schools that have stagnated or declined. The others are strong leadership, high professional capacity, instructional guidance, and a student-centered learning climate.

In schools that have turned around, teachers are familiar with students’ cultures and backgrounds. They spend time in the community, invite parents to observe in classrooms, try to understand parents’ concerns, and embrace parents as partners. Parents respond by becoming involved in school activities and addressing teachers’ concerns about their children’s schoolwork.

Not only can community-based programs benefit from incorporating these same elements, but in turn, they can help schools develop closer ties with families and surrounding community. Afterschool programs make it a priority to create a welcoming environment in which parents can feel comfortable engaging in their children's education (Strickland & Jean, 2005). When community organizations work inside schools, they can create a gateway for parents to become more involved in their children's learning.

Conversely, community organizations that operate such programs can provide an opening to the neighborhood for teachers. For example, a local program could sponsor a "community walk" for school and program staff to tour neighborhoods and identify local assets. Family members and local residents can serve as tour guides.

A key difference between high- and low-achieving students is how they spend their out-of-school time. Afterschool and summer programs often cultivate links with community partners and school programs, such as AVID and Gear-Up, to expand resources available to students and their families. Through these connections, families can have access to a variety of academic and extracurricular activities, such as tutoring, martial arts, music, drama, and dance, as well as education classes for parents. These opportunities allow and encourage adolescents to explore the larger world with guidance from their families (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

In a study of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Strickland and Jean (2005) reported on promising practices that promote family participation in children's learning. The six programs in the study—half of which served middle school students—employed a variety of strategies to engage parents. In all sites visited, children generally responded positively to their parents' presence. Parents of students in the middle grades noticed improved behavior, attitudes, and communication at home, as well as greater attention to schoolwork, all of which they attributed to their children's participation in the program.

When community organizations work inside schools, they can create a gateway for parents to become more involved in their children's learning.

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*Corwin Middle School 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program  
in Pueblo, Colorado*

The afterschool program at Corwin Middle School maintained both informal and structured communication with students' families. Whether face-to-face exchanges at pick-up time, or through monthly newsletters the site coordinator published with student help, families were made aware of what was happening with their students (Strickland & Jean, 2005).

Families liked the way parent-teacher conferences were coordinated with the afterschool program's family night. During the Family Night/Conference, teachers were in the gym during the afternoon and early evening, and a simple dinner was available. Parents said they could easily find and talk with teachers, then make follow-up appointments if needed. Because several teachers worked in the afterschool program, parents were familiar with them, which also helped create a welcoming feeling for families.

A key to the program's success was hiring "community advocates" to focus on families whose children were struggling in school. The advocates built relationships and offered assistance without "meddling" in families' lives. In home visits, the advocates listened to what parents wanted then connected families to resources and made referrals to counseling. The advocates also built rapport with students and teachers and helped "work things out" to avoid suspension. When the program began in 2000, attendance at parent-teacher conferences averaged about 23%. During the second year, parent participation shot up to 90% and remained at that level.

While the Corwin afterschool program ceased operating at the end of the 2008 funding cycle, the program's foundational commitment to family engagement continues to exert major influence to the present day. Corwin has been restructured as a magnet school that requires 18 hours of volunteering per family each year, thus ensuring that parents are significantly involved. The former director of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program at Corwin Middle School is now in charge of the Upward Bound program at Pueblo Community College. She has cultivated significant parent participation in that program, which serves some of the same families whose children attended the afterschool program at Corwin Middle School. Corwin's legacy of strong family engagement endures!

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*Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Nassau County, New York*

Communication with parents is an integral part of Elmont's before-school and afterschool support programs for 600 seventh- and eighth-grade students. Parents and teachers collaboratively design academic intervention plans that give personalized support for class work and the New York State Assessments. Teachers follow up by tailoring instruction to meet students' needs. The program is staffed entirely by teachers from the school, allowing close alignment with what's being taught in the classroom (National Education Association, 2011).

Almost 100% of the students enrolled at Elmont are children of color, and many are from immigrant families and single-parent households. The school had, however, a 94% graduation rate in 2011, exceeding the state standard of 80%. Over 90 % of its graduates attend college. In 2006, when the program began, only 31% of Elmont students earned an advanced Regents diploma. In 2010, it rose to 49% (New York State Education Department, 2011).

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*Salomé Ureña de Henríquez Campus in Manhattan*

Salomé Ureña de Henríquez is a community school developed by the New York City Department of Education and the Children’s Aid Society, a local nonprofit organization. The campus serves a low-income Latino population and includes three middle schools and a high school. A full-time parent coordinator arranges for adult education (including ESL, GED, computer, financial literacy, and citizenship classes), as well as parent support groups, clubs, and advisory councils.

Through leadership training, parents learn to advocate for themselves and their children. They go to City Hall to promote afterschool and school-based health centers, launch letter-writing campaigns for immigrant rights and youth summer work opportunities, and do community organizing for housing rights. In addition, they learn how to navigate the education system, how to make the best use of parent-teacher conferences, and what to do to get a child admitted to college.

A recent evaluation of afterschool programs at six Children’s Aid Society middle schools shows that students made significantly greater gains in math, reading, and positive behaviors than students who did not participate in these afterschool programs. Finally, the evaluation noted that the Children’s Aid Society’s community school model contributed to a positive school climate and enhanced support structure not usually found in stand-alone afterschool programs (Krenichyn, Clark, & Benitez, 2007).

## **What Do Families Want?**

A study in four U.S. cities asked African American parents about what they want in afterschool programs (Robinson & Fenwick, 2007). For participating parents, “afterschool programs are more than a place for homework, a snack, and basketball,” they offer hope for improving their children’s life chances. In the parents’ opinion, the following features are what make a high quality program:

- **Commitment to learning:** *Achievement, motivation, homework completion, school engagement, reading for pleasure, and math competence*
- **Constructive use of time:** *Participation in creative and fun activities*
- **Support:** *Personal attention, positive family communication, a caring environment, and positive adult relationships*
- **Social competence:** *Interpersonal and cultural competence, decision making, and conflict resolution*
- **Boundaries and expectations:** *High expectations and adult role models*
- **Positive identity:** *Self-esteem, personal power, and a positive view of the future*

## Effective Strategies

Middle school students experience significant and often difficult transitions. Providing young people with expanded learning opportunities afterschool and summers, while simultaneously engaging families in those programs and in the regular school day, creates a “win” for everyone involved. These programs, including those supported through the 21st Community Century Learning Centers initiative, should take advantage of their less formal settings and frequent connections to community partners to reach out to families. By linking families more closely to afterschool and summer learning programs, as well as to schools and other supportive community institutions and organizations, they can improve student success. Below are several strategies that merit attention and inclusion:

### **Focus school-family-program partnerships on improving student outcomes.**

Link the content of afterschool classes and tutoring to the school curriculum, and use student achievement data to hone in on skills that need strengthening. Be sure to deliver the actual programming in hands-on, interesting, and engaging ways because doing more of the same is unlikely to boost student achievement. Helping families stay current with their students’ progress keeps information flowing full circle. Families are much more likely to understand, accept, and accommodate suggestions if educators and staff of community partner organizations work together in afterschool or summer settings to explain data and provide recommendations.

### **Communicate frequently with families about their child’s progress and about ways they can address their child’s unique learning interests and needs.**

Adolescents will profit by personal attention from adults, including their parents, in afterschool and summer programs. Adults in these programs should meet regularly with parents before and after school hours to discuss student progress, share information, and confer on strategies to support learning. Programs should involve parents, as well as use classroom teachers, staff of youth development organizations, and well-organized volunteers from cultural and scientific professional associations and other community groups, to increase the amount of personal attention accorded to youth to help more of them succeed.

### **Collaborate with parents to develop individualized intervention plans for students.**

Classroom teachers, community teachers, and youth development staff in the afterschool and summer programs should use meetings with parents to provide recommendations of specific academic support programs for students at risk of falling behind. Teachers and program staff subsequently should develop instructional strategies based on feedback from parents and should incorporate those strategies

By linking families more closely to afterschool and summer learning programs, as well as to schools and other supportive community institutions and organizations, they can improve student success.

in the expanded learning settings and during the regular school day. These planning sessions are also useful venues for identifying student and family interests (for example, music, sports, fitness, robotics competitions, technology, languages) that expanded learning programs can then include in their offerings, weaving in needed basic skills and social and emotional development.

**Build relationships and a sense of community with families.**

School-community partnerships can employ “community advocates” who develop rapport with families whose children are at risk of failure or dropping out of school. Advocates can help bring about positive changes in their children through sharing both good and bad news and helping them to understand their children and communicate with them better. This rapport can, in turn, be used to develop more relevant and engaging afterschool, evening, weekend, and summer programming and opportunities for families (for example, sessions on the requirements for attending and succeeding in college, joint family-student art or math nights, and cooking and family gardening classes).

**Provide a safe space for families and school staff to connect.**

Comprehensive afterschool programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—along with their community partners—should turn their schools into hubs of community life. They could, for example, create a “family room” on campus that provides a welcoming space for parents and other caregivers to attend workshops. The room can be staffed by a parent coordinator or a community resident whose children graduated from the school. Community partners can sponsor community-building events, such as an annual heritage or neighborhood celebration, that bring hundreds of families and other community members to the school.

**Build parents’ capacity to participate in multiple ways.**

Expanded learning programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, can develop and help coordinate parent leadership institutes. (See for example the Parent Leadership Institute offered by the Children’s Aid Society in New York City.) This type of leadership training can advance parents’ capacity to contribute to the life of their children’s schools (Epstein et al., 2009). In a yearlong institute, for example, parents could learn many ways to foster their own and their children’s education, support their families financially, develop social capital, and advocate for high quality schools for their own and other people’s children. Leadership development can also include showing parents how to secure more expanded learning opportunities for their children and how to identify community partners needed to improve the afterschool and summer programs that their children attend.

Both research and practice make clear that neither schools nor afterschool programs will succeed in improving student outcomes without engaging families. *If families are out of the loop, there is no loop*, and the focused energy that is needed to make and sustain gains will dissipate. Fortunately, there is much good information on how to do this effectively if we will just make use of it.

## For More Information

*Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0*, a new report from the National Education Association, offers many examples of wrap-around and community education programs that collaborate with families to support student achievement. For a free copy of the report, go to [www.neapriorityschools.org/family-school-community-partnerships](http://www.neapriorityschools.org/family-school-community-partnerships).

*Afterschool Programs as an Oasis of Hope for Black Parents in Four Cities* is a 2007 report from the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) that includes detailed information about family engagement in afterschool programs. It is available online at [www.baeo.org/files/mottSummary.pdf](http://www.baeo.org/files/mottSummary.pdf).

*Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School* is a 2006 report from the Harvard Family Research Project that profiles programs that engage families and offers information about strategies and approaches. To download a free copy, go to [www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school](http://www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school).

The Harvard Family Research Project website has an entire section on out-of-school time, with several publications, evaluations, and recorded webinars available for free download. See [www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time](http://www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time) and [www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning](http://www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning).

The Coalition for Community Schools has published a number of reports and studies on the benefits of community schools for students and families. The most recent is *Community Schools Research Brief, 2009*. To download a free copy, go to [www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CCS%20Research%20Report2009.pdf](http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CCS%20Research%20Report2009.pdf).

The Children's Aid Society's National Center for Community Schools recently published a user-friendly manual entitled *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action*. To download a free copy, go to [www.nationalcenterforcommunityschools.org](http://www.nationalcenterforcommunityschools.org).

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## Family Involvement in Expanded Learning Programs for High School Students

Research, common sense, and practical experience all make it crystal clear: *Family involvement is critical for student academic success.* Consider the following research findings:

- *Low parent interest in a child's schooling is associated with substandard student achievement (Steinberg, 1996).*
- *Bogenschneider (1997) studied 8,000 high school students in nine high schools in Wisconsin and California and found that when parents were involved in their teen's schooling, students reported higher grades in school. Parental involvement showed consistently positive results, regardless of the education level of the parent.*
- *Parents play a critically important role in their children's academic achievement and social-emotional development (Comer, 1980; Eccles & Harold, 1996).*
- *Various parenting, volunteering, and home learning activities positively influence student grades, number of course credits completed, attendance, behavior, and school preparedness, regardless of student background and past achievement (Simon, 2001).*

Family involvement is also critical to student success in expanded learning programs offered after school, on weekends, and during the summer. Moreover, many such programs offer literacy and other educational activities for the entire family, and these programs are, therefore, of particular importance to students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. According to Ellen Gannett, director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, afterschool and summer learning programs “integrate the best of teaching and learning and engage youth in active, positive youth development and enrichment opportunities that will inspire them to become academically successful, good citizens, physically and emotionally healthy, artistic, social, problem solvers, and lifelong learners” (Gannett, 2012). In fact, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the federally-funded expanded learning programs, have been shown to improve student grades and test scores, lower dropout rates, and generate a sense of competence among students (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

## Elements of Family Involvement

Most expanded learning programs include a family involvement component. At the most basic level, programs typically incorporate a system of communication with families, a plan for family involvement, and an inviting program environment for families. High quality programs, however, also include many or all of the following components:

- *They establish a parent/community advisory committee that meets regularly.*
- *They distribute a family handbook that can include such items as family support activities, a calendar of events and guidance in helping children in school.*
- *They offer educational experiences for families and share community resources with families.*
- *They collect informal and formal feedback from families and community partners to determine program strengths and weaknesses.*

Expanded learning opportunities at the secondary level for students can include, but are not limited to, work-based experiences, use of innovative technology, preparation for college and careers, community service, and/or personalized school plans. In the remainder of this article, we will explore the involvement of families in expanded learning programs for secondary students and offer recommendations in developing this component.

## Effective Strategies for Family Involvement in Secondary-Level Expanded Learning Opportunity Programs

A variety of family involvement strategies are available for parents of high school students participating in expanded learning programs.

**Homework/tutoring contracts.** One such strategy is a *homework/tutoring contract* for families, parents, and guardians, such as the one developed by the Center for Afterschool Education at Foundations (Weisburd, 2007). This model flexibly addresses whether the parent wants the student to do homework during the afterschool program, how the student works best, and when the student needs assistance.

**College application assistance.** Another effective strategy for involving families in expanded learning programs is to hold information sessions for parents and students to discuss the college application process. During these sessions, staff can also provide parents with information about financial aid (Peterson & Fix, 2007). Family tours of local colleges are also a helpful activity in the college preparation process.

**Alternative schools.** For academically challenged students, Big Picture Learning offers a promising approach. Established in 1995, this organization (<http://www.bigpicture.org/>) operates an alternative school model for unsuccessful students in 60 sites across the country. As part of the model, students create a personalized educational plan with their parents. Technology and community resources are important components of the program, and students take advantage of learning opportunities before and after school, at home, and within the community (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

### **Examples of Successful Secondary Expanded Learning Programs**

Among the many expanded learning programs designed for high school students, the following program examples are noteworthy for both their reach and their documented successes with older youth.

**After School Matters.** Successful secondary expanded learning programs often focus on careers and/or college preparation. After School Matters (ASM) is a nonprofit organization that offers Chicago teenagers high quality, out-of-school time opportunities in the arts, science, sports, technology, and communications at no charge ([www.afterschoolmatters.org](http://www.afterschoolmatters.org)). Its project-based programs introduce teenagers to careers in education and help them develop job skills. The program provides regular updates about student progress to parents, as well as offering community updates and regular e-newsletters. Results show that participants missed fewer days of school, failed fewer courses, and had higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than their high school counterparts.

**Breakthrough Collaborative.** Another example of a successful expanded learning opportunities program for youth is the Breakthrough Collaborative ([www.breakthroughcollaborative.org](http://www.breakthroughcollaborative.org)). It has locations both domestically and internationally. Breakthrough Collaborative launches motivated middle school

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students on the path to college and prepares secondary students for careers in education. In 33 years, Breakthrough has assisted 20,000 students in preparing for college. This program is focused on preparing high-achieving middle-school students who are primarily of color and from low-income families to enter and succeed in college-preparatory high school programs. Breakthrough Collaborative also recruits and trains outstanding high school and college students to become teachers and to teach other students about careers in education. This program offers services to students and their families that include academic enrichment, one-on-one tutoring, and secondary and college preparation. For the Breakthrough Collaborative, family support is paramount in ensuring student success. Parents attend parent/teacher conferences, student orientation, and family reunions. Eighty-five percent of Breakthrough “teachers” show a strong interest in teaching following a summer internship.

**Young Audiences Arts for Learning.** This national not-for-profit arts-education organization recently celebrated its 60th anniversary ([www.youngaudiences.org](http://www.youngaudiences.org)). The organization is located in over 20 states. It includes in-school, afterschool, and family programs and allows young people to work with professional artists to learn, create, and take part in the arts. There are family nights that include arts appreciation, productions, and presentations. Over the years a correlation has been shown between student participation in Young Audiences and improvements in their academic performance and standardized test scores, increases in student attendance, and decreases in dropout rates.

A growing number of state afterschool networks are working to expand the connection between afterschool and summer programs and participation in careers and post-secondary education. Increasing family engagement is often an important part of the set of strategies discussed. Along those lines, in June 2012, a successful statewide forum on college and career readiness in Indiana was co-hosted by the Indiana Afterschool Network in partnership with the Commission for Higher Education/Learn More Indiana, American Graduate Initiative, Indiana Department of Education, and the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project (Indiana Afterschool Network, 2012).

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## Recommendations for School and Community Groups

As community or school groups implement family involvement activities in expanded learning programs provided to high school students, the following recommendations will help make the planning and development process easier:

1. Sometimes the parents that need—and may even want—to be deeply involved the most in the success of their high school students, may themselves not have graduated from high school and/or may not have “good memories” of high school. Therefore, a critical starting point is to make family involvement activities relevant for family members. These activities should have a targeted educational focus and be fun. Afterschool, weekend, and summer programs can offer parents a more comfortable, flexible setting in which to engage with their young people and become involved in their education. Creating a program that reflects the desires of the families and the students themselves can lead to offering programming that better matches their interests and needs, helps with program improvements, and increases attendance and parental investment.
2. Afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for secondary students are positive avenues to learn about and experience career and college possibilities. These important learning opportunities for students can be made more meaningful if they include engaging activities to help family members learn about those options, including about how to pay for future post-secondary education.
3. Often afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for secondary students have a variety of school-college-workforce-family partnerships. So it is worth analyzing which of the partner organizations have particularly strong connections to families and then take advantage of those linkages to create the family involvement options. The majority of parents want to be involved in their young people’s current and future education, but many face barriers that prevent them from doing so. Many regular school day programs do not have the resources or the time to reach out to families who are interested but may be reluctant to participate. It is important to take time to identify what resources already exist in the community and enlist their help.
4. Parents, school personnel, and community partners are all stretched for time and resources. Programs should be sure to eliminate duplication and maximize resources when developing the family involvement activities. Does a neighboring community group, 2- or 4-year college, workforce preparation program, or high school have a similar program? They should collaborate and share resources. Aligning the family component to educational goals is a must. Paramount goals are helping more students graduate from high school and preparing students for college and careers. Parents also enjoy activities, however, that offer a chance to socialize and discuss concerns with other parents and staff. So afterschool, weekend, and summer programs can also be an important forum for identifying and providing resources and services that strengthen families as well as connect them more directly to the educational goals.

## For More Information

The following publications are examples that offer suggestions for strengthening family engagement in expanded learning programs:

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Henderson, A. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family/school partnerships*. New York, NY: New Press.

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