

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO WATCH

Communities in Schools of Cleveland County North Carolina

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Urbanicity: Mix of urban and suburban

Location: Cleveland County, North Carolina

Grades: 5-8

21st CCLC Enrollment: 200

Percentage of All Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 85%

Demographics: African American: 84%,
Caucasian: 16%

Hours of 21st CCLC Program Operation:
Monday through Thursday, 2:30-5:30 p.m.

Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships Opportunity Conditions Addressed

Process Conditions:

Linked to Learning
Developmental
Collective/Collaborative

Organizational Conditions:

Integrated

Re-learning Family Engagement

Children and parents vote with their feet. For the Communities in Schools (CIS) of Cleveland County North Carolina, children and families register their positive votes with well-attended programs, events and, overall, robust family engagement with its 21st CCLC. It is a testament to the strength of CIS's program hosted in four Cleveland County Middle Schools that so many young people participate, as do their families, notes 21st CCLC Program Director James King. This is especially notable because students decide to be involved. CIS believes participation in family events is a key barometer for family engagement. But, after hosting a three-day training with Dr. Karen Mapp, a renowned expert on family engagement, James King and other staff realized they needed to relearn family engagement. "We had to rethink and retrain people to think about family engagement as a hands-on learning experience for the whole family," says King. Staff also want to break down false barriers between staff and families and focus more specifically on supporting student learning.

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More Than High Participation Rates and Turnout at Events

CIS implemented change in its program in years past. After a pause in providing busing home for children, CIS staff realized communication with families increased dramatically when parents pick up their children. Staff thought there would be a decrease in participation, but children and families became more engaged. As a result, the program eliminated busing altogether. CIS' Parent University, a program that leads interactive sessions for families focused on topics related to their children's academics, is a strong foundation for beginning a new approach to family engagement. Moving forward, staff want parents to help develop program goals. Several parents have already joined CIS' steering committee.

“At one site, we had a family event with great turnout. The site coordinator took it to the next level to get those families there. She talked with each family leading up to the event about the positive achievements of their children. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and you could feel the positivity with the families at the event.” –James King, 21st CCLC Program Director

TIPS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Family engagement requires constant relationship building, not just with families, but also with school leaders and partners, with other organizations, with community leaders, and others.**
 - o The goal from day one should be to leverage strong, authentic partnerships to support families and children in your program. This takes constant work and will include challenges and setbacks. Strong relationships within the community will yield strong relationships with families.
- **When hiring staff, look for qualified professionals who are rooted in the community they will serve.**
 - o As much as possible, staff should be from and reflect the community they serve. It is especially important that site leaders reflect the community.
 - o Professional development is critical. Through investing in the development of leadership, a site invests in the program. This matters for strong family engagement and vibrant, quality programs.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- **No two 21st CCLC programs will look exactly alike, and there is no cookie cutter program model for a program.** Working with two very different demographic populations, one a working and middle class white, suburban population and the other an African American working class population, has taught CIS that family engagement can look different based on the issues and needs of the community. It is even more important that a site knows and has strong connections with its community/communities when partnering with different communities.

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