



Family Engagement Research Brief

Over the past 100 years, American education has become bureaucratized and professionalized. In many ways, these changes have produced great gains in instructional quality while unintentionally separating parents from many aspects of educational decision making (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). The U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program seeks to reverse this trend by encouraging family engagement at grantee sites.

Historical Background: From Involvement to Engagement

The effort to increase parent involvement started with The National Congress of Mothers in 1897. Their statement of purpose includes this: "...the education of parents for child development; the cooperation of home and school" (Butterworth, 1928, p. 7). Over time, this group evolved into what we know today as the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), with a similar goal of enhancing parent-school partnerships.

The term *parent involvement* has been used to describe the "flow of information from school to parent" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 2) and can be classified in two ways: reactive or proactive. Examples of reactive involvement activities include parents attending meetings and family events, and volunteering at their children's schools. Proactive involvement activities include parents providing homework help, staying informed about school-related events and activities, and following their children's academic and educational progress (Olmstead, 2013).

Both types of activities fall under the family involvement umbrella and are important to student academic achievement and overall educational success. Recently, the term *family engagement* has gained ground as families

and schools have sought to build higher-quality working relationships. Some experts (Baker, Wise, Kelley, & Skiba, 2016) explain the evolution from parent involvement to family engagement as the result of these factors: (a) student populations growing more diverse (Dotger & Bennet, 2010), and (b) the need for today's educators to be aware of diverse family dynamics (Baker et al., 2016).

Family engagement takes a culturally responsive approach to relationship-building with a child's key family members. The collaboration involves school-based educators, out-of-school time practitioners, families and children who build positive and goal-oriented relationships. As one expert explains, "Over 40 states in the U.S. have legislation in place to promote professional development in family engagement in school districts" (Ferrera, 2017, p. 145).

The concept of family engagement "involves support from multiple providers — the family, the school, and the community... [and] centers on learning and self-discipline" (Ferrera, 2017, p. 146). The learning and self-discipline include families becoming involved in their children's schools and education, and school personnel and 21st CCLC program staff learning about and engaging with students, their families and the community that surrounds the school or program site.

Benefits

Students do better in school when their families are involved. Research shows that "increases in frequent and high-quality interactions amongst teachers and parents yielded greater trust and respect, increased social capital for students, and provided more support for student success" (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004, p. 162). According to other studies about the benefits of parent involvement (e.g., Henderson &



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Mapp, 2002; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012), the development of better school–community relationships also contributed to higher student academic achievement.

National Standards

The National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012) provide a framework for schools and out-of-school time programs interested in improving family engagement and its associated benefits. The six standards are as follows:

- **Standard 1:** Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
- **Standard 2:** Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.
- **Standard 3:** Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
- **Standard 4:** Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
- **Standard 5:** Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.
- **Standard 6:** Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

To truly meet the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships through the empowerment of family members, 21st CCLC programs should work first on getting families involved and engaged.

Empowering Families

Families can be successful in the educational environment if they have “learning resources and a wealth of social capital” (Ferrara, 2015, p. 33). The term *social capital* is understood as a form of cultural capital in which social networks are central; success in this area requires reciprocity, cooperation and trust between stakeholders. Families with high levels of social capital can successfully navigate schools and other educational spaces using the relationships they have built with stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, support staff and 21st CCLC staff.

Unfortunately, some 21st CCLC families don't engage with schools or the community because they lack resources such as English language proficiency, financial security or technology (Ferrera, 2015, p. 33). Fortunately, 21st CCLC programs can use family engagement activities to help families gain access to resources that increase their social capital and empowerment.

To increase social capital, 21st CCLC programs may first aim to increase family access to resources and establish trusting relationships through open lines of communication among program staff, families and other stakeholders. In time, “more complex and comprehensive forms of partnerships” can build from this foundation, allowing family members to become active participants in school-community partnerships and to exercise decision-making power (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016, p. 156) alongside program staff and

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stakeholders they have grown to know and trust.

This process should begin with communication that is culturally and linguistically sensitive and responds to the needs of all families. Other fundamental activities include hosting collaborative activities with families and offering community resources and family supports.

Building Culturally Sensitive Environments

Because of increasing diversity among U.S. families, 21st CCLC programs should be ready to serve students and families from multiple ethnic groups who may speak languages other than English.

Given the many different backgrounds of students and their families, 21st CCLC practitioners must understand the cultures of students and their families (King & Goodwin, 2002; NEA & MALDEF, 2010). This understanding helps practitioners relate to family issues and understand the perspectives that shape how families participate in and view the out-of-school time program. Hiring staff members who represent family diversity will help build better connections with families (Kakli et al., 2006; NEA & MALDEF, 2010).

Programs can also bridge the cultural divide by drawing on families' knowledge and skills when training staff (NEA & MALDEF, 2010), remembering that everyone's culture has value and that all families bring a wealth of cultural capital.

In addition, 21st CCLC programs should strive to understand the important differences between groups that at first may seem culturally similar (Garcia Coll et al., 2002). Researchers have found differences between Dominican, Cambodian and Portuguese parents' "beliefs about involvement,

provision of material resources, home-based involvement (e.g., monitoring children's whereabouts, imposing curfews) and school-based involvement (e.g., contact with teachers, participation in school events)" (Calzada et al., 2015, p. 873). A study by Pinder (2008) looked at cultural, ethnic, parent involvement and educational achievement differences among students who were African American, Afro-Caribbean and African. The author notes the need for cultural sensitivity to understand differences between these African heritage groups.

Family Engagement in Practice

As noted earlier, culturally sensitive programs provide materials in languages and formats that their families understand. These programs also incorporate the cultures into their activities by creating opportunities for families to display their heritage through food, music, dance or other forms of expression that honor and celebrate the community's diversity.

Skill-based family engagement activities, shared activities with students and families, governance and leadership activities, and school and community linking activities can help to empower families and increase engagement.

Skill-Based Family Engagement Activities

Skill-based family engagement activities focus on parents and caregivers. These activities strive to boost the ability of adults to support their children's learning and enhance their own development. Examples of skill-based activities include the following:

- English as a second language (ESL) classes for adults
- GED or high school equivalency certificate programs
- Nutrition and healthy living courses
- Courses on best practices in childrearing





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- Workshops on navigating schools, districts and educational programs

Shared Activities With Students and Families

21st CCLC programs offer many ways for families and children to share fun and educational experiences. Such activities enable family members to support students in new ways and connect with new educational topics. Here are examples of shared activities:

- Educational board game nights
- Educational movie nights
- Family collaborative science fairs
- Family college tours
- College and career planning events led by counselors and other trained personnel

Governance and Leadership Activities

Family involvement activities related to governance and leadership provide a voice for families in 21st CCLC programs and draw on their interests and desires to be more deeply involved with the program (Kakli et al., 2006; Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Here are some examples:

- Parents and caregivers serve on a program advisory board.
- Offer training that builds the leadership skills of caregivers (NEA & MALDEF, 2010).
- Family members volunteer to help with administrative tasks, serve as liaisons to other family members, or lead activities for children or adults (The After-School Corporation, 2011).

These kinds of activities increase program resources by making excellent use of the expertise and enthusiasm of family members. Having family members in leadership roles creates a valuable bridge to the local community, as parents and caregivers take

their experiences into the community and build support for the program.

School and Community Linking Activities

21st CCLC programs are well-positioned to link parents and caregivers to schools and community resources (Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Because each program is associated with a school, it can help with forging stronger connections between families and the school, especially when the program is hosted within the school (Kakli et al., 2006). Strengthening these connections is especially important with two groups: (a) parents and caregivers who are wary of schools because of their own experiences growing up and (b) immigrant parents and caregivers who do not understand the role that American schools expect them to play. Family engagement activities can help educate family members about school policies and ways to partner with schools to support their children. Collaborating with schools for this work provides an excellent way for programs to create stronger links to the school(s) they serve (King & Goodwin, 2002).

Out-of-school time programs can provide important family support by connecting families to community services (The AfterSchool Corporation, 2011). Some ways to fulfill this role include sponsoring a service fair where community agencies and families can meet; hosting an on-site health clinic to provide care for children and families; or offering information from community nonprofits in a parent room, pick-up location or on a bulletin board. Here are more examples of school and community linking activities:

- Family educational courses held at school sites by community groups
- School and community food, clothing and supply drives



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- Referring families to social service agencies in the community
- Referring students and their families to free wi-fi zones in the community
- Business coupons and discounts connected to school-provided vouchers

Conclusion

Research has demonstrated that 21st Century Community Learning Centers program sites and other out-of-school time programs that promote family engagement can empower families through culturally sensitive and inclusive activities. These programs provide events that help individuals and families grow, and help family members get involved in their children's education. In doing so, these programs make an impact by raising families' social capital and helping them become advocates for themselves and their children.

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