

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO WATCH

Project Literacy Engagement and Achievement Program (LEAP) Rochester for At-Risk Urban Males

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Urbanicity: Urban

Location: Rochester, New York

Grades: K-6

21st CCLC Enrollment: 250

**Percentage of All Students Eligible for Free
and Reduced-Price Lunch:** 88%

Demographics: Majority African American and
Latino

Hours of 21st CCLC Program Operation:
30 minutes during school day and 9am-3 p.m.
Saturdays, summer weekdays, and school holidays

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

Process Conditions:

Linked to Learning
Relational
Developmental
Collaborative
Interactive

Organizational Conditions:

Systemic
Integrated
Sustained

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Breaking Traditional Boundaries Between School, Community, and Families

For Project LEAP: Literacy Engagement and Achievement Program for At-Risk Urban Males, family engagement is part of an overarching framework of urban transformation. Project LEAP uses an asset-based approach in its work in the low-income neighborhood of Beechwood in Rochester, New York. Project LEAP refutes negative stereotypes of families in low-income communities that reinforce power imbalances between professionals and parents. Project LEAP is designed to intentionally build the capacity of the Beechwood community to support each child's success in school and increase children's quality of life by developing opportunities for families and the community to learn and grow together.

Co-led by the North East Area Development (NEAD) and the University of Rochester as well as other partners, Project LEAP incorporates a unique research-action approach to family engagement. Parents and students are co-researchers and co-authors, trained in qualitative data collection. "Everyone's gathering data so that we can feed it back into practice. When we go into homes, we record our conversations so that data informs our family engagement," according to Professor Joyce Duckles, a lead partner from the University of Rochester.

Home Visits

Home visits are the starting point and, in many ways, the backbone of Project LEAP. Staff recruit families by knocking on doors, specifically targeting boys in grades K-3 who are not involved in any program. Family visits are conducted three times per year.

"Families don't always welcome us in. Initially, there are a lot of porch conversations. But by the third time, we're sitting at their kitchen table," reflects George Moses, NEAD's Executive Director.

Family visits are co-led by a team of three that consists of a parent, a staff person, and a university student researcher.

Family-Focused Plans

Staff realized that having events such as parent nights were not significant for families. George says, "We have food. They'll show up. They'll eat, listen, and then leave. But we realized it didn't mean much."

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Instead of being event-focused and coordinating a calendar of events with little meaning for families, Project LEAP has become more focused on building relationships and supporting parent-led efforts that galvanize existing networks and cultivate community. The program also hosts parent activities that matter more to families and better overlap with their schedules. For example, because high blood pressure is a common issue, Project LEAP hosts blood pressure screenings on Tuesday mornings after student drop off.

Shared Leadership

Family engagement also means family-to-family collaboration and shared leadership. Project LEAP's work helped launch the Beechwood Greenhouse Collaborative. The Collaborative was created by 10 families to address the need for access to healthy food, sustainability, and job training. It operates a healthy corner store and secured land that will become a community garden. The Beechwood Greenhouse Collaborative is spawning other parent-led projects, including a market and a cooking kitchen. Parents will secure the proper certification to manage the kitchen.

“A child doesn't exist in a box by her or himself. There are different family structures. Traditional engagement tends to silo a family, where you're just working with this one family through service delivery. We see the family as a unit and are really working from a model of holistic community development.”—George Moses

Literacy Skills

Literacy is the hook that supports families' involvement in their children's education; and strengthening parent literacy development is also critical. Moses describes family literacy as fundamental to Project LEAP. “The essence of our 21st CCLC work is literacy. We see literacy as freedom. Once you can read, it opens up whole new worlds to people. Family literacy practices matter,” Moses said. At the same time, for families, “Literacy is not just reading books. Authentic literacy is a part of everyday life and everyday living,” George adds. Seeking certification to run a kitchen, developing a business plan for a garden, and launching a fundraising campaign for the Beechwood Greenhouse Collaborative reflect how literacy is promoted for families as well as students. Children participate in parent-led projects and cheer on their parents. Through hands-on experiences, children learn that literacy is important everywhere, not just in school.

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TIPS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Know your community.**
 - o Show up on a regular basis in spaces that matter to families.
 - o Conduct regular home visits.
 - o Collaborate and honor the work of organizations that are working on the ground.
 - o Know the issues that matter to families.
- **Be the change you want to see.**
 - o Know that walking the talk and being authentic is critical, and you must keep learning and growing.
 - o Don't be sympathetic; be empathetic.
 - o Imagine what you would do if you were in someone else's shoes.
- **Recognize that parents are the best experts on their children.**
 - o Recognize and honor families' knowledge of their children.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **A relationship-based model of family engagement can be more meaningful to parents than an event-based model of family engagement.** Instead of featuring events geared toward families as the center of family engagement, consider relationships with families cultivated intentionally over time in schools, in families' homes, and in the community as the main engine of family engagement.
- **Creating economic opportunity for families is critical when working in low-income communities.** Thinking creatively about how to offer opportunities for parents to develop job skills, advance their own education, and secure or create jobs is an important bridge between family engagement and community development.

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