

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO WATCH

Tennessee Opportunity Programs Academics Inspiring Minds (AiM)

Tennessee Opportunity Programs AiM

Urbanicity: Rural

Location: Warren County, Tennessee

Grades: K-8

21st CCLC Enrollment: 500

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

Demographics: 40% English Language Learner

Hours of 21st CCLC Program Operation:
Monday through Thursday, 3-6 p.m.

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

Process Conditions:

Linked to Learning

Relational

Collaborative

Honoring Families' Cultures and Creating Dynamic Learning Opportunities for Teachers, Families, and Young People

The Tennessee Opportunity Programs (TOPS) AiM (Academics Inspiring Minds) serves a demographic of families with historically low rates of parental involvement within the school system and with their children's education. TOPS works to give parents a role in the program and at home. At the same time, TOPS works with teachers to support their understanding of families' needs, especially for the community's large population of English Language Learners, most of whom are Latino. AiM addresses teacher and parent misconceptions about the role of parent engagement. "We've tried to shift attitudes of teachers and attitudes of parents too, working from both sides," says Program Coordinator Nora Wilson. AiM program staff helps to overcome assumptions made by some teachers about families; and, conversely, help parents become more immersed in their children's education.

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Honoring Culture

Whether through leading professional development or one-on-one conversations, AiM helps teachers gain a larger perspective on the realities of families' lives. AiM staff provide concrete information about the heritage and culture of their students' families and both similar and different cultural norms.

“Our biggest work is providing opportunities,” says Jessica Castaneda, the 21st CCLC Coordinator. Kids try experiments they wouldn't ordinarily have the chance to try. Teachers have opportunities to look at and understand parents. Parents receive an array of tools to help them step into more active roles in their children's learning.

Connecting School and 21st CCLC

Communication between teachers and program staff is continuous and includes teachers sharing information about student assignments and program coordinators checking on student progress. Several members of each site's staff are also school day employees of the feeder school.

AiM staff consult with teachers so they are not dismissive of families. They help teachers better understand their differences, especially among those who are new to the country or who do not speak English. AiM staff focus on helping parents recognize and use their own expertise to help their children learn. “This helps them to then take ownership,” of the program and, more broadly, of their role in their children's education, explains Wilson.

Parent-Program Contracts

At the beginning of the year during registration for the program, parents sign a contract about how AiM and parents can partner to enhance their children's education. For example, parents sign a contract agreeing to be involved in their child's homework completion for the regular school day. Parents are encouraged to participate in projects and activities conducted in AiM and to participate in special events related to units of study.

After instituting the contract, AiM saw more parents actively participating throughout the program year. Parents demonstrated increased awareness of what their children should be working on and the skills their students are either gaining or behind in. This resulted in a greater number of parents asking for help and/or suggestions about how to help their children progress. During parent nights and through parent-

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staff discussions, parents receive specific strategies and resources to help them become active stewards in their child's education, including take-home tips for helping their child during daily 20-minute reading sessions.

Friendly Competitions

During competitions and projects, the benefits of parental engagement are clear. Students whose parents are involved consistently do better in competitions and complete more in-depth projects. Families are excited, supportive, and invested in what their students are doing, and this leads to greater success. These families are the best motivators for other families.

Cutting-Edge Curriculum

"We believe if we have really engaging activities, students will share what they've learned with their parents, and parents will genuinely want to get involved," says Jessica Castaneda, the 21st CCLC Coordinator. For example, AiM's make-your-own-gadgets and superhero contests are popular with families.

AiM's hands-on, project-based curriculum supports the school district's learning goals. For example, in response to the district's request to support story development, AiM programs guided students in making 3D characters. This involved an elaborate story and character creation process and ultimately involved students making 3D stop-motion videos.

"One of the local schools had a parent university and, unfortunately, only three parents showed up. The next day, we had an afterschool activity and had over 400 parents show up. We are having open, honest conversations with parents about what they can really do to support their children's learning. —Nora Wilson, Program Coordinator

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TIPS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Remind families who don't speak English that they can support literacy practices with their children by encouraging them to read two books a week for pleasure instead of playing video games.** In addition, encourage families to read in their native languages.
- **Remind teachers that just because a parent or family member doesn't speak English doesn't mean they can't support a child's learning.**
- **Be specific with families about how they can help with their child's homework and lessons.** Be mindful of parents' comfort levels with content.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Design programs so parents pick up their children daily and can check out their children at work.**
- **Maintain an ongoing dialogue built on respect between teachers and families.** Remind everyone that the 21st CCLC needs their help and regular input to succeed. Invite both teachers and families to events, and create opportunities for them see and honor each other's contributions.

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