



21st Century Community Learning Centers

Lessons From the Field: Serving All Students, Including Students With Disabilities



Topic Guide 6

Engaging Families and Communities to Support Inclusion

After reading this guide, you'll be able to...

- ✓ Connect with parents, families and community members to support inclusion.
- ✓ Use enrollment and intake to learn about students and their families.
- ✓ Empower family members as advocates.
- ✓ Establish effective two-way communication with families of students with disabilities.

Tools in this guide include ...

- ✓ An action planning checklist, with links to selected resources.

Partnering With Parents and Families of Students With Disabilities: Why It Matters

Research suggests that families of children with disabilities often experience difficulty providing afterschool and summer care themselves, and they have limited access, real or perceived, to quality options outside the home.^{1,2} Families may hesitate to enroll a child if they fear the program may not be able to support the child's needs or if the child has difficulty making social connections. Some families have described how they struggle to help program staff understand that inclusion is more than allowing a student to be physically present and academically included. As advocates for their children, families often feel they are not being heard.

For 21st CCLC programs, opening the door to students with disabilities can be an opportunity to create one of the most important partnerships for supporting student success — a partnership with the family.³

What are some ways to establish trusting relationships with families? How can program staff reinforce the message that the program welcomes and wants students with disabilities and special needs to participate in meaningful ways?



YOU FOR YOUTH

All *Lessons From the Field* guides on inclusion, as well as other professional learning and technical assistance tools for 21st CCLCs, are available on the U.S. Department of Education's You for Youth (Y4Y) website at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

DEFINITION

How Do Federal Education Laws Define “Parent”?

In federal education legislation, the term “parent” extends beyond natural parents to include legal guardians or other persons standing *in loco parentis* (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare). ESEA § 9101(31)

This guide offers strategies and examples that program staff can use to connect with parents and families and to support them as advocates for their children.

For additional ideas, set aside an hour or so to complete the Family Engagement course on the Y4Y website (<https://y4y.ed.gov>). Or use Y4Y’s one-minute online survey to assess your family engagement efforts (<https://y4y.ed.gov/learn/family/introduction/assess-your-family-engagement/>). You’ll get an immediate score and ideas for improving it!

Connecting With Families and Community Members

Nationwide, 21st CCLC sites serve more than 1.5 million children and youth each year. These students represent all sectors of our increasingly diverse nation, and the students and families in your community are no exception.

Inviting dialogue with families and community members can help staff avoid false assumptions about students with disabilities based on race, ethnicity, language, religion or socioeconomic status. Listening to people’s ideas and concerns enables program staff

DEFINITION

What Is Family Engagement?

Engaging families means building relationships through activities such as helping parents and caregivers develop their own skills, offering educational activities for families and students together, bringing family members into leadership positions with the 21st CCLC program, and connecting families with schools and resources in the community.

to learn about their neighbors’ various opportunities, barriers, struggles and successes. The time and effort required to do this is not wasted: engaging and serving the adults in students’ lives can be as important as engaging and serving students.

To collaborate effectively and to understand the larger community framework, give families and community members a voice. Setting up a community advisory group with representatives from diverse backgrounds can be an effective strategy. (See topic guide 5 in this series for ideas on developing state and local partnerships and topic guide 7 for ideas on working with schools and districts.) When programs are comfortable with and open to diverse students and families, it makes a great difference for youth with disabilities because understandings and norms around disabilities may differ among cultures.

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand the experiences of youth with disabilities in 21st CCLC

Think About It How Inclusive Is Your Advisory Board?

How diverse is your program advisory board? Does it represent the community and the families you serve? Have you considered the following sources for possible board members?

- Public school administration
- Career and technical education
- District student support services
- Resource and referral agencies
- City council members
- Faith communities
- Nonprofit community service organizations
- Developmental disability services
- General and mental health services
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Families of students with disabilities
- Student leaders with disabilities

Connecting to Your Students, Families and Communities

Keith Jones, National Speaker and Disability Rights Advocate

Program planning is always more effective when the community participates. Their involvement in “guiding the ship” makes the program organic and homegrown, even if outside partners are also involved. Remember, there are various cultural norms and interpretations of disabilities within each community or culture, and we need to take those into account when we interact with students. Community members can increase our awareness of these overlapping contexts, and the systemic way disabilities are viewed and talked about within those contexts. They can help us understand what it’s like to be an immigrant child, or a child of immigrants, or a refugee. Or what it’s like to parent a child with disabilities. They can offer suggestions for supporting inclusion (e.g., “If you’re going to tell us you’re targeting underserved students in our community, is it not a reasonable request to hire some staff who come from the community?”). Program leaders can ask community members to share their ideas, experiences and expertise. They can listen and learn. They can make changes based on what they hear. They can recruit families and community members as volunteers. They can keep the conversation going.

environments if you don’t also acknowledge intersections with race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, second language or gender that can impact social, developmental and academic outcomes. These intersections and their impacts may differ for each student and each setting — classroom, out-of-school time program, school or district.⁴ When students with disabilities also belong to minority or marginalized groups, their challenges — and, thus, challenges for all students in your program — might be multiplied by racial or ethnic discrimination. Understanding the big picture can increase your program’s effectiveness in meeting individual needs and including all students.

Using Enrollment and Intake to Learn About Students and Their Families

Intake and enrollment processes can shape a family’s first impression of a program or organization. When families read your program’s enrollment or registration forms, will they see the questions and information requests as an indication that students with disabilities are welcome? Or will the forms come across as a tool for screening out such students?

Developing Inclusive Enrollment or Registration Forms

- ★ Ask for the specific information you need to make accommodations, rather than asking for a diagnosis.
- ★ Request a copy of the student’s IEP or Section 504 plan, and explain why and how the information will be used — and how it will be protected.
- ★ Include consent forms so families can grant permission for program staff to speak with the student’s teachers, therapists or other professionals who can help design accommodations.

Families of children with disabilities often feel they are being screened out of a program before their child has the opportunity to participate because of the enrollment process. Be aware of the power of words, and of first impressions. Make sure your enrollment process and related forms convey that program staff will use information gathered to ensure the best possible experience for the student.



Enrollment forms should include questions about what the child needs and what the parents expect in an out-of-school time program. Don't require families to list the child's diagnosis. Knowing that a child has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), cerebral palsy or a learning disorder doesn't indicate what specific supports a student needs for successful participation in a 21st CCLC environment. In fact, seeing a diagnosis might lead some program staff to make judgments about a student's needs and abilities based on stereotypes or wrong ideas rather than personal interactions with the student.

As part of the intake process, get to know the students as individuals and reach out to their families, who can provide information on how best to accommodate the students. When you ask questions respectfully, families feel you value their input and want to meet their child's needs. Ask questions like *What makes your child smile?* And *What does your child do that makes you smile?* Your program will learn a lot about the youth's strengths and interests, and this information will help you plan appropriate accommodations. You might want to ask *What is challenging for your child? What does it look like when your child faces that challenge? How do you manage those challenges?* Consider creating a list of questions to ask all parents, not just parents who have a child with a disability. You might also want to create a list of questions for the students themselves.

If you encourage families to grant access to their child's individualized education plan (IEP) or Section 504 plan, let them know how these documents can help the program and the child succeed. Also, make sure they know that granting access is optional. For example, the YMCA of the Triangle in North Carolina uses its enrollment form to communicate to families what types of information are useful and how the information will be used, and this explanation lays the groundwork for a collaborative relationship with the family:

The goal of the YMCA of the Triangle is to meaningfully include all youth and provide accommodations in our programs when needed. To help us achieve this goal, we respectfully ask parents or guardians to inform the YMCA, prior to the start of the program, of any special circumstances which may affect your child's ability to participate. By providing information regarding the strengths and needs of your child, the staff can prepare helpful accommodations which will better serve all children in our programs. Upon being informed of such circumstances, the Program Director or other staff member may request a meeting to gather more information and discuss the accommodations that can be created to successfully include your child.⁵

Empowering Families as Advocates

Because family involvement has special importance when a child has a disability, it is addressed in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. This federal law calls for including parents in planning and decision making for IEPs.⁶ Usually, family members of children with disabilities are keenly aware of how important it is for them to advocate for their children, understand their legal rights and learn to navigate the special education system.⁷

Families whose children have experienced exclusion will appreciate being brought in as partners for inclusion. They will also appreciate your help with becoming fully aware of what they can do to advocate for their children. Parents' advocacy helps to ensure truly inclusive programs.

In turn, the parent's perspective as an expert on the child can help you identify the best ways to support the child's participation in your 21st CCLC program. Remember, families experience their child in a variety of settings, so they can offer valuable insights to help the program serve the "whole child."

Story From the Field

The Speed of Trust

Melissa Yuhas, OST Coordinator, Rapid City YMCA

When program staff and parents trust one another and work together, issues can be addressed quickly and effectively, and students benefit as a result. I can provide two examples. One of our 21st CCLC program sites has such a good reputation for serving children with special needs that parents often approach the program directly, or the school refers them. So when parents register their children, they are very up front about their child's needs. Two students, a third-grader and a fifth-grader with Down syndrome, have been part of the program since kindergarten. Because the staff members have great communications with the parents, they can call parents right away when an issue arises, and the parents often give helpful suggestions. These two students are in our summer camp program and, though the parents were a bit apprehensive at first, both surpassed everyone's expectations. Another program includes an elementary school student who has anger issues and is on the autism spectrum. Whenever there is staff turnover, the student's mother helps new staff understand her child and what strategies worked best. This program serves several children with emotional and cognitive issues, and the program leaders report wonderful experiences working with parents.

Three Ways to Establish Trust and Support Advocacy

- ★ Invite families to share what they see as their children's strengths and unique abilities.
- ★ Work with the family to identify accommodations that will best support a child's needs.
- ★ Take a tip from Harder Elementary in California, where staff inform parents of opportunities to advocate for their children. In one case, a mother was empowered to request and receive an aide to support her child in the 21st CCLC program.

Establishing Effective Two-Way Communication With Families

Programs can use words and actions to communicate that students with disabilities (and their families) are welcome. Developing a statement on inclusion, including it in outreach and enrollment materials, and making the materials readily accessible to all members of the community are good first steps. The Wareham Public Schools CARE program in Massachusetts reaches out to families in a variety of ways, including social media, faith-based groups and free family field trips.

Story From the Field

Reaching Out to Families

Directors of Beyond School Time,
Wareham Public Schools, Massachusetts

We have a Twitter page and a Facebook page with about 750 members. We also post to the Wareham Public Schools site and have a monthly newsletter, the *PTA Blast*. Being located at the district office makes it easy for the program to connect with schools and disseminate information. News is translated for families who don't speak English. One parent had a visual impairment, and we enlarged the print for her. To promote our program's commitment to inclusion, we recently had an information table at a home show and visited church groups. We've also made information available at the laundromat, the formula pantry and other places where community members go.

You can also work with school or district special education offices to identify potential student participants, then invite parents to tour the program or to bring their child for a visit. At Gardner Pilot Academy in Massachusetts, 21st CCLC staff and school-day teachers set aside time to visit families in their homes, as a team. By actively seeking participation and input from families of students with disabilities, program staff can empower families to voice their needs and concerns — and set the stage for effective two-way communication.

Opportunities for two-way communication are not limited to formal times or methods. Informal interactions during pick-up, drop-off, or program events throughout the year can help develop relationships, trust and increased understanding of individual students. Grab every opportunity to get input from families about what makes their child unique and special. Seek to understand each student's strengths, not just their challenges. Tell families about the strengths you see in their children. All families, especially those with children who have disabilities, appreciate knowing that others recognize their children's strengths.



Engaging Families and Communities

Action Planning Checklist for 21st CCLC Programs (With Selected Resources)

Know Your Families and Community

- **Use all or part of a Y4Y Panel Discussion**, “Creating a Parent-Community Advisory Board,” in a professional learning session for staff: <https://y4y.ed.gov/webinars/y4y-panel-discussion-creating-a-parent-community-advisory-board>.
- **Identify potential advisory group members** who represent diverse student needs and backgrounds, including students with disabilities.
- **Invite the advisory group to**
 - **Share its vision** for a quality inclusive program that serves students with diverse cultures, experiences and abilities.
 - **Recommend** ways to make programs and policies inclusive.
 - **Collaborate** with families and community members to leverage resources and provide a quality program.
- **Complete Y4Y’s free online course on family engagement for more ideas.** It takes about an hour, but you don’t have to finish the whole course in one sitting. You’ll get a certificate of completion at the end: <https://y4y.ed.gov/learn/family/introduction/>.

Enrollment and Intake

- **Make your program inviting** for families of students with disabilities by developing a statement on inclusion and including it in communications and outreach materials. You might state that you welcome all students and make accommodations based on their individual needs, and explain that you protect confidentiality. You might also seek input from families, professionals and community members. The University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies has published a guide for writing an inclusive policy: <https://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/admissionsll/>.
- **Review your enrollment and intake process.** Make sure it’s respectful, legal and incorporates inclusive language. Gather only the information necessary to support the child.
- **Coach staff to reach out to family members for information that can be used to create and provide accommodations to successfully include their child.** Encourage questions that accentuate students’ strengths. Also ask about challenges so that supports can be put into place to ensure that students are included and have opportunities to experience success.
- **Let parents know why you are interested in information from the IEP or Section 504 plan.** Explain that information will be securely stored, and will be shared with staff only as necessary for the benefit of the student.

Families as Advocates

- **Make families aware** that the 21st CCLC program can be part of their child’s IEP or Section 504 plan.
- **Offer to attend IEP or Section 504 plan meetings** to share information about the student’s participation, interests and interactions in the 21st CCLC program setting. See topic guide 8, “Working With IEPs, Section 504 Plans and Transition Plans,” available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

- **Request information from families in a respectful way.** Always ask about the child’s strengths, interests and abilities, not just needs and challenges.

Effective Two-Way Communication With Families

- **Seek formal and informal opportunities for two-way communications.** Consider using home–program communication logs, gathering useful information through surveys and meetings, conversing with family members during drop-off or pick-up, conducting home visits and involving parents in program activities.
- **Provide staff training on how to gather and use feedback from families.** Use role-play to practice gathering or sharing information in a respectful way.
- **Create space for private conversations** so student information is protected. Refrain from having sensitive discussions in hallways or locations where other students or families might overhear.



YOU FOR YOUTH

Interested in checklists on other inclusion topics? All *Lessons From the Field* topical guides on inclusion contain checklists like this one. The guides are available at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

Notes

¹A. Ceglowski, M. E. Logue, A. Ullrich, and J. Gilbert, “Parents’ Perceptions of Child Care for Children With Disabilities,” *Early Childhood Education* 36, no. 6 (2009): 497-504.

²J. A. Resch, G. Mireles, M. R. Benz, C. Grenwelge, R. Peterson, and D. Zhang, “Giving Parents a Voice: A Qualitative Study of the Challenges Experienced by Parents of Children With Disabilities,” *Rehabilitation Psychology* 55, no. 2 (2010): 139-50.

³A. F. Cross, E. K. Traub, L. Hutter-Pishgahi, and G. Shelton, “Elements of Successful Inclusion for Children With Significant Disabilities,” *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 24, no. 3 (2004), pp. 169-83.

⁴K. McDonald, C. Keys, and F. Balcazar, “Disability, Race/Ethnicity and Gender: Themes of Cultural Oppression, Acts of Individual Resistance,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 39 (2007): 145-61.

⁵YMCA of the Triangle, *Information Form: 2016 Summer, 2016-2017 School Year* (Raleigh, NC: YMCA of the Triangle, 2016), https://www.ymcatriangle.org/sites/default/files/ymca2016_17_yif_fillable_3.pdf.

⁶U.S. Department of Education, *Q and A: Questions and Answers On Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Evaluations and Reevaluations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004), <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CQaCorner%2C3%2C>.

⁷J. Ferrel, *Family Engagement and Children With Disabilities: A Resource Guide for Educators and Parents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, 2012), <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-engagement-and-children-with-disabilities-a-resource-guide-for-educators-and-parents>.

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