

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO WATCH

Washington Elementary School District (WESD) After-School Academy

WESD After-School Academy

Urbanicity: Urban

Location: Phoenix, Arizona

Grades: K-9

21st CCLC Enrollment: 3,000

Percentage of All Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 77%

Demographics: Hispanic: 53%, White: 28%, Black: 8%, Asian: 3%, More than one race: 4%, American Indian: 4%

Hours of 21st CCLC Program Operation: Monday through Friday, 12 hours per day

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

Process Conditions:

Linked to Learning
Developmental
Collaborative
Interactive

Organizational Conditions:

Systemic
Integrated
Sustained

Offer Families a Menu of Supports and Opportunities

With 32 schools and a current population of 23,471, ensuring strong and consistent family engagement practices across Washington Elementary School District's (WESD) many 21st CCLC programs and schools comes with challenges.

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WESD, located in Phoenix, Arizona, implemented several strategies that speak to the central role of family engagement in supporting dynamic, strong 21st CCLC programs. Understanding the importance of linking families and schools, WESD created a program called Family Links (Schools + Families = Student Achievement). The mission of Family Links is to provide engaging, relevant opportunities for families to support the academic lives of their children and to foster community partnerships to enhance the mission of the school. The strategies include the use of sharing individual student data as a core component.

Menu Highlights “Must-Haves” for Families

WESD created a Family Links Menu to offer multiple choices to meet the needs of families and each school. WESD surveys parents to determine class offerings and scheduling. Translators are available for Family Links classes and all materials are provided in English and Spanish. Last year, Family Links programs reached more than 9,000 family members across the district. This program allows for family engagement that emphasizes family-to-family collaboration and shared leadership.

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FAMILY LINKS MENU

MAIN COURSE

Series of classes to share data & support learning

Family Links Grade Level Classes / Design classes for specific grade levels to share individual student data and learn strategies to help parents support the growth of their student.

Family Links Town / Create a town experience hosted by students which showcases learning, data and after school activities.

Take your parents to after school! / Invite parents to attend After-School Academy alongside their child to learn strategies to support their child's learning.

Math/Reading Academy for Parents / Organize a series of classes offered to help parents understand new math and reading strategies, share data and learn how they can assist their child at home.

A LA CARTE

Activities to support learning & the home-school connection

Additional Education Classes / Host classes designed to meet the needs of After-School Academy families such as ELL, parenting, bullying, safety concerns, etc.

Academy To-Go / Create activities to send home with students for families to participate and learn together.

ASA Family Newsletters / Design and distribute a newsletter to After-school Academy families and include ASA highlights and at-home learning activities.

ASA Family-Centered Events / Coordinate events for After-school Academy families to learn and have fun together.

Volunteer Activities / Organize volunteers to assist in the After-school Academy or other family engagement activities.

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“One of our afterschool teachers actually sent out personal invitations to each family to attend an event at her school. 80 parents showed up!” —Deidre Mai, Administrator of Academic Support Programs

WESD 21st CCLC staff use the Family Links Menu like a real menu to plan, structure, and lead activities with families, selecting from an array of options. Options are centered on data and focused on helping parents understand their children’s academic progress. The menu prioritizes sending home activities. Many sites use these activities to get children and parents excited. Family games and other items organized around a theme are sent home in bags with the afterschool logo for each year (such as the After School Avengers).

“We want them at home doing fun learning activities as a family, which provides families with the basic knowledge about their children’s education, to bring home their learning with their parents,” says Kathleen McKeever, Director of Academic Support Programs.

The a la carte menu items encourage parents to volunteer. This helps staff build relationships with parents. These touch points allow for substantive family input.

“Sometimes we’re so survey-driven,” McKeever says. “Every connection with a parent is an opportunity to learn more and becomes a pivotal moment for that parent to provide tangible input in the program,” McKeever adds.

Guided by the menu, family outreach specialists contact each family a few times each semester.

The menu is fluid and adapted and upgraded on an ongoing basis. New a la carte items are added and changed on a regular basis. This is part of the reason the menu system is so successful as both a catalyst and an organizer for family engagement. The differentiation between a la carte and main menu items is used as a mini-rubric or a continuum for family engagement. Main menu items are most critical and mandatory for all sites. A la carte menu items are more flexible and might look different at each site. The system also serves as a quality measurement tool, both ensuring all sites are utilizing the best practices outlined in the menu, and having success in doing so, and also providing a common framework to share and inspire best practices across all schools.

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TIPS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES

- Embed a menu of family engagement into every part of family engagement practices. Consider carefully which family engagement practices are main menu and which are a la carte.
- Reflect on family engagement from a parent’s perspective, and develop your strategies accordingly.
 - o Ask yourself whether as a parent in your school you would you like to participate in the programs and activities.
 - o Are there barriers to participation such as work schedules, transportation challenges, or language?
- Provide ongoing professional development for staff to better understand how to reach and support families.
 - o Facilitate training so staff go out of their comfort zones to meet parents where they are. For example, use skits and role plays so staff explore different situations, perspectives, and needs of families. Situations might include a family that is homeless or a family that is experiencing divorce.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Gather and use data to understand and improve family engagement. Ask deeper questions, and use corresponding data to identify issues preventing families from attending events or responding to outreach efforts. For example, how many calls were made to families, in what languages, etc. Do not let assumptions get in the way of using real information to strengthen programs and increase family participation.

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