



# Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

Leveraging

# **the** Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit [www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds](http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds).

## About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at [www.expandinglearning.org](http://www.expandinglearning.org).

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# Evidence-Based Strategies for Supporting and Enhancing Family Engagement

Family engagement should be a vital component of any strategy to expand learning opportunities for children and youth after school and during the summertime—whether at the organizational, community, state, or national level. Under current federal guidelines for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, “family engagement” takes the form of activities to support parental involvement and family literacy. All centers are required to track and report the number of family members who participate as part of the annual Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS). Consistently those data indicate that the majority of centers do, indeed, provide these important activities for families.

In 2010 alone, 9,139 centers (approximately 85% of all centers funded) served over 250,000 family members; the average adult attendance at adult activities was almost 28 family members. Further, data indicate that of the centers funded in 2010, over 60% served students eligible for free and reduced lunch, indicating that these centers are supporting some of the most economically needy families in the country. Summary data from the past 5 years of reporting indicate that the centers have cumulatively served over one million family members, with the average adult attendance per center rising each year.<sup>1</sup>

[21st Century Learning Centers] are supporting some of the most economically needy families in the country.

1. The data presented here are part of an unpublished data set archived at the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS).

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 Figure 1. 21st Century Community Learning Centers adult family member participation, 2006–2010.

APR Year	School Year Only	Summer Only	Both	Total	N Centers	Avg. Adult Attendance per Center
2006	148,193	14,680	40,170	203,043	9,353	21.7
2007	165,960	12,537	34,249	211,192	8,987	23.5
2008	183,560	12,429	30,554	223,042	9,053	24.6
2009	173,791	14,031	27,199	213,552	8,704	24.5
2010	201,410	13,796	40,936	253,404	9,139	27.7
5-Year Total Parents Served				1,104,233		

Despite impressive numbers of families served, however, many 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other afterschool and summer programs struggle with more fully engaging families. This article presents six research-derived strategies that afterschool programs can and do use to engage families. A set of additional resources for educators and program managers is also included, along with examples drawn from several programs that have experienced noteworthy success in engaging families.

What can afterschool and summer learning programs including 21st Century Community Learning Centers do to support and improve family engagement? The following are six research-based strategies that 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar programs can use to improve their family engagement efforts (Bouffard, Westmoreland, O’Carroll & Little, 2011; Little, 2011).

- 1. Have adequate and welcoming space to engage families.** Helping families feel welcome is an important first step on the road to building trusting relationships with families. 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other similar afterschool and summer programs can help families feel welcome by establishing a “family corner” in which family members can find resources about the program and services in the community. They can also make sure the signage at the center is welcoming and accessible in the languages spoken by the families served.
- 2. Establish policies and procedures to promote family engagement.** To ensure that family engagement is a priority, afterschool and summer programs should include a section on family engagement in their operations manuals, laying out their strategies for engaging families; they should also consider including family engagement as part of their program quality standards. At minimum, this should include conducting at least one family open house per year. Many programs also have created a Family Handbook that helps family members understand the goals and purposes of the center.
- 3. Communicate and build trusting relationships.** Frequent and positive communication with family members is critical to effective family engagement. This means treating family

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members with respect; asking them about their own lives and interests, as well as those of the students in the program; and ensuring that interactions with family members are not solely in response to negative student behaviors or performance. Some programs use a communications log to monitor the frequency and nature of communications with family members.

- 4. Be intentional about staff hiring and training to promote effective staff-family interactions.** At the heart of quality afterschool programs are the staff who run them. Core components of effective staff-family interactions include hiring staff who reflect the demographics of the families served and who are trained in respect for cultural differences, including an examination of their own biases. Once hired, it is important to provide ongoing training and support to ensure that family engagement is part of a staff member's daily duties. In addition to external training, programs can set aside a time at staff meetings to reflect on and improve their family engagement strategies.
- 5. Connect families to each other, to the program staff, to schools, and to other community institutions.** Afterschool and summer programs can play a vital role in facilitating connections, both within the program to other families and outside the program to schools and other community institutions. This role is emerging as particularly important for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which have the opportunity to support a more holistic approach to education—one that requires afterschool programs, schools, and families to partner to provide expanded opportunities for learning throughout a longer learning day and across the entire calendar year.

### **Find Out What Families Think and Need**

New Settlement's afterschool program at CES 64 in the Bronx decided that parent focus groups would be a good way to elicit information and initiate a strong platform for parent decision making in the afterschool program. To attract participants, flyers in Spanish and English were posted around the school and community. When the response was minimal, the site coordinator realized that this was not reaching her families. Since many parents had a history of feeling unwelcome, she had to take a different approach. She began direct outreach with a few parents, who in turn, gave her the names of others who may want to participate. She spoke to them individually, explaining the mission of her program and the need for parental input. In the end, 15 parents signed on to participate in the focus group sessions (The After School Corporation, 2006).

### **Case Management to Support Families' Basic Needs**

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds a Boys and Girls Club in Buffalo, New York, that recognizes the critical role it can play in helping its participants attend the program and school healthy and ready to learn by supporting families' basic needs. It has created a full-time, salaried staff position at each clubhouse to help families deal with social issues, providing triage, case management, and referral services. It has also leveraged other resources to build an on-site kitchen that provides free meals and snacks to the program participants as well as deliberately cooks a surplus of meals and offers them to caretakers in "to go" boxes when they come to pick up their children (Manhattan Strategy Group, 2011).

- 6. Help support families and their basic needs.** Support for families and their basic needs runs the gamut from providing access to community resources to hosting forums and discussion nights to address topics of concern to families to providing training on leadership and advocacy. At minimum, afterschool programs need to help families overcome logistical challenges, such as transportation, that may affect their children's participation. Many programs have community school partnerships. These partnerships can be enhanced in order to provide families with information about community resources to address particular social service needs.

While each of these strategies can serve to engage families, some research indicates that it is the constellation of many strategies that may best support participants. In a recent study of engaging older youth in afterschool, summer, and other out-of-school-time programs researchers found that programs for older youth that were successful in retaining at least 50% of the participants for 12 months or more utilized, on average, eight different family engagement strategies (Deschenes et al., 2010).

Also from the research we know that engaging families is a win-win for programs, families, and afterschool and summer learning program participants. Moving forward, as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative and other efforts to expand learning beyond the school day continue to grow, it is imperative that the spotlight on family engagement, so evident in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, continues to shine throughout the expanded learning movement.

## For More Information

### Family Engagement in Afterschool Programs Resources

Several research-based toolkits and resources have been developed to help educators both in schools and in afterschool programs work more effectively with families.

- **Family Engagement in After School Inventory**  
Developed for 21st Century Community Learning Centers in Texas, this research-based inventory can be used as a self-assessment tool to help programs gauge their current and future capacities to engage families.  
<http://www.texasace21.org/content/prime-blueprint-texas-ace>, (see Appendix 11)
- **Focus on Families: How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School**  
A joint publication of United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Harvard Family Research Project, and BOSTNet, this resource provides four overarching strategies that programs can implement to engage families.  
<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school>
- **BOSTNet Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Tool Kit**  
The Engaging Families Toolkit is aimed at afterschool programs and provides templates for assessing family engagement practices, developing an action plan, and designing a family engagement program.  
[bostnet.org/matriarch/documents/EngagingFamiliesToolkit.pdf](http://bostnet.org/matriarch/documents/EngagingFamiliesToolkit.pdf)

- **Increasing Family and Parent Engagement in After-School**

In this document TASC provides a guide for engaging parents in afterschool programs. TASC explains the importance of engaging families, offers advice and materials for effective outreach to parents, and highlights examples of successful family engagement methods.

[http://www.tascorp.org/files/1455\\_file\\_parent\\_engagement\\_03082006.pdf](http://www.tascorp.org/files/1455_file_parent_engagement_03082006.pdf)

- **Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships**

This comprehensive family engagement resource examines, among other things, how to know whether a school or afterschool program is really open to partnerships and how to develop trusting relationships with families.

[www.thenewpress.com/bakesale](http://www.thenewpress.com/bakesale)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Priscilla Little** is an independent research and strategy consultant who has been working on issues related to effective afterschool and summer learning programs for over a decade. Her clients include national education research firms, state education agencies, not-for-profit agencies, and private foundations. She is currently working for The Wallace Foundation to support its afterschool system-building work, and with the U.S. Department of Education on a research study to investigate good and innovative practices in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. The views represented in this article are solely her own and do not represent those of her clients.

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