
Strengthening Youth Programs through Family Engagement

Family Engagement: Why does it matter in Youth Programs? Programs that actively involve families are able to *help their kids more* because positive family engagement is related to improved academic and developmental youth outcomes. Effective family engagement is more than an occasional potluck, however. It is a sustained positive relationship involving clear communication with mutual responsibility and respect. After school programs, in particular, provide opportunities for family involvement outside of the typical school day and may even boost student participation and achievement in the classroom (IRE 2003, NIOST 2006). Research regularly highlights the critical role family engagement plays in youth success. Programs that do not make this a priority may ultimately be less effective in helping kids: "*... programs that operate in isolation – while they may succeed in providing positive activities in a healthy environment – may not attain their goals for youth unless they also reach out to parents,*" (NIOST 2006, p25).

How are Boston programs engaging families? BOSTnet collects information from over 400 out-of-school time programs in greater Boston and synthesizes their most successful strategies for the after school field. For example, we've found a key "best practice" in family engagement to be the creation of interactive parent leadership opportunities (HFRP & BOSTnet 2006). These findings, however, are not reflected in typical field practice; while 62% of 363 programs responded that they incorporate some kind of parent or family engagement practices, less than half of these have parent volunteers and only a third have family members on their board or advisory committees, (BOSTnet 2006).

Other key points:

Language barriers can derail effective family engagement practices. Nearly 35% of Boston's community speaks a language other than English at home and over 12,000 of Boston's school aged children live in households where no adults speak English "very well," (US Census 2005). Family-focused practices depend on clear communication. Currently, 59% of 363 after school programs reported that they have staff who speak at least one language other than English and 25% of programs speak multiple other languages at their site (BOSTnet 2006).

After school programs are recognizing the need to communicate more effectively. BOSTnet found that while 64% of all surveyed programs report having staff that speaks a language other than English, 74% percent of *programs engaging families* reported that staff speak additional languages.

Program capacity and geographical location impact family engagement availability. While there are over 20,000 after school slots available for school-aged youth in Boston, there are more than 79,000 school-aged residents. The Boston Public Schools alone has an enrollment of nearly 58,000. Obviously, programs that are close to home can improve accessibility. Boston's programs, however, simply do not have enough capacity to service all the children in their neighborhoods.

A snapshot of two neighborhoods: According to BOSTnet data, the neighborhoods with the greatest number of school-aged residents also host the most after school programs - Dorchester and Roxbury. These neighborhoods also report some of the highest incidence parent engagement activities in the city; 72% and 85% of these programs implement family engagement practices, respectively. However, Dorchester-site programs

are able to serve only a fraction of Dorchester's school-age youth with less than 3000 slots reported in the 2006-07 Guide for over 19,000 school-aged Dorchester residents. Similar comparisons can be found in Roxbury where there are less than 2000 reported slots in a neighborhood with over 13,000 youth residents. This has serious implications for the ability of families to be involved in local after school programs.

Older kids and their families need to be targeted. Older youth need greater family involvement in their out-of-school time activities, particularly as their increasing independence exposes them to more potential risks outside the home. Unfortunately, programs for middle and high school youth are typically less effective in engaging families. Despite adolescents' need for the adults in their lives to work together, parent involvement usually decreases in middle school. For example, less than a third of the 229 reported Boston programs who integrate family engagement practices serve youth ages 11 years and older and only 21% exclusively provide after school programming for older kids (BOSTnet 2006).

Programs often recognize that they need help with engagement issues. Many programs that already implement family engagement practices have indicated to BOSTnet that they seek technical assistance to improve their efforts. Specifically, they ask help with creating leadership opportunities for parents and innovative ways to attract greater involvement.

Conclusion: Effective family engagement clearly requires investment from programs, parents, community leaders and resource providers. Getting families involved with after school programs is pivotal to maximizing youth gains both in and out of school. Despite this, **Boston area providers are not reaching families uniformly nor at great enough breadth.**

- After school staff need to know why it's important, what works, and how to implement effective strategies.
- Families must demand more interactive activities with after school providers.
- Policymakers and advocates need to help secure resources and mobilize public interest to fill in existing gaps related to location, local funding investments, and demonstrated commitment.
- Programs themselves need to make family engagement central to their mission, making it a funding and staff priority, and communicate this to the communities they serve.

Contact information:

BOSTnet (Build the Out-of-School Time Network)
11 Beacon Street, Suite 1000
Boston, MA 02108
www.bostnet.org
info@bostnet.org

References.

BOSTnet (2006). *2006-2007 Guide to Boston's Before and After School Programs*
Boston Public Schools (2006). Boston public schools at a glance. Available at <http://www.boston.k12.ma.us/bps/bpsglance.asp>
Boston Redevelopment Housing Authority (2003). *Boston's Neighborhoods*. Available at <http://www.cityofboston.gov/bra/neighborhoods/Neighborhoods.asp>
Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet), (2006) *Focus on Families: How to build and support family-centered practices in after school*
Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), Brigham Nahas Research Association (2003). *Family Participation in After-School Study*
James, D. W. & Partee, G. (n.d.). *No more islands: Family engagement in 27 school and youth programs*. American Youth Policy Forum
National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST), (2006). *Making the Case: A fact sheet on children and youth in out-of-school time*, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College
NIOST and Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE), (2006). *Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS)*
U.S. Census Bureau (2005). American Community Survey Office, US Census