



K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

A Learning Brief

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The K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative is focused on boosting student success among Oregon's middle school students. The Oregon Community Foundation and The Ford Family Foundation are currently funding 21 organizations that provide out-of-school-time (OST) programming (e.g., after school or summer) to rural students, students of color and low-income students. Funded programs emphasize academic support, positive adult role models and family engagement. This learning brief summarizes what is known about the importance of family engagement from existing research and shares what we are learning about the efforts of the Initiative grantees to engage and support families. We hope that this description of the work of the Initiative grantees helps build understanding of the practices and experiences of OST programs in Oregon.

WHAT IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

What the Literature Says

Family engagement is a shared responsibility for schools, OST programs and families. It is more than simply involving families in program activities, but rather, encompasses partnering with families to support student learning and success (Bouffard, et al., 2011). Family engagement can be home-based (e.g., helping students with homework or providing enrichment activities) and school- or program-based (e.g., volunteering or meeting with staff and teachers), and also includes academic socialization, such as family attitudes about the importance of academic success and planning for the future (D'Angelo, Rich, and Kohm, 2012).

Traditionally, family engagement was often identified as a responsibility of parents; research has documented that teachers tend to think of family engagement in a way that excludes their own responsibilities in the partnership. Involvement was something parents did — or did not — do, such as attending meetings with staff or teachers (Theodorou, 2008). However, attention is increasingly being drawn to the shared responsibility of families and programs and schools for fostering meaningful family engagement for student success (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015).

Thus, the goals of family engagement can go beyond mere parental presence at events and instead can include the development or support of parents' efficacy and confidence, building knowledge and skills to support students' education, facilitating parent networks and developing leadership skills (Tagle, 2011). Weiss et al. (2009) state that family involvement is:

co-constructed, shared responsibility because meaningful and effective involvement includes not just parents', caregivers', and teachers' behaviors, practices, attitudes, and involvement with the institutions where children learn, but also these institutions' expectations, outreach, partnerships, and interactions with families. Families, schools, and communities must together construct family involvement, actively taking part and sharing responsibility in building mutually respectful relationships and partnerships (p. 4).

HOW DO GRANTEES DEFINE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

What We're Learning in Oregon

Parents and some grantee staff have a broader sense of what it means for families to support their students' success than fits the traditional definitions of family engagement. When parents were asked how they support their students' success, they often spoke of the importance of providing opportunities like participation in OST programming for their students. A number of parents also spoke of the value of providing structure and meeting basic needs — ensuring students get adequate sleep and nutritious meals. And they spoke of the importance of staying informed and connected — asking their students about their day and communicating with teachers and school staff about what is going on at school.



WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

What the Literature Says

The K-12 Student Success Out-of-School Time Initiative is supporting programs around the state that are providing high-quality OST programming aimed at improving academic success for middle school students. Fostering student success requires the efforts of in-school teachers, out-of-school staff and families. Bouffard et al. (2011) list several positive outcomes for programs that are successful in engaging families, including increased youth participation in programming, increased parent support for learning at home and better outcomes for youth.

Programs that engage families see better youth participation.

This could be due to both the fact that engaged families are more likely to actively encourage student participation and the fact that students are more likely to want to participate in a program in which they see their family invested (Bouffard et al., 2011).

Families who are engaged with OST programming are more likely to support their children's learning.

OST programming can model and assist families with how to be advocates and supports for their children's academic success (Bouffard et al., 2011).

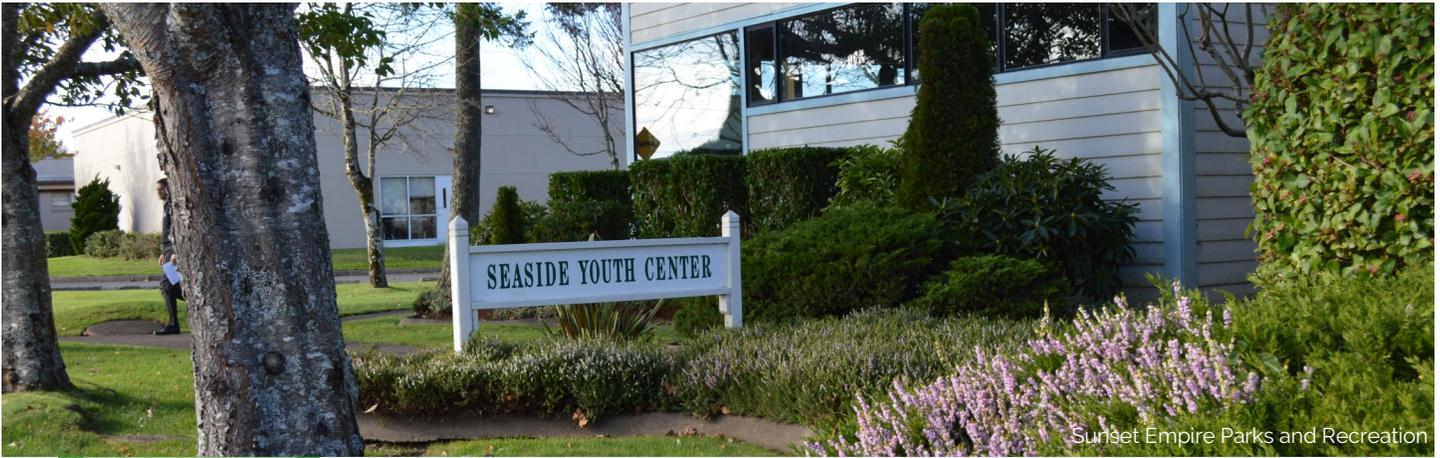
Having families actively engaged in student success can help make schools more equitable and culturally responsive.

Indeed, some programs and school districts that are champions at family engagement see this engagement as part of a larger commitment to social justice, educational equity and improved well-being for all children and communities (Auerbach, 2009; Edwards & Kutaka, 2015).

Schools and OST programs with strong family engagement components see positive outcomes for youth.

These include social-emotional learning outcomes (e.g., increased social skills, reduced aggression, decreased risky behaviors) and academic outcomes such as grades and attendance (Bouffard et al., 2011; Ramos, 2014).





WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT FOR GRANTEES?

What We're Learning in Oregon

The experiences of the K-12 Student Success grantee organizations as well as of parents and guardians of participating youth lend support to the research regarding the positive outcomes of successful family engagement.

Supporting youth participation: Grantee staff members and parents alike explain that in order to engage students, it is necessary to have the support of families. Grantees that have struggled with enrollment describe challenges with spreading the word among families about the program and with gaining parent interest and support for enrolling their students. Once students are enrolled in programming, however, parents describe the peace of mind the programming gives them in knowing that their students are safe, cared for and learning during OST hours while they are away at work. This peace of mind, in turn, motivates families to encourage their students' continued attendance.

Supporting student learning: Many K-12 Student Success grantees are focused on partnering with families to support student learning (see page 5 for examples), and parents and staff members both describe how they are working together to support student success. Parents and staff members communicate with each other about homework assignments and deadlines, as well as about where students are struggling. Staff members help families navigate the school system and advocate for their children. As a result, parents report being more willing and prepared to attend teacher conferences, among other things.

Supporting schools: Parents and program staff both report that parents build community with each other as a result of their students participating in OST programming together. This newfound sense of community can have a ripple effect throughout a school community; program staff at one grantee organization shared that school administrators commented that parents now seem more empowered to advocate for their children and school.

“This program helps me to feel good as a parent by helping me support my child.”

-Parent of Program Participant

HOW CAN PROGRAMS ENGAGE FAMILIES?

What the Literature Says

Components of family engagement

Kreider & Cunningham (2011) outline a framework for family engagement activities that includes six components. Many other researchers identify some or all of these components of family engagement as well.

Family social events: Family social events can take many forms, including potluck meals, game nights, cultural celebrations, talent shows, sports events, outings and trips (e.g., to amusement parks or bowling and holiday celebrations) (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011).

Academic support for children: This component of family engagement focuses on supporting families' involvement in students' learning and success. Kreider & Cunningham (2011) describe a variety of activities that fall within this domain, including program staff serving as liaisons between teacher and schools and families, offering parent-involvement-in-school workshops and providing information about college financing and scholarships. Successful parent advocates have the skills to track students' performance, help students make good decisions regarding educational options, monitor and steer students toward a college path, navigate the educational system, and advocate for programs and schools that will help all students succeed (David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2015; Tagle, 2011).

Outreach, information and communication: Programs can communicate with families in a variety of ways, including newsletters, emails, phone calls, text messages, bulletin boards and suggestion boxes, along with individual, face-to-face communication such as home visits (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011). Successful outreach and communication happens in families' home languages. Further, in order for families to be effective partners and advocates for student success, programs need to share data and information with families, need to solicit information from families and should assist families with getting and sharing needed information with schools. The types of information and data that should be shared among all parties include students' strengths, challenges, grades and attendance (Tagle, 2011).

Adult education courses: Programs can offer, or coordinate with partners who offer, a wide variety of educational opportunities for parents, including education and employment-related courses (e.g., English as a Second Language, GED, resume writing), health classes such as nutrition, and parenting classes (David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2015; Kreider & Cunningham, 2011).

Family support: This component of family engagement involves providing direct services as well as providing referrals to other services to assist families with myriad needs. This may include providing health and dental screenings; referrals for counseling, human services or economic support; and addressing basic needs by offering food pantries and clothing drives, among other services (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011).

Volunteerism and civic engagement: This component of family engagement includes involving families in OST programming as well as connecting and supporting their involvement in other service and leadership opportunities in schools and communities. This could include volunteer opportunities in the program or community, opportunities to give input or take leadership in aspects of the programming, and sharing information about community civic engagement activities (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011).

Tools for Success With Family Engagement

Simply offering one or more family engagement activities does not ensure success. While many schools and OST programs support the concept of family engagement, there are barriers that present challenges to effective engagement. These barriers include lack of time (for both families and program and school staff), cultural and language gaps between families and programs, logistical challenges (such as transportation and work schedules) and fear or mistrust on the part of both families and program staff (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffrey, 2006; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011).

Further, how and whether programs are culturally responsive to the families being served plays an important role in the success of family engagement efforts (Carlisle & Kemple, 2005). Edwards and Kutaka (2015) note that staff attitudes, dispositions and worldviews are critical factors in determining whether programs form constructive partnerships with families.

Therefore, programs can utilize the following strategies when implementing family engagement plans that can set them up for success.

Designate family engagement staff: Many successful programs have a staff member dedicated to family engagement. However, even without a dedicated staff position, programs can ensure through their hiring practices that staff members have the disposition and skills needed to prioritize and excel at family relationship building (Bouffard et al., 2011; Kreider & Cunningham, 2011). In addition, programs should strive to have family-focused staff who ideally share families' experiences and backgrounds. These staff should utilize informal contact and communication with families, and communication should ideally happen in families' own languages (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Resto & Alston, 2006). Holloway & Kunesh (2015) stress the importance of staff and teachers learning as much about families' backgrounds as possible, including attending community events or making home visits.

Understand and meet family needs: Programs can build relationships with families (which in turn can foster family engagement) by ensuring that programming meets families' needs. This can mean addressing logistical needs (ensuring programming hours and transportation options suit families' needs, etc.) as well as ensuring that the content and approach taken by the programming are what families want and need (Bouffard et al., 2011). Kakli et al. (2006) stress the importance of soliciting family input and focusing on family assets in order to ensure that programming is culturally responsive.

Communicate regularly and effectively: Regular and effective communication builds trust. While programs should use multiple communication strategies (such as newsletters, emails and event invitations), face-to-face and personalized communication are crucial for building relationships with families (Bouffard et al., 2011). In order to make explicit to families a program's commitment to family engagement and cultural relevance, Goodwin, King, & American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2002) suggest that the program's written commitment to family engagement should include an explicit commitment to "meaningful and culturally responsive parental involvement."

Provide avenues for families to connect and to take on leadership roles: Programs can foster connections between families and can connect families to leadership opportunities within the program, the school or the larger community. Families that are connected to each other and committed to the program, school and communities are more likely to engage in the program and act as advocates for their students' success (Tagle, 2011).

Pair family engagement efforts with other activities and make students the focus: Programs can pair or embed family engagement efforts into other efforts with which families are already involved (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011; Ramos, 2014). For example, programs can coordinate and consolidate their events with school-related events. Programs also can consider partnering with other community organizations and resources, such as co-hosting a family art night at a local museum. Furthermore, making students the focus is an effective strategy to engage families. Programs can showcase student artwork, for example, at a family event, even if the artwork itself is not the primary motivation or goal for the event (Kreider & Cunningham, 2011).

Use a variety of engagement opportunities and strategies: There is no one way to “do” family engagement. Successful programs have multiple opportunities for families so that families can engage in the ways that are most appropriate, comfortable and practical for them (Bouffard et al., 2011).

Make family engagement a key component of program quality: Programs should make an explicit commitment to family engagement and embed family engagement into their definition and monitoring of program quality (Bouffard et al., 2011).



HOW ARE GRANTEES ENGAGING FAMILIES?

What We're Learning in Oregon

The K-12 Student Success Initiative grantees are implementing a variety of family engagement activities that include family social events, academic support, outreach, parent education, family support and volunteerism. About half of grantees report that they communicate through established mechanisms such as newsletters, e-mail or events, whereas half describe communication as more informal or irregular. Almost all grantees are engaging families in at least one of the following: planning, implementation, management, evaluation or improvement of the program — often through informal or formal gathering of parent feedback, such as end-of-year surveys.

The family engagement efforts of two grantees are described on the following pages; these examples illustrate particularly robust and responsive approaches, but it is important to note that these are not the only Initiative grantees with strong family engagement programming.



HOW ARE GRANTEES ENGAGING FAMILIES?

What We're Learning in Oregon

Adelante Mujeres

Adelante Mujeres, a community-based organization in Washington County, has received Initiative funding to support its Chicas Program, which provides after school and summer programming for Latina students. Adelante Mujeres also has robust parent engagement and family support services. A dedicated parent coordinator on staff helps provide family support, and program staff members, who all share families' cultural backgrounds, provide individualized **outreach** to families in Spanish through phone calls and home visits. The program provides **academic support** for families in a variety of ways, including by helping students and families understand and complete forms and other school requirements, explaining the American education system to families and helping families schedule and prepare for school conferences. Staff members sometimes accompany families to these conferences. The program also provides **adult education** courses, including the "Journey to College" workshop series (focused on college scholarships and financial aid processes along with career readiness), an adolescent development workshop and nutrition classes. Program staff members provide **family support** by assisting families with myriad needs, such as needs related to the health care system, housing needs and referrals to counseling and other services. The program also encourages **volunteerism and civic engagement** among families: parents volunteer with the program, fundraise for scholarships and seek opportunities to influence school climate. In addition, a parent holds a leadership position on the Chicas Parent Leadership Group, and program staff members have mentored this parent to give her the opportunity and skills to participate in a community leadership group in Washington County. Furthermore, the program coordinates community service events for families and has a family leadership group that plans social events.



Hacienda CDC

Hacienda Community Development Corporation (CDC) provides OST programming located at the organization's affordable housing developments in Portland. The families of the students in the program for the most part are recent immigrants to the United States. Program staff can conduct **outreach** in more informal ways than many other grantee programs because the program is co-located where families live; staff can easily escort children home to speak with parents and parents can easily drop by the program site to ask staff questions. Like Adelante Mujeres, Hacienda places an emphasis on **academic support** for families: staff members often translate and help families complete required forms and even help families enroll children in school. The program invites school staff to speak with families at the program site, and staff members drive families and sometimes accompany them to conferences with school personnel to help break down barriers to participation. Families are encouraged to participate in **adult education** provided by the program that is focused on helping families advocate for their children within the American education system, and understand nutrition, digital literacy, and even bike riding and bike safety. Parents **volunteer** with the program in ways that feel comfortable to them; they chaperone field trips, read to youth, help youth with homework, teach skills such as tamale-making and embroidery, and help care for the program site.



SUCCESSSES WITH ENGAGING FAMILIES

What We're Learning in Oregon

Successes

The K-12 Student Success grantees have achieved success in a variety of areas related to family engagement, including strategies related to relationship building, dedicated staffing, showcasing students and creating roles for parents.

Relationship building: Some grantees have purposefully and successfully built trust with families. These grantees have established personal, one-on-one relationships, and staff at these grantee organizations stress that they listen to and respect families' voices. For these grantees, families are often considered recipients of services and support as well as contributors to the success of the program, students and the community at large. Program staff members prioritize responding to family input and requests, and parents of students at these programs contrast the difference in relationships they have with program staff as compared to school staff.

Dedicated staffing: Those grantees that are most successful with family engagement have dedicated family engagement staff positions and/or staff who are linguistically and culturally similar to the students and their families. Building trusting relationships takes time and takes personal connection and understanding, all of which is much easier to accomplish with dedicated staff who share families' backgrounds. Dedicated staffing also alleviates, at least to some extent, the challenge of capacity that many program staff face -- having staff focused on family engagement does not mean that program staff working with students don't engage with parents, but that dedicated staff provide resources for additional support and can help greatly in coordinating family engagement efforts more generally.

Showcasing students: Grantees report that the most successful family engagement events are those in which students take the lead in planning the events or in which student projects (e.g., art work, demonstrations) are featured. In addition, some grantees are deliberate about providing positive feedback to families about their students' participation, accomplishments and strengths. Many families appreciate a chance to celebrate their students' strengths and achievements, especially when school-related events (such as parent teacher conferences) are often focused on challenges students may be facing.

“ I don't really trust anyone with my kids, but I do trust [program staff]. ”

-Parent of Program Participant

Clear roles for parents: Grantees who feel more positive about family engagement tend to have more opportunities for families to volunteer or otherwise contribute to the program. These grantees have opportunities for families to chaperone activities, mentor students or lead activities (for example, a mother at one program leads a gardening unit, and parents at another program lead robotics groups). Family members at other programs donate supplies or food, and cook and clean. These opportunities allow program staff and family members to forge relationships, allow family members to see firsthand what goes on during programming, and ultimately can enhance family support and engagement with the program. It is also important, however, for grantees to understand the constraints on the ability of families to engage and to take these into consideration when designing opportunities for family engagement.

“ I want parents to be partners. I don't want them to defer to us as experts. ”

-Grantee Program Staff



Building Healthy Families



CHALLENGES WITH ENGAGING FAMILIES

What We're Learning in Oregon

Grantee staff and families identify a variety of challenges related to family engagement. Most of these challenges are related to outreach, family situations, program limitations and the developmental stage of middle school students.

“We are thinking of creating an email address for the parents because almost none of them have one, and sometimes it's really challenging contacting them all over the phone.”

-Grantee Program Staff

Outreach challenges: Grantee staff explain that multiple methods of outreach are necessary; some families do not have email, while others prefer to communicate via social media. Grantees that have tried newsletters have found that many families do not read the newsletters (or the newsletters never make it out of students' backpacks). One-on-one contact through phone calls and home visits tends to be most successful, but these methods are time consuming and not always practical, especially as programs grow. Language barriers also present a huge challenge to outreach and communication. While many programs that serve Spanish-speaking families do have Spanish-speaking staff, some grantees are serving families with a variety of home languages. The level of outreach varies widely among the grantees. Some sites conduct outreach to families primarily to publicize the program and generate enrollment. In contrast, other sites consider family outreach and engagement a primary program function central to accomplishing program goals.

Other demands on family time and attention: The most often cited challenge to family engagement is simply how busy parents are and therefore how difficult it is for them to have the time to engage with programming. Many families work during program hours or hold multiple jobs with shifting schedules. Transportation is a barrier for many families. In addition, many families are struggling with challenges such as substance abuse and incarceration, and some participating students are in foster care.

Successfully engaging families who are struggling with poverty and related challenges is a primary concern for the grantees; those families that are most difficult to reach are most likely those families who could most benefit from additional supports. Grantees also explain that even for families without these serious challenges, engagement can be difficult with parents who may, due to their own past experiences, lack trust in the educational system.

Program limitations: While some grantees have dedicated family engagement staff, most grantees do not. Family engagement requires an investment of time and resources. For many grantees, limited staff resources are focused on student programming rather than on families more broadly. Further, for some program models family engagement is a more difficult fit. For example, some programs take place exclusively during traditional work hours or follow curricula and structures that do not provide easy opportunities for parent volunteers. Finally, grantees who serve immigrant and other culturally diverse families can struggle to provide linguistically and culturally relevant staff, which makes connecting with families more challenging.

Developmental challenges: Engaging families in middle school programming is more challenging than engaging them in the elementary years. Some grantees explained that families with middle schoolers may also have younger children and therefore cannot engage with middle school activities due to childcare constraints. Furthermore, parents themselves pointed out that middle school students do not want their parents as involved as younger students do.

“Parents whose kids are on the right track are easy to reach. Other parents are harder to get ahold of.”

-Grantee Program Staff



OSU Smile

ABOUT THIS LEARNING BRIEF

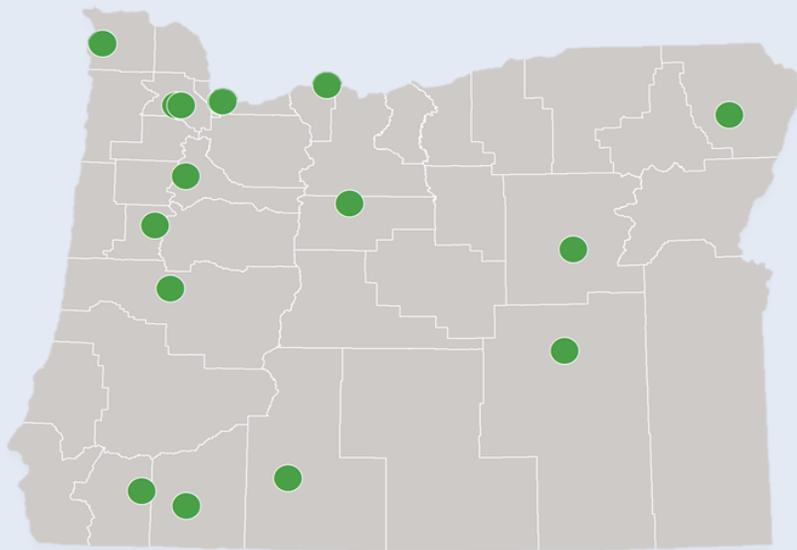
The K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative began in late 2013 and is currently ongoing. The goal of the Initiative is to help close the achievement gap for students in Oregon by raising awareness of the importance of supporting students in their middle school years and the valuable role of out-of-school time (OST) programs in supporting student success.

Through the K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative, The Oregon Community Foundation and The Ford Family Foundation are currently funding 21 organizations that provide OST programming (e.g. afterschool and summer) to rural students, students of color and low-income students. These programs emphasize academic support, positive adult role models and family engagement.

This learning brief summarizes what is known about the importance of family engagement through existing research as well as the successes and challenges of the Initiative grantees in their engagement of families. Information included in this brief was gathered through Initiative evaluation activities completed to date — these include literature review, interviews with grantee staff and leaders, the Youth Program Quality Assessment process and focus groups with parents and guardians. This brief is one of several developed and published by the Research Department at The Oregon Community Foundation to share what we're learning during the Initiative with practitioners and other stakeholders, in order to build understanding of the practices and experiences of OST programs in Oregon.

Cover Photo: Oregon MESA

2016 K-12 STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE GRANTEES



21 Grantees
are currently funded
through the K-12 Student
Success Initiative.

Adelante Mujeres
Building Healthy Families
Camp Fire Columbia
Centro Cultural
Chiloquin Jr Sr High School
College Dreams
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

Eugene School District 4J
Grant School District #3
Hacienda CDC
Hood River County SD
Human Solutions, Inc.
I Have a Dream Foundation
Kids Club of Harney County
Kids Unlimited

Latino Network
Open Meadow
Oregon MESA
OSU SMILE
Self Enhancement, Inc.
Sunset Empire Parks and Recreation District

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Suggested Resources for Practitioners

Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in Afterschool (2006)

Promising Practices for Family Engagement in Out-of-School Time (2011)

Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships (2007)



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