

## **Section 2: Parent Engagement**





## Why Parent Engagement?

Educators play a major role in teaching our students anywhere from academics to Social Emotional Learning (SEL) under a school setting, but it is the caregiver of each student that help nurture SEL at home. Parents and after-school staff working together is a powerful partnership and supports the student's learning. Parent engagement boosts students' self-esteem, helps them be more connected to the after-school program staff and classmates, and helps in forming trusting relationships.

According to research, having parents engaged in their student's education and after-school programs will positively impact their academic achievement and their SEL skill development. Parental engagement helps reduce truancy at school, improve behavior, and leads to a higher graduation rate. This connection to school and after-school programs may strengthen the relationship between youth and parent.

"Furthermore, studies have observed these positive outcomes regardless of students' ethnic or racial background or socioeconomic status, noting that students at risk of failure have the most to gain when schools involve families" (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouse and Gonzalez, 1997; Henderson, 1987).

<https://www.projectappleseed.org/barriers>

## Potential Barriers to Parent Engagement

Despite having an understanding about the importance of parent involvement it isn't always simple. There is a range of barriers that one may encounter when taking on the initiative to increase parent engagement. For instance, the following are examples of some of those barriers according to Project Appleseed (2018).

**Limited family resources.** Lack of time is the major reason given by family members for why they don't get more involved. Lack of transportation and child care also keep families from participating (Caplan, 2000).

**Parents' lack of comfort.** Some parents feel intimidated and unwelcome at school. Many parents had negative school experiences themselves or are unfamiliar with the American culture that they do not want to get involved or feel unsure about the value of their contributions. Barriers are also created by parents who have feelings of inadequacy or are suspicious of or angry at the school (Jones, 2001; Caplan, 2000; Liantos, 1992).

**Tension in relationships between parents and teachers.** Parent and teacher focus groups, conducted around the country as part of the Parents As School Partners research project, identified common areas of conflict between parents and teachers (Baker, 2000).

**Parents felt that teachers waited too long before telling them about a problem and that they only heard from teachers when there was bad news.** Most parents felt they didn't have easy or ongoing access to their children's teachers and that teachers blamed parents when children had problems in school. Some parents felt unwelcome at the school, believed schools didn't really want their input, and thought communication was a one-way system with schools sending out information. Parents felt they had few, if any, opportunities to share ideas with the school.

**Lack of vested interest.** Many families don't see the value in participating and don't believe their involvement will result in any meaningful change (American Association of School Administrators, 1998).

**Difficulties of involvement in the upper grades.** There is typically less parent involvement at the middle and senior high school levels, as adolescents strive for greater autonomy and separation from their parents. Families often live further from the school their child attends and are less able to spend time there (Caplan, 2000).

## Top 6 Barriers to Family Engagement

The HuffPost article, "Top 6 Barriers to Family Engagement with School", written by Elizabeth Breese, PhD, illustrates guardian/parent input on the family engagement barriers with schools. After having 18,000 guardian/parent surveyed, the data results are similar barriers that after-school programs encounter with parent engagement.

- 54% responded that their schedule interfered with them being involved in their child's school
- 24% responded that after-school programming played a role with their involvement with the school
- 23% responded that the school staff seemed too busy
- 21% responded that they were apprehensive in bringing up concerns to the school because they believe their child would be treated differently
- 19% responded that transportation was a challenge
- 18% responded that the school provided minimum information about involvement opportunities.

## How to Address the Barriers

Some barriers are easier to address than others. When it comes to transportation, child-care, and the cost of attending, programs can attempt to offer solutions. Potentially children can come with their parents and a location can be established to support the supervision of the children during an activity or meeting. Bus tokens or ride-sharing is an option for transportation.

However, the most complicated of barriers takes more thought and reflection. It starts with a relationship. Are there moments when the program staff see parents when they are picked up or dropped off? Those are precious moments of a brief connection and can start the journey of engaging with parents. A pleasant smile, a word of encouragement, a nod of understanding and a space to talk about their child even if only for a few seconds.

Is the space inviting for parents? Maybe a bulletin board with parent activity information, something that creates a warm and welcoming environment? Potentially there could be a room for parents to connect after dropping off their child, or a book exchange, or toy exchange. Making parents feel welcome is important.

But more than feeling welcome, are parents a part of the ongoing work of the program? Do they have input into changes? Are they asked about how things are going and if they have suggestions? Are parents involved in planning activities? If parents are asked to be a part of the process, their role should be clearly defined.

During a two-year SEL and Parent Engagement project in Chicago, consultants worked closely with programs and there were many steps taken to address the issues that stood in the way of parent engagement. Throughout this work, programs identified the following outcomes and activities as ways to address some of the barriers of family engagement.

- Creating informative monthly newsletters for parents regarding the activities taken place in the program.
- Being intentional in contacting parents about the participants positive behavior rather than just focusing on the negative ones.
- Hosting a program open house for parents that required a review of the after-school program.
- Staff members routinely reviewing participants academic grades and supporting them to achieve their academic goals. This activity helped build a healthy collaborative relationship between parents and staff.
- One after-school program created its first annual workshop for graduating 8th graders that focused on identity, providing an opportunity to learn about high school life.
- Offering fun activities at school that engage both parents and students and involve the after-school staff.
- Promoting community involvement and support through trips, learning activities, and service.