Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Programs Toolkit

Tools to Strengthen After School and Youth Programs by increasing Family Involvement

A publication of Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOST*net*)
11 Beacon Street, Suite 1000, Boston, MA 02108

About Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOST*net*)

"20 years of building a strong network of out-of-school time opportunities for children and youth." BOST*net* envisions a future in which all families have access to a rich network of out-of-school time opportunities that challenge, reward, and inspire children and youth. Our mission is to enhance the quality and increase the capacity of the out-of-school time field. A pioneer in building Boston's network of children and youth programs, BOST*net* was founded in 1987, as Parents United for Child Care, with the goal of increasing access to quality and affordable child care in Massachusetts. After 20 years, we have grown into a professionally managed organization with a broader focus: ensuring that children and youth are well cared for during out-of-school time (OST) hours. BOST*net* pursues its mission, through a powerful network, by providing resources to low- and moderate-income families, children & youth programs, and local and state policymakers. We serve as a resource, a partner, and an advocate. BOST*net* may be contacted by phone at 617 720-1290, by email at info@bostnet.org or by mail at 11 Beacon Street, Suite 1000, Boston, MA 02108. www.bostnet.org

About the United Way of Massachusetts Bay

Since 1935, United Way of Massachusetts Bay has brought people and resources together to improve lives and strengthen the neighborhoods of Greater Boston. We believe that children are our region's greatest asset. By helping each child reach his or her full potential, we will build the foundation for a strong, stable region and vibrant economy with the promise of a brighter future for everyone. United Way is leading change throughout Greater Boston by advocating for and driving public awareness of critical issues, empowering volunteerism, building partnerships across the region, and collaborating with a network of more than 250 partner agencies. The perspective gained through these relationships and the ability to unite and apply resources where they are needed most is a critical role uniquely served by our organization. In 10 years, Greater Boston will be regarded as the best place in the country to raise a child. We will achieve this vision by helping adults find family-sustaining jobs and affordable housing, by ensuring that basic needs are met, by creating opportunities for youth, and by strengthening the environments that nurture the healthy development of children.

About the Initiative: Engaging Families in After School

BOST*net* has strengthened programs' capacity for engaging families to improve youth outcomes through **The Engaging Families Initiative** (EFI), one of four national Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiatives, which were funded by the Wallace Foundation and focused on improving learning outcomes for children ages 6 to 10 year through activities outside of traditional school. The goals of EFI were to increase family involvement, engagement, and leadership in children's academic achievement and informal learning. The initiative worked with 9 Boston-based after school providers that primarily serve Black and Latino students, ages 6 to 10 years. Over 4 years, BOST*net* provided technical assistance, operational support, and connection to community resources from local organizations. BOST*net* conducted regular meetings for EFI program coordinators to share best practices. EFI promoted parental involvement in after-school programs in two primary ways: 1) by providing financial support for parent outreach and program activities; and 2) by providing technical assistance. Financial support was for staff time to conduct parent outreach and communication, and to cover costs of family activities, provide transportation, etc. Technical assistance was designed to give programs information and strategies to enhance parent involvement and to link programs with community resources. The tools in this publication are drawn from EFI.

How to Use this Toolkit

Through the 4-year Engaging Families Initiative, BOST*net* worked with after school programs to develop tools and strategies to help you improve how you involve families in your program and in the success of their children. These strategies were evaluated by the Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE) at UMASS as powerful tools for promoting self-assessment of program practices; and as feasible and practical strategies for enhancing parent involvement in after school. This Toolkit summarizes best practice tools and strategies from the Engaging Families Initiative.

In the Engaging Families Toolkit, you can start off by assessing what stage your program is at with Family Engagement. Whether you are just starting to think of involving parents in your programs or already hold family nights or already have parents involved on a program advisory board, you can use **The Family Engagement Checklist** to find out if you are at a Basic, Intermediate or Advanced Level.

You may then identify priority areas for improvement and develop a **Family Engagement Action Plan** that will guide you in taking the next steps toward engaging families in your program.

A strength of after school programs is that you are able to check in with a family member of a child *every* day you operate. Use **The Family Communication Log** to identify areas for improvement in your parent communications to ensure that you are making the most of this very important opportunity to touch base with parents.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Making Parents / Families Feel Welcome and Valued in Out-of-School Time Programs

How do you involve and engage families in your out-of-school time program? Research shows that family engagement in after school can lead to increased family involvement in children's education and school, improved relationships between parents and children, and improved after school programs. Please use this tool to get started on improving family involvement and engagement in your programs! Through BOST*net*'s Engaging Families Initiative, this checklist has been tested by Boston-area programs to help them assess their own strategies. Whether you have a history of making family engagement a priority or are just recently considering the needs of families in your programs, BOST*net* lauds your efforts. Please review the following checklist to assess whether your program is at a Basic (Level 1 – Parents and families attend program events and communicate with staff periodically), Intermediate (Level 2 – Family engagement is a core principle in the overall program development), or Advanced (Level 3 – Parents are acting on behalf of the program and their children in after school) level in involving families in programs. Using the information from this checklist, BOST*net* urges you to seek additional resources to implement family engagement practices to improve your programs.

11 Beacon Street, Suite 1000, Boston, MA 02108   t: 617.720.1290 f: 617.720.1291 tty: 617-720-1292 web: www.bostnet.org   email: info@bostnet.org

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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY
CHECKLIST

Making Parents / Families Feel Welcome and Valued in Out-of-School Time Programs

PROGRAM NAME: _____

Completed by: _____ **Date Completed:** _____

LEVEL 1 - (Basic) Involvement & Engagement Strategies					
	STRATEGY	Rarely	Some-times	Consistently	Priority
1	There are signs welcoming parents into the program space.				
2	There are signs or a person directing parents where to find their children within the building/program.				
3	Staff greet parents in a friendly, respectful manner at pick-up time. Staff can address parents by name.				
4	Staff ask parents how they are, how do they feel. Good Day? Bad Day? Compliment them.				
5	At family and program events staff greet parents in the front of the room or building when they arrive. For example there are greeters, and tour guides on hand.				
6	Staff introduce parents to each other.				
7	Staff make an effort to communicate to each parent something interesting /positive that their child did or said at least once a week.				
8	Staff ask parents regularly for input about their child's needs.				
9	Program has a space where parents know that information/communication is available for them - a "Parent Comfort Corner," a lounge, a corkboard, a table, a shoetree, etc.				
10	Program has community resources available for families. The area that resources are located allows for privacy and confidentiality. Resources may include: mental & physical health, nutrition, housing, schools, heat, freebies, etc.,				
11	When communicating verbally or in writing, staff are specific in what they ask of parents –they give dates and times of events, what they need, supplies, a potluck dish, how the parent can be involved, etc.				
12	Program hosts at least one annual open house to attract and inform new families and recognize existing ones.				
13	Program holds periodic parent orientations - at different times and dates to allow for more parent participation.				
14	Program has a clear and concise "Parent Handbook" that explains all program policies and procedures that families need to know. Family friendly language is used, not jargon or acronyms, in all written communications to families.				
15	Staff phone parents to remind them of meetings and call them after to thank them or tell them that they were missed. Program personalizes written invitations and requests.				
16	Family activities are planned at various times of the day or week and take into account the parent's work schedule.				

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LEVEL 2 (Intermediate) -

	STRATEGY	Rarely	Sometimes	Consistently	Priority
1	During Staff Orientation the program has training on how staff can make an effort to understand and respect cultural differences, to be non-judgmental, and keep an open mind about all families.				
2	Staff receive training and support in being aware of their own "cultural lenses" and/or biases, and how to be respectful of families and children no matter their backgrounds and cultural identifiers such as ethnicity, education level, race, sexual orientation, employment status, language, disability, socioeconomic status, etc.				
3	Program communicates with families constantly, using flyers, newsletters, phone calls, e-mails, welcome packets, coffee hours.				
4	Program has a parent suggestion box and staff are prepared to address parents' suggestions constructively.				
5	Staff ask families what they want and need and really listen to their answers. Staff address all issues or concerns that parents bring up no matter how small.				
6	Staff keep parents informed of any major policy change that will affect them.				
7	Program makes on-going feedback forms available - Allows families to prioritize-to decide what activities are most important to them.				
8	Staff help parents identify and interact with staff informally. For example program uses a photo board, rotating staff "greeter", informal social events, has parents and staff serve together on committees, staff /parent talent night, etc.				
9	If the staff doesn't speak the languages of all families, the program uses interpreter services for communicating verbally and in writing.				
10	The program makes childcare available for younger siblings at meetings/conferences.				
11	Program offers informal social events or activities that are fun! For Example: Mom's Night/Day Out, Family Craft Night/Day, Family Recreation Day/Night, Parents/Couples Night Out, Dad's Day, Potluck dinners, etc.				
12	Program offers activities for both parents and staff together: Exercise classes, art workshops, first aid course, etc.				
13	Program provides refreshments and transportation for meetings/events, etc.				

	Strategy	Rarely	Sometimes	Consistently	Priority
14	Program helps to provide a bridge between the family and the child's school if needed.				
15	Program helps to support families' involvement in their child's academic and informal learning by holding events connected to their child's learning. For example a Family Literacy Night , Science Night, Health Care Day, Math Night, Make It and Take It Night, family fishing expedition, art walk, etc.				
16	Staff nurture parents and focus on the family. Staff give them time to talk about themselves instead of only talking about their children. They meet the needs of the adult and not just the child.				
17	Program hosts parent forums and/or discussion groups.				
18	The program cultivates volunteers and invites the larger community in to support the program. Staff invite parents to participate in program activities and/or field trips. Staff invite parents to help them locate resources to support program activities.				
19	The program publicly recognizes volunteers: a program newsletter that thanks all the parents and families that have been involved or helped out the program in any way the month before.				
20	Staff conduct formal and informal surveys on a regular basis.				
21	Staff take pictures/videos of the children engaging in activities that parents can watch at the program or take home.				
22	Staff invite parents to make recordings of them reading, singing or talking and make the tapes available for children on a daily basis.				
23	Staff invite families to share family traditions - Cook family recipes,send in photos, help plan a special event related to their cultural background.				
24	Staff encourage children to keep a daily journal - children can keep photos, drawings, stories, that they can share with their parents at the end of the day.				
25	Staff work with the children to plan and host a "Parent Appreciation Day/Night/Week - Children make special badges, prizes, cook a special meal, make gifts, perform songs, etc.				

LEVEL 3 (Advanced) - Strategies to Develop Family / Parent Leadership

	STRATEGY	Rarely	Sometimes	Consistently	Priority
1	Staff assist parents to advocate publicly for issues that affect the program and their child. For example: Education, child-care, health care, tax breaks, etc.				
2	Staff ask parent volunteers to call other parents to invite or remind them of upcoming events.				
3	Staff celebrate and recognize those parents that contribute their time and effort. For example their ability to be handy, write a grant, sew a pillow, talk to a legislator, etc.				
4	Staff ask and/or assist parents to write an article for the newsletter: For example there is an "Ask Another Parent" section, or an editorial section that parents can contribute and voice their ideas/opinions.				
5	Program offers Parent Leadership Courses and actively recruits parents for those opportunities.				
6	Program has a program improvement council or Advisory Board where parents can help set the agenda.				
7	Program offers home visits to provide information about parent opportunities directly to the parents and build relationships.				
8	Program staff help to facilitate families and schools working together as a team to set goals for the child; they work with outside specialists when necessary.				

Action Plan Example

Strategies/Activities and Events to Increase Learning for Families, Staff and Children—What do you hope will be the outcome?	Who will do it? (Staff, QA, Parent Outreach Specialist, etc.)	Resources Needed (Specialist, equipment, supplies, etc.)	Timetable/ When it will take place (At least one per month of operation)	Outcomes: How did it go? How many participated? Any feedback?
1. Family Orientation Night and Potluck.	SACC Director and 3 parents from last year are going to organize the written materials and who brings what for the potluck. One of the parents is also going to go over the behavior management plan and the parent's rights and responsibilities section in the parent manual so that the other new families don't feel like the staff is "lecturing" to them	New Parent Handbook Copies with updated information. Sign-up sheet for potluck. Notices home (Maybe handwritten by the kids?)	September 21	70% of our parents came representing a total of 30 kids. Tons of food! It was great Parents want to have another one in December with a "multicultural theme" Next time we need to make sure to have a few special activities for the kids to do so they don't get bored and bother their parents during the adult time!

EFI Family Communication Log Example

What is the EFI Family Communication Log?

The EFI Family Communication Log is a data collection method that was developed to allow after-school programs to keep track of their communication with families during the program year. Although programs maintain regular communication with families throughout the year, most do not have a systematic way of tracking this contact.

The log is a very important component for the EFI program because it enables us to see how programs are attempting to strengthen communication with families in order to promote their involvement in the after-school program and their engagement in their child's learning. This is a major program goal of the EFI initiative.

What Data Should be Collected Through the EFI Family Communication Log?

The Family Communication Log was created to record in-depth communication initiated by the after-school staff with individual families. Casual, more general interactions with families should not be recorded here.

Include in the Log

- Interactions that last over 2 – 5 minutes
- In-depth individual conversations
- One-on-one meetings with families
- Personal emails and phone calls
- Personal letters or notes

Don't Include in the Log

- Casual/brief greetings at drop off or pick-up
- Group newsletters, flyers or emails
- Phone call reminders regarding an event
- Brief calls regarding attendance

Information about family engagement and communication not recorded in the log can be collected through parent surveys, parent phone interviews and event attendance sheets or the Action Plans.

How to Use the EFI Family Communication Log

One staff member at each after-school program should be designated to complete the log each month. That staff member is responsible for collecting and recording all of the staff-initiated interaction with individual families that occurred. It is important that all staff at each program attempt to increase communication with families and that these attempts are captured in the log. Please be sure that all staff report their in-depth interactions to the designated staff member before the end of the month. This could be done at staff meetings, for example.

The Family Communication Log is a very simple form to complete. Only eight pieces of information need to be collected for each staff-initiated interaction with a family. These include:

1. Date of Contact

2. Name of Child

3. Family Member Contacted

4. Staff Member Who Contacted

5. Type of Contact

6. Length of Contact

7. Reason for Contact
   - Update: providing info about the child's progress
   - Question: asking for family's opinion/feedback
   - Technical Assistance: discussing family strategies to support child's learning/development at home
   - Problem: talking about child's behavior, academics, emotions, etc.
   - Other: Other reasons for communication not listed)

8. Brief Description of Nature of Contact—Generally what was shared or talked about during the contact (e.g., family issue at home, emotional problems that the child is experiencing, etc.). For confidentiality purposes this information does not need to be detailed.

Benefits of the Log

The Family Communication Log enables us to see how well we are reaching the EFI program goal of strengthening communication with families in order to promote their involvement in the after-school program and their engagement in their child's learning. Of equal importance it allows the after-school programs to document and track their own communication with families, information that is very helpful for program improvement, program documentation and for potential future funding.

Because in-depth, individual communication between the after-school staff and families usually occurs only occasionally throughout the year, we hope the burden of completing the log should be fairly minimal for the after-school programs.

How to Use the EFI Family Communication Log

Afterschool Program _____ **Week** _____ **Staff Person Who Completed Log** _____

Week of Contact	Name of Child	Family Member Contacted	Staff Member Who Contacted	Type of Contact	Length of Contact	Reason for Contact	Brief Description of Nature of Contact
		☐ MOTHER ☐ FATHER ☐ GRANDPARENT ☐ FOSTER PARENT ☐ OTHER: _____		☐ PHONE ☐ EMAIL ☐ IN PERSON ☐ PERSONAL LETTER/NOTE	☐ 1-5 MIN ☐ 5-10 MIN ☐ 15-30 MIN ☐ 30+ MIN	☐ UPDATE ☐ QUESTION ☐ TECH. ASSIS ☐ PROBLEM ☐ OTHER: _____	
		☐ MOTHER ☐ FATHER ☐ GRANDPARENT ☐ FOSTER PARENT ☐ OTHER: _____		☐ PHONE ☐ EMAIL ☐ IN PERSON ☐ PERSONAL LETTER/NOTE	☐ 1-5 MIN ☐ 5-10 MIN ☐ 15-30 MIN ☐ 30+ MIN	☐ UPDATE ☐ QUESTION ☐ TECH. ASSIS ☐ PROBLEM ☐ OTHER: _____	
		☐ MOTHER ☐ FATHER ☐ GRANDPARENT ☐ FOSTER PARENT ☐ OTHER: _____		☐ PHONE ☐ EMAIL ☐ IN PERSON ☐ PERSONAL LETTER/NOTE	☐ 1-5 MIN ☐ 5-10 MIN ☐ 15-30 MIN ☐ 30+ MIN	☐ UPDATE ☐ QUESTION ☐ TECH. ASSIS ☐ PROBLEM ☐ OTHER: _____	
		☐ MOTHER ☐ FATHER ☐ GRANDPARENT ☐ FOSTER PARENT ☐ OTHER: _____		☐ PHONE ☐ EMAIL ☐ IN PERSON ☐ PERSONAL LETTER/NOTE	☐ 1-5 MIN ☐ 5-10 MIN ☐ 15-30 MIN ☐ 30+ MIN	☐ UPDATE ☐ QUESTION ☐ TECH. ASSIS ☐ PROBLEM ☐ OTHER: _____	
		☐ MOTHER ☐ FATHER ☐ GRANDPARENT ☐ FOSTER PARENT ☐ OTHER: _____		☐ PHONE ☐ EMAIL ☐ IN PERSON ☐ PERSONAL LETTER/NOTE	☐ 1-5 MIN ☐ 5-10 MIN ☐ 15-30 MIN ☐ 30+ MIN	☐ UPDATE ☐ QUESTION ☐ TECH. ASSIS ☐ PROBLEM ☐ OTHER: _____	
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Strategies and Tips learned from the Engaging Families Initiative

1. **Strategy: Support Families**
   - Focus on families' assets.

   - Consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served.

   - Solicit family input.

   ### Tips for Supporting Families

   - Have a parent suggestion box.
   - Conduct formal and informal surveys about the program on a regular basis.
   - Host parent forums or discussion groups that allow parents to meet one another and discuss their concerns about child rearing and other family matters.
   - Strike up conversations with parents that focus on them.
   - Give them time to talk about themselves instead of their children.
   - Work with the children to plan and host a family appreciation event.

2. **Strategy: Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships**
   - Communicate frequently and in positive ways.

   - Be there for families.

   - Provide leadership opportunities for families.

   ### Tips for Communicating and Building Trusting Relationships

   - Make a regular effort to share positive news with each parent about their child.
   - Welcome parents. Greet them in the front of the room or building when they arrive. Always call parents by name and make a point of smiling.
   - Offer informal social events or activities that are fun, such as craft nights, potluck dinners, and weekend trips to museums, theaters, and other cultural institutions.
   - Conduct periodic family orientations to familiarize new families with the program. Ask current program family members to help you present the materials.

Strategies and Tips learned from the Engaging Families Initiative

3. Strategy: Hire and Develop a Family Focused Staff
- Hire staff with family engagement experience.

- Hire staff who share parents' experiences and backgrounds.

- Foster professional development.

Tips for Hiring and Developing a Family Focused Staff

- When interviewing potential staff, consider candidates' experiences working with families and ask them how after school programs can engage families.
- Invite a family engagement expert from a local K–12 school, university, family support agency, or guidance center to speak to staff.
- Offer programs, such as exercise classes, first aid courses, and art workshops, for both parents and staff.

4. Build Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations
- Collaborate with local organizations.

- Act as a liaison between families and schools.

- Help parents develop advocacy skills.

Tips for Building Linkages Across Individuals and Organizations

- Encourage parent leadership by inviting parents to help you locate resources in the community to support program activities, whether they be field trip sites, philanthropic organizations, or support services for families.
- Ask a classroom teacher to talk to parents about grade-level expectations and developmentally appropriate activities for children in different subject areas.
- Invite a family advocate to offer workshops on how parents can obtain the services their children need and how they can develop relationships with schools.
- Offer to attend parent–teacher conferences with families who feel that they need support in discussing their concerns and asking teachers questions.

BOSTnet
Build the Out-of-School Time Network

Tips for Designing a Family Engagement Program Component: Lessons From the Engaging Families Initiative

The following goals, strategies, and structures, developed by BOST*net* for the Engaging Families Initiative for use with its programs and families, may help other programs plan and reflect on their own family engagement efforts.

Consider setting the following goals for your program:

- Develop "action plans" that are sustainable and support objectives of your organization, including assessing parent needs and reducing barriers to parent involvement.
- Develop consistent communication with families in order to exchange information about their children's interests and needs at home and school and during out-of-school time.
- Increase the levels of family involvement, engagement, and leadership opportunities at your program.
- Increase utilization of community organizations and resources that support children's out-of-school time learning and family engagement.
- Increase awareness of school calendar and activities that would complement what happens in the school day.

Consider setting the following goals for families:

- Increase familiarity and utilization of cultural institutions and other community organizations in support of children's informal learning.
- Increase understanding of school expectations, opportunities, and resources available to parents through the school system.
- Increase engagement in children's informal learning.

Consider employing strategies that help you engage families after school:

- Connect with community partners to plan training for staff, host family nights, and provide resources for after school programs.
- Identify and develop needed resource materials such as strategy tip sheets, communication logs, and action planning sheets for program use.

Consider putting helpful structures in place to facilitate family engagement:

- Form an advisory board that includes administrative representatives of relevant agencies.
- Hold regular monthly meetings to coordinate project activities and assess progress on an ongoing basis.

The Next Steps:
Start improving your program's Family Engagement practices

BOST*net* offers training and technical assistance to get you started on developing or improving family engagement in your program.

Engaging Families Training and Technical Assistance
Goal: Increase the number of after school programs that effectively connect families to resources and improve family involvement in children's education and school

Strategy: Strengthen Children and Youth programs by improving cultural competence of staff in working with families from a diversity of backgrounds, maintaining quality relationships with families.

Competencies:
Achieve Boston
- Building Caring Relationships/Behavior Guidance
- Cultural Competence
- Families and Schools
- Building Leadership and Advocacy

National AfterSchool Association
- Human Relationships: Staff and families interact with each other in positive ways
- Administration: Staff support families' involvement in the program
- Administration: Staff, families, and schools share important information to support the well-being of children and youth

Family engagement has been shown by the research to improve program outcomes, increase family involvement in children's education and school, and improve relationships between parents and children.

Program Leadership: BOST*net* trainings provide Program Directors guidance in assessing family engagement in their programs and developing program Family Engagement Plans that account for outreach to and engagement of families from various ethnicity, income, and disability backgrounds and that provide families access to a network of support services.

Program Staff: BOST*net* trainings provide front line staff with the time-tested tools and strategies to improve family engagement in programs working with families from a diversity of backgrounds, keeping families informed and connected to resources, and developing parent leaders in the community. The training provides guidance in customizing strategies and tools for programs.
Staff serving children and youth ages: 5- 14

Please contact us at 617 720-1290 or info@bostnet.org for more information on Family Engagement Training and Technical Assistance.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

BOSTnet Publications

Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School, BOST*net*, United Way of Massachusetts Bay, The Harvard Family Research Project (2006)

Executive Summary:
Children's learning is critically enhanced through family involvement practices in out-of-school-time (OST) programming. The Engaging Families Initiative (EFI) is a pioneer in the evaluation of best practices and dissemination of resources. Funded by the Wallace Foundation and a collaboration between Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOST*net*), and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, this initiative has enabled programs to expand their communication and parent engagement activities to reach a broader scope of children's families.

Why is it important? While the value of family engagement in children's schooling is well established, few relevant resources exist to specifically help after school programs bolster their efforts. This gap remains despite evidence that significant benefits are derived from strong family engagement practices that connect caregivers and providers. For example, family participation in OST programs has been linked to both greater overall involvement in school and better child outcomes within after school programs.

Strategies and Practices: In *Focus on Families!*, after school programs can draw on four comprehensive strategies for improving family engagement practices.
- *Family support* includes appreciation and utilization of existing family strengths, such as soliciting parent feedback for program implementation and improvement.
- *The establishment of trusting relationships* benefits from positive communication and fostering parental leadership opportunities to strengthen ties between programs and the communities they serve.
- *Family-friendly staff* involves designating a key person to lead engagement efforts. This can be done through both hiring and professional development practices.
- *Connections across individuals and organizations* provide opportunities to build a network of resources. For example, programs can pool assets and ideas regarding family engagement and help parents work with other organizations in the city.

Focus on Families! also provides detailed profiles of organizations currently involved in this work and recommends approaches for effective self-assessment. By using what has been proven effective in the field, the toolkit is a pivotal resource for providers that recognize the need to make family engagement an organizational priority.

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?

BOST*net* 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 & BOST*net* 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, (BOST*net* 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 (BOST*net* 2006).

After school programs are recognizing the need to communicate more effectively. BOST*net* 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 BOST*net* 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 (BOST*net* 2006).

Programs often recognize that they need help with engagement issues.

Many programs that already implement family engagement practices have indicated to BOST*net* 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:

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

Family Engagement State of the Field References.

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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

Websites

BOST*net* (Build the Out-of-School Time Network)
www.bostnet.org
BOST*net* provides help for parents and caregivers in finding after school programs. BOST*net*, formerly Parents United for Childcare, is an organization of low- and moderate-income parents, child care providers, and other community residents committed to increasing the supply of quality, affordable child care in Massachusetts.

Center for Parent Leadership
www.centerforparentleadership.org
CIPL is an initiative that trains and supports parent activists to help improve achievement in their schools and to be advocates for statewide reform in Kentucky. Their services consist mainly of large-scale consulting, workshops and seminars, and publications.

EPIC – Every Person Influences Children
www.epicforchildren.org
EPIC is a national not-for-profit organization that provides effective programs and resources for parents, teachers, and school administrators that help adults raise responsible and academically successful children.

Family Literacy and Math
Email: alevine@thehome.org
These programs focused on helping parents of populations traditionally left out of higher mathematics to develop their own skills, confidence, and enthusiasm for math.

Family Support America
www.familysupportamerica.org
Family Support America has been the nation's catalyst, clearinghouse, and thought leader in family support, based on a bedrock belief: If you want to help families, ask parents what they want.

FamilyEducation
www.familyeducation.com
Program staff can direct parents to this website designed for families for academic and parenting tips.

Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)
www.finenetwork.org
The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of over 5,000 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. Online resources include an e-newsletter and announcements of current ideas and new resources.

Harvard Family Research Project's Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html
The Out-of-School Time (OST) Program Evaluation Database is a compilation of profiles of evaluations of OST programs and initiatives. It provides accessible information about evaluation work of both large and small OST programs to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs in the OST field.

Institute for Responsive Education
www.responsiveeducation.org
IRE provides training and technical assistance to help administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members to develop skills to implement and sustain partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

MegaSkills Education Center of the Home and School Institute
www.megaskillshsi.org
The MegaSkills Education Center is dedicated to building achievement, developing within each student confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense, problem solving, and focus.

The National AfterSchool Association
www.naaweb.org
The National AfterSchool Association, formerly the National School-Age Care Alliance, is a professional association with a membership component that includes more than 7,000 practitioners, policy makers, and administrators representing all public, private, and community-based sectors of after-school and out-of-school time programs, as well as school-age and after-school programs on military bases, both domestic and international. As the leading voice of the after-school profession, NAA is dedicated to the development, education, and care of children and youth during their out-of-school hours.

National Center for Family Literacy
www.famlit.org
The mission of the National Center for Family Literacy is to create educational and economic opportunity for the most at-risk children and parents.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
www.ncpie.org
NCPIE is a coalition of major education, community, public service, and advocacy organizations working to create meaningful family–school partnerships in every school in America.

National Community Education Association
www.ncea.com
NCEA provides leadership to those who build learning communities in response to individual and community needs by providing its members with national and regional training conferences and workshops; specialized periodicals, publications, and products; opportunities for peer support and networking; and information and referral services.

National Institute for Literacy & Partnership for Reading
www.nifl.go
The National Institute for Literacy's activities to strengthen literacy across the lifespan are authorized by the U.S. Congress under two laws, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) in the Workforce Investment Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

National Network of Partnership Schools
www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000
Established by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, the National Network of Partnership Schools brings together schools, districts, and states that are committed to developing and maintaining comprehensive programs of school–family–community partnerships.

Parent Involvement and Resource Centers (PIRCs)
www.pirc-info.net/pircs.asp
PIRCs were created by the Department of Education in 1995 to provide parents, schools and organizations working with families with training, information, and technical assistance to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in school.

Promising Practices in Afterschool
www.afterschool.org
The Promising Practices in Afterschool website features programs' best practices in a variety of areas, including community and family involvement, programming, and financing.

PTO Today
www.ptotoday.org
PTO Today provides tips and tools on family involvement in schools.

Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers
www.taalliance.org
The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers supports a unified technical assistance system for the purpose of developing, assisting, and coordinating Parent Training and Information Projects and Community Parent Resource Centers under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

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