Parent Engagement in Out-of-School Programs:
Learnings from Sowing Seeds with Faith

Executive Summary

Introduction

Family engagement is an essential component of youth well-being and development. Considerable research has examined the impact of family engagement across the lifespan of child, adolescent, and adult development, demonstrating a range of positive outcomes when caring adults are involved in the process.

- Students with engaged parents/caregivers are more likely to perform better in school when their parents are involved both at home (helping with homework, supervision) and at school (attending events, communicating with teachers).[1]
- Students with engaged parents/caregivers are more likely to stay engaged in school and succeed academically even when facing adversity like poverty, health challenges, or high levels of adverse childhood experiences. [2]

In an effort to better understand how to support and increase caregiver and family engagement in out-of-school time spaces, the Bounce Coalition conducted a multi-method study on the Sowing Seeds with Faith "The Village" Parent Council. This executive summary reviews the findings of that study, highlights themes present in "The Village" Parent Council model, and suggests key opportunities for increasing family engagement and resilience in out-of-school time (OST) spaces.

Themes Present in "The Village" Parent Council model:

- **Trust:** SSWF focuses on the trust of parents as a foundational factor. Parents trust that SSWF has the best interests of their child in mind and values their roles and expertise as parents.
- **Safe Space:** SSWF approaches families from a focus on their strengths, creating a safe space for them to authentically engage.
- **Community:** SSWF is deliberate about building a community among members of its parent council, helping parents create a network of support among fellow parents.
- **Shared Commitment:** SSWF staff care personally about the children in their programs and are willing to advocate for them outside of formal programming, tapping into the shared values of wanting what is best for children.
- **Staff Value Parent Input:** SSWF actively invites parents to engage in decision-making, as well as values and incorporates feedback and ideas offered by members of the Village Parent Council.
- **Engagement around Child Development:** SSWF engages parents in ways that tie to children's healthy development, building parent skills, and knowledge and promoting family resilience.

Key Opportunities for Increasing Family Engagement and Resilience

The themes present in "The Village" Parent Council model guided the identification of opportunities that other organizations can implement to strengthen and increase family engagement and resilience. The recommendations below draw on guidance provided by parent council members themselves and on research-based frameworks.

1. **Assess how your organization builds relational trust with families**
   Relational trust is the glue that builds the foundation for family engagement, which creates the opportunities to build resilience. Using the tool below, OST providers can assess how their organization builds relational trust and consider how to better center relational trust in all programming aspects.

Assessing Relational Trust	
Respect	Am I seeking input and listening carefully, without bias, to what all families have to say?
Competence	Am I demonstrating to families that I am competent and that I am honoring their role as valued and competent caregivers?
Integrity	Do I keep my word with families?
Personal Regard	Do I show families that I value and care about them as people versus objects?

2 **Identify practices to focus on family strengths and create a safe space for parents when they engage.**

Organizations can ensure staff have training on an asset-based approach and review materials and language to reflect a focus on families' strengths. Staff can also set the tone in gatherings for an environment without judgment where parents see supportive behaviors modeled by staff and other parents.

3 **Build a community support network that cultivates staff-participant relationships and interpersonal relationships among families.**

Action steps to build community between participants might include activities, such as creating informal opportunities for parents to connect and structuring agendas in a way that allows for parents to converse and build community among themselves.

4 **Implement practices to demonstrate shared commitment to the well-being of children.**

Staff members can demonstrate their personal regard for families in numerous ways, including checking in with parents in between meetings, furthering trust. They can also stand alongside families during external meetings that might otherwise be stressful, such as meetings with a child's school. Staff showing up for children – by supporting them at extracurricular activities or joining school meetings – deeply conveys that a child matters to staff.

5 **Create organizational systems that center family input in decisionmaking**

Staff can implement plans to get family input on scheduling meetings, types of preferred programming, ideas for discussion topics, and what resources may be most beneficial. Ideally, staff will invite parent input regularly and act on it in ways that parents can see that staff value the input.

6 **Co-plan skill and knowledge-building opportunities that are parent-informed and tie in to child development**

Family engagement activities work best when they connect with the learning and development of the children. Staff can engage parents to identify topics of interest to them, structure activities so parents can practice new skills, and make explicit how skills are connected to child development.

To learn more about the Bounce Coalition and read the full report, visit bouncecoalition.org/.

1. Kim, S. W. (2022). A second-order meta-analysis of parental involvement and student achievement over 50 years. Education and Urban Society, 54(7).
2. Bethell, C. D., Gombojav, N., & Whitaker, R. C. (2019). Family resilience and connection promote flourishing among US children, even amid adversity. Health Affairs, 38(5). https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05425
3. Mapp, K., & Harris, S. T. (2024, June 4). Learning series 4: Co-Creating Solutions: Addressing engagement and attendance challenges with historically underserved populations; session 1: The dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships. U.S. Department of Education. https://www.ed.gov/media/document/41-dual-capacity-building-framework-family-school-partnerships-109231.pdf