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Connections: Schools, Parents and Communities

Children benefit significantly when programs build connections among schools, parents and communities. Programs can benefit, too, by tapping new, often underutilized resources for afterschool education.

Connecting with Schools

Afterschool programs connect with schools and schooling in different ways and to different extents, from no connection at all to tight integration. If your program is in a school, the connection can go further than simply sharing space. Each educational and developmental space should be a resource for the other and for the children you serve.

Close relationships with schools help improve the quality of your program by:

- Providing opportunities to better understand children's strengths and how best to address individual needs
- Aligning program activities to expand, deepen, practice or reinforce school learning
- Mutually supporting 21st century skills for success in school, including teamwork, hands-on learning, problem solving, decision-making and creativity
- Sharing resources

Connections require work and planning, with the recognition that both sides have staff and time limitations to consider. These ideas can help.

- Exchange a list of important contacts (e.g., name, phone and e-mail of afterschool director/staff, school principals and others)
- Mount a bulletin board for sharing information, like homework or project assignments, afterschool activities, special events, teacher-to-teacher notes or student work
- Invite school staff to an open house so they can see what goes on in the program
- Ask for opportunities to participate/present at school meetings
- Plan joint staff development sessions so all staff can know the school's academic priorities for the year (e.g., writing across the curriculum and improving attendance) and learn about academic content standards
- Share GraffitiWalls® across in-school and afterschool time

PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND
WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Harvard Family Research Project: www.hfrp.org
The Harvard Family Research Project has conducted valuable research on family involvement.

Find articles on improving family involvement and Out-of-School Time (OST), including links for downloading, at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/pubs/publist.html#fimd

Connecting with Families

Research confirms what educators know: Family involvement is critical for children. Afterschool is a great doorway for engaging with families to support child's learning and healthy development.

Families often connect more easily with afterschool. The setting is more relaxed than schools, with more opportunities for interaction. Pick-up times for younger children allow staff and parents to talk and get to know each other. Projects with older children and youth can often include a family component.

High-quality programs deliberately plan and actively build connections with families. Techniques include:

- Posting information on community events
- Facilitating referrals to helpful resources
- Creating informal support networks among parents and caregivers
- Drawing on families' skills and knowledge for the program
- Soliciting volunteers and help with fundraising
- Planning family time, such as cultural celebrations, movies, book groups or homework time

Connecting with Communities

Communities are critical—and exciting—resources. Connecting children with people and places outside of school helps them identify with and develop as members of their multiple communities.

You can leverage community connections to:

- Better link children and families to health care, housing, energy assistance and social services
- Serve as partners and resources for internships, service learning, job placements, apprenticeships and career building
- Provide training in finance and sustainability, culturally relevant programming, advocacy and outreach work, health and fitness or other specialized areas
- Create opportunities for field trips and other enrichment activities

To establish community connections, clarify what you want to achieve. Involve children and young people in the thinking and discussions.

Once you've set goals, seek suggestions from staff, from the neighborhood, as well as from parents, families, school personnel and children and young people themselves. Conduct active outreach with local businesses, political leaders and others who can help strengthen your connections.

HOW CAN OUR STAFF HELP YOURS?

The Center for Expanded & Afterschool Education provides professional development and technical assistance to help develop this component of your program. Set the wheels of collaboration in motion for children's success.

For more information go to www.afterschooled.org

Tips on Building Relationships with Families and Organizations

1. Create a warm, welcoming environment for family members when they drop off or pick up children. If possible, provide a sitting area with interesting reading material and information on local family resources in English and other languages, when appropriate.
2. Hire staff who relate to your communities of children and families, and train all staff to work well with families.
3. Make your environment reflect children's diverse backgrounds, with staff who live in the neighborhood or speak the home languages of the families. Include visuals reflecting the languages and cultural heritage of the children.
4. Exchange information with community-based organizations and institutions. Post notices of community events in your afterschool space.
5. Invite people from the community to be part of or present in the program, whether teaching a skill or leading a workshop.