

Increasing Engagement And Building Relationships After School

A practical guide to tech tools and strategies that work.

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Introduction

> "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men." – Herman Melville

Most educators today would agree that K-12 schools alone can't provide all of the education and developmental support children need to lead productive adult lives. Afterschool programs have become an important source of supplemental education for children across the socio-economic spectrum. And by extension, afterschool programs have become an important resource for families, linking them to their children's schools and services in their communities.

As a matter of logistics, parents often have more interaction with afterschool program educators and staff than they do with their children's classroom teachers. This puts afterschool programs in a unique position to engage with parents and families on a daily basis. These daily interactions, in turn, can lead to strong relationships that can have a big impact on a child's life.

Additionally, afterschool programs that closely interact with the schools they serve, and also with organizations and individuals in their communities, have an opportunity to create highly supportive and enriching environments for their students.

This guide is meant to provide afterschool professionals with ideas and tips for increasing engagement with parents and families, and also with schools and communities. Specifically, we'll focus on using free and low-cost technology tools to simplify and streamline that engagement.

As the popular saying goes, "teamwork makes the dream work." We hope you'll share this guide with your staff, and use it to help expand your program's team and impact.

Why parent engagement matters

Research has found that when families are involved in school, their children do better academically, score higher on standardized tests, and receive better grades overall. Their children attend school more frequently, have fewer behavioral issues,[1] and graduate at a higher rate.

Afterschool programs are largely seen as extensions to the school day, and therefore the same benefits can be seen when families are involved in afterschool activities.[2] Also, parents who feel connected to their afterschool program are more likely to have contact with their child's teachers and school day staff, according to The Afterschool Corporation's (TASC's) report on parent and family engagement.

What do we mean by engagement?

Engaging parents and families can range from simple engagement in conversation to soliciting input and ideas to active involvement in day-to-day activities. Every afterschool program will have its own view of what constitutes engagement, and it's important to define what engagement looks like for your program. Parent engagement, for example, may include any or all of the following:

1) Communicating regularly at pick-up and drop-off
2) Attending and participating in afterschool events
3) Completing surveys and answering requests for input
4) Volunteering
5) Donating resources
6) Helping with fundraising efforts

A study of 96 school-based afterschool programs… identified connections between program staff and families as one of the shared features of high-performing programs.

Source: Engaging Families in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs: A Review of the Research

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[1] Child Dev. 2010 May-Jun; 81(3): 988–1005.

[2] MetLife Foundation Afterschool Alert Issue Brief #32. March 2008.

Engagement: How families benefit

- Children view school and learning positively
- Parents connect with community services and support
- Families meet and socialize with other parents and families

Through their involvement with afterschool programs, parents send their children the message that learning and community are important. Students whose families participate in afterschool events, volunteer, or regularly interact with afterschool program staff are more likely to get help with their schoolwork at home, and are more likely to view school and learning positively.

Afterschool programs can also use engagement strategies to help connect families to beneficial community resources, such as parenting, ESL, and GED classes; cooking and exercise classes; free or low-cost financial services; job training; and assistance with issues related to nutrition, health, and housing. Helping parents connect with other parents, too, can benefit students and their families. Working parents can more easily meet and socialize with one another through afterschool events, and thus benefit from a stronger sense of community and belonging.

How afterschool programs benefit

- Parents volunteer their time and expertise
- Students stay enrolled and attend regularly
- Parents and students are more satisfied overall

Engaging parents and family members can in turn benefit afterschool programs. Once a trusting relationship is established, many parents are happy to volunteer their time and career expertise, and even serve as mentors and role models for students. Parents willing to chaperone field trips; help on-site during special events; assist students with homework and tutoring; and help staff with fundraising efforts can also be a great benefit to afterschool programs that are often shorthanded.

Even minimal engagement (communicating regularly with afterschool staff and attending occasional programming events) with parents and families can significantly benefit afterschool programs. Parents who feel welcomed, respected, and comfortable during drop-off and pick-up hours tend to keep their children enrolled in afterschool programs regularly, and over the long term. As a result,

afterschool programs benefit from lower rates of student turnover, and higher rates of referral and overall parent satisfaction.

Tips and tools for increasing parent engagement

Increasing parent and family involvement in program activities starts with educating your staff and constituents on the value of engagement. In addition, there are several things you can do—and technology resources you can use—to increase engagement at your program. Here are 12 that we've identified:

1.**Create a dedicated online portal** (a Google doc, for example) where program staff can access program guidelines and share notes and tips on increasing parent engagement. Guidelines should consist of engagement best practices for all staff to follow. (For example: addressing parents by name and making eye contact during drop-off and pick-up.) You may also want to add a spreadsheet to your portal where staff can log specific interactions with parents. Teachers Pay Teachers offers downloadable parent communication logs you can edit in Excel or Google Sheets and add to your online portal.

2. **Host a training seminar** for your staff on building trusting and respectful relationships with parents. This could be as simple as a lunch discussion to exchange ideas and document strategies everyone agrees on. Consider following up with a more formal discussion that you can videotape and use when training new staff members. Powtoon and Animoto are easy-to-learn tools you can use to make simple training videos. Both offer free and low-cost plans for educators. In addition, You for Youth offers a free training webinar for afterschool staff on increasing parent engagement.

3. **Update new and existing job descriptions** to include engaging parents, schools, and community organizations. Make sure every role in your program shoulders some responsibility for fostering engagement. When it comes time to hire new staff members, question candidates on their experiences engaging families of diverse cultural backgrounds, and look for candidates with dual language skills. Mighty Recruiter is a free online tool for creating job descriptions, screening resumes, and tracking applicants.

4. **Create a welcome space for parents** where they can learn about upcoming events, pick up flyers and permission slips, and check for program updates. Consider compiling a family resource binder here for parents to flip through and familiarize themselves with community resources and social services, such as free counseling and parenting classes. Remember, it's the sense of community that your program creates that makes parents want to become involved.

5. **Update your enrollment packet** to include information about parent volunteer opportunities, and ask parents at time of enrollment if they can commit to volunteering on at least one occasion per year. Some afterschool programs even require a minimal amount of parent involvement, and include a commitment letter in their enrollment packets for parents to sign and return along with their other student forms. Check the After School Corporation (TASC)'s guide to parent involvement for sample parent commitment agreements you can add to your enrollment packet.

6. **Ask parents how they'd like to be contacted** or receive updates. With so many different communication streams available, it's important to customize your approach for each parent. Not every parent has regular access to email, for example. Give parents a choice at enrollment for how they prefer to be contacted (phone, email, or text), and note this preference along with their preferred language and contact details in each student's profile.

7. **Designate staff to serve as parent liaisons.** Frontline or front desk staff are the people who likely have the most frequent contact with parents, and are usually parents' first point of contact with your program. It makes sense to cultivate this familiarity and task these staff members with phone calling, emailing, and texting families when necessary. Parents are much more likely to respond to messages from someone they know and see regularly. You may also want to consider hiring a parent coordinator to handle all engagement efforts.

8. **Survey parents** to gather important data on household demographics and elicit feedback and input on planned activities and programming choices. There are a number of online tools you can use to create surveys — many of which are free or free for educators. Electronic surveys are preferable to paper surveys for obvious reasons. They can't be lost or forgotten at home, they can be completed privately and on the go using a smartphone; and they automatically collect and tabulate your results for you. Many will automatically display results for you in graphic form, and allow you to easily share your results with staff and parents via email or social media. Some online survey tools worth checking out include: SurveyNuts, ZohoSurvey, SurveyPlanet, eSurveyCreator, Free Online Surveys, Survey Monkey, and Pollmaker. You can also use Google Forms to create simple, free surveys and polls.

9. **Use social media** to generate awareness of program activities. If your program has the resources, create a website (Weebly offers free website creation and hosting for educators) or Facebook page to share information about upcoming events, and also day-to-day activities.

10. **Use group text messaging** to remind parents about upcoming events, volunteer needs, job opportunities, and last-minute schedule changes. Be

careful not to overwhelm parents with too many messages. Always, too, give group message recipients the option to unsubscribe to your feed. Remind is a free group messaging tool just for educators; ClassParrot and ClassPager are similar tools designed to group message students as well as parents.

11. **Make phone calls** to directly contact parents about their child's progress, and confirm volunteer participation dates and times. Some programs make a point of following up on flyers and email with a phone call to confirm whether or not a parent can attend an upcoming event such as Parent Night or a student art show. If you don't want to use your personal phone to make program-related calls, you can use an app service such as Google Voice and even make calls from your desktop. Using app-based calling can also be a good way to automatically log parent calls in your student spreadsheet or database.

12. **Create monthly or quarterly newsletters** to hand out on site, and also email directly to parents. Google Slides is a great free resource that many educators use for creating one-page graphic newsletters that can be both printed and shared easily via email. MailChimp is a more sophisticated tool for not only creating and sending e-newsletters, but tracking views as well. Although not free, MailChimp is relatively low cost tool that offers discounts for nonprofit use.

Engaging schools

In addition to making family engagement a priority, high-performing afterschool programs make it a point to stay in frequent contact with teachers and administrators at the schools they serve. This engagement often means working directly with teachers, administrators, and state-mandated parent coordinators. By engaging with schools, afterschool program staff can use student achievement data, for example, to inform curriculum choices that address academic skills that need strengthening.

> **Take Action:** At the beginning of the school year, make an effort to meet with your school's parent coordinator to learn how your program can work collaboratively with teachers and school administrators to better support students. Establish a plan for delivering updates regularly—whether through monthly emailed reports, newsletters, or in-person meetings.

Engaging community organizations

Engaging private businesses, individuals, and community organizations can open doors for bringing in speakers and programming content that appeal to students' interests outside of school. Symphonies, theatre arts groups, dance troupes, and museums are, when asked, often receptive to volunteering time and activities to enrich student learning. Private businesses are also frequently receptive to donating goods and materials to afterschool programs that reach out. Libraries, youth groups, emergency response, and social services providers may be willing to deploy informed staff at dismissal and special events, for example, to further engage students and their families.

> **Take Action:** Maintain a spreadsheet or database of contact information (including email addresses for point people) for target support organizations in your community. Create quarterly email newsletters for community members, and email contacts with volunteer and support opportunities. Look to build lasting relationships over time by getting to know these people on an individual basis, and learn how your program might be able to in turn support their organizations. Helping with food drives for local food banks, for example, or spreading the word about beach cleanup days, for example.

Expanding your program's own community beyond school the physical spaces where your program takes place will ultimately serve to broaden your students' sense of community as well. And that's a win-win for everyone.