



Best Practices for Boosting Family Engagement in Under-resourced Schools

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Abstract

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding established a link between out-of-school time and family engagement by mandating the inclusion of literacy and educational services for the low-income families of youth. As family engagement has been historically low in families with youth attending under-served schools, the research team sought to identify factors associated with high workshop attendance by examining a large-scale, rapidly growing family engagement program in the largest school district in the country. With a mixed-methods concurrent design combining individual interviews with quantitative analysis of program record and survey data, we identify structural factors that contribute to workshop attendance from a three-tiered perspective including parents, CBO implementers, and a grant administrator. Our analysis identified best practices in two distinct areas--working effectively with schools, and providing high quality experiences to parents—and includes lessons learned and recommendations for a successful parent workshop program.

Best Practices for Boosting Family Engagement in Under-resourced Schools

In 1998, the United States government linked the provision of after-school youth activities with family engagement by extending the mandate of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, the sole federal funding source devoted to after-school programming, to include literacy and educational services for the low-income families of youth targeted by the allocation (Elementary & Secondary Education Act, 1998, 2002). By creating this link, policymakers hoped to expand opportunities for low-income youth to reap the positive developmental benefits associated with family engagement in schooling, including increased school readiness, academic achievement, and graduation rates (Christenson, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006; Stewart, 2008; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Using 21st CCLC funding as a vehicle to boost parent engagement equipped each state with resources to further many low-income students' academic success. It is essential to reach low income families, because recent nationally representative studies of parent engagement suggest that income level is more strongly related to parent involvement in schooling than any other demographic factor (Herrold, O'Donnell, & Mulligan, 2008). National studies of parent engagement in schooling use a range of measures to capture the full spectrum of engagement. At the low end, parent engagement is conceptualized as attending a general school meeting, while an example of engagement from the higher end of the spectrum might include

volunteering on a school committee. Disparities in involvement by income level exist across the spectrum of parent engagement. For example, national data reveals that parents below the poverty line were less likely to attend school or classroom events than parents above the poverty line; 81% of parents below the poverty line attended at least one event, as compared to 91% above. The effects of income on involvement become even more pronounced at higher levels of involvement, with only 26% of parents below the poverty line volunteering on a school committee, compared to 51% of parents above the poverty line.

While parental poverty has the strongest effect on family engagement in school-centered activities, other demographic factors such as low parental educational attainment, being African-American or Latino (as compared to White or Asian), and having limited English proficiency are also associated with lower levels of engagement (Herrold, O'Donnell, & Mulligan, 2008). NHES data shows that 75% of parents who did not complete high school attended a school meeting, as compared 94% of their counterparts who have obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher. While ethnic differences were minor at low levels of parent engagement (87% of African American parents, 87% of Latino parents, 90% of Asian parents, and 91% of White parents attended general school meetings), they became more pronounced at higher levels of involvement with 35% of African American parents, 32% of Latino parents, 46% of Asian parents, and 54% of White parents reporting that they volunteered on a school committee. The relationship between speaking English at home and parent involvement in schooling also became stronger at higher levels of involvement: 84% of parents from families where no parent spoke English at home attended a general school event, as compared to 90% of parents from families where both parents spoke English at home; but only 22% of parents from families who did not speak English at home volunteered at school, as compared to 49% of parents from families where both parents spoke English at home.

Contrary to stereotype, national data reveals that a school's geographic surroundings (urban, suburban, or rural) do not effect parental involvement. While other factors of poverty, racial/ethnic minority status, and low educational attainment are often conflated with urbanicity, it is important to dispel the myth that they are synonymous. To the extent that parent involvement in urban schools is low, it is likely driven by the demographic factors mentioned above, and particularly so in schools that serve families with a multiplicity of risk factors for low parent engagement (Aud et. al, 2011). It may, however, be especially beneficial to reach families in under-resourced urban schools that serve high concentrations of low-income students, students from families where parental educational attainment is lower, students of color, and students from families with limited English proficiency, because the positive effects of parental involvement are even more salient for these students (Jeynes 2005, 2007).

In addition to demographic differences in parent involvement, parents of all backgrounds reduce their involvement in school as their children age (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Herrold, O'Donnell, & Mulligan, 2008). Researchers believe this is due to parents' feelings of inadequacy addressing the higher educational levels taught to older youth, as well as their desire to respect adolescents' growing independence (Eccles & Harrold, 1996; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Nationally representative studies demonstrate that between early elementary school (K-2nd grade) and high school (9th -12th grade) parent participation in general school or PTA meetings dropped by 10%, attendance at regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences dropped by 29% and participation in school or class events dropped by 10% (Herrold, O'Donnell, & Mulligan, 2008). This research suggests that the 21st CCLC centers across the country serving families of middle and high school youth may face a greater challenge engaging parents.



Given the identified challenges associated with family engagement, and the federal mandate to use 21st CCLC funding to boost engagement, the research team sought to identify factors associated with higher attendance in the parent component of 21st CCLC. The research team examined a large-scale, rapidly growing family engagement program in the largest school district in the country, New York City (NYC). The program, Building Family, designed to better connect parents to their children, their children's school, other parents in the community, and themselves through personal development, address the family literacy and education components of 21st CCLC, provides two-hour school-based parent workshops. The program has grown more than 10-fold; in just a year it went from serving 596 in 15 schools to 5,375 parents in 66 schools (in 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years respectively), with high mean levels of attendance at each workshop that continuously increase by about 30% with each program year (6 parents in 2008-9, 9 in 2009-2010, 11 in 2010-2011).

Developed by The Leadership Program (TLP), a mid-sized community-based organization based in New York City, Building Family serves parents in Title I schools, a designation that indicates their attendees are at historically low-performing academic sites where nearly half or more students demonstrate financial need (U.S. DOE, 2004), and is primarily funded through the 21st CCLC program. Forty-three workshops address information in six areas: parenting, current youth issues (i.e. bullying, drug and gang awareness, etc.), family health, academic support, career development, and the arts (TLP, 2011). While most are aimed solely at parents, some are designed to facilitate parent-child interactions. Building Family staff collaborate with school staff point people to schedule and select topics based on perceptions of family needs and interests and then deliver them. Workshops may be held weekly or spread throughout the school year, and content is typically independent across workshops, though a few schools have experimented with a series format. The number of workshops allotted per school varies according to funding; in 2009-2010, schools received as few as two and as many as 30 workshops.

Building Family's workshop topics and format are typical for a parent workshop program; it differs though by providing school-based workshops that are selected and planned by school staff but are facilitated by CBO staff. Most parent programs are either school-based *and* school-facilitated (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Comer, 2005; Sar & Wulff, 2003), building family-school connectedness but wearing school resources, or they are community-based *but* do not directly foster family-school relationships since they are provided at the CBO site rather than the school (Eisner & Meidert, 2011; Sanders, Prior, & Ralph, 2009). Building Family blends aspects of both models by utilizing schools' immediate access and proximity to parents while providing push-in curriculum and staff.

About half of the schools that offer Building Family (55% in 2009-2010) also have youth programs delivered by TLP, allowing the CBO to utilize existing relationships with children, families, and schools to promote parent workshops. This implementation technique is aligned with recent recommendations from the Harvard Family Research Project (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010), which recommends that community-based organizations support family engagement in schools by building on pre-existing relationships between CBO staff and families.

Study Design

In effort to gain a well-rounded view of the factors effecting successful parent engagement in the current exploratory study, the research team used a mixed-methods concurrent design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) that includes both qualitative and

quantitative data. Many researchers support mixed methods approaches, suggesting “research is stronger when it mixes research paradigms, because a fuller understanding of human phenomena is gained” (Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, Perez-Prado, 2003). Quantitative data from workshop attendance, parent post-workshop surveys, and Building Family supervisor surveys investigated factors influential to program success, while the qualitative interviews narrated Building Family staff experiences of programmatic successes and challenges related to implementation. We combined individual (key informant) interviews with quantitative analysis of program record and survey data to identify structural factors that contribute to workshop attendance from a three-tiered perspective including parents, CBO implementers, and a grant administrator. This way, we were able to give voice to three sets of people: those served by the program, those that design and deliver it, and those responsible for overseeing it at a city-wide level.

Our study had four stages:

First, we conducted 10 structured individual interviews with Building Family staff and one NYC Department of Education grant administrator assessing the successes and challenges of program delivery within an urban context from the implementation and oversight perspectives. We also garnered impressions of successful strategies for engagement and factors associated with higher attendance. The grant administrator interview addressed program implementation from a district-wide oversight perspective, e.g. “From your perspective what are the pros and cons related to implementing a large scale versus a smaller scale parent program?” Or “What makes Building Family similar to [or distinct from] other school-based parent programs?”

Then, we analyzed attendance and data from a survey of the CBO’s quality of relationship with each school’s parent program point person. Building Family supervisors were asked to rate those relationships as positive (i.e., “Contributed to Building Family implementation”), indifferent (“Neither contributed or inhibited Building Family implementation”), or negative (“Inhibited Building Family implementation”) for the 2009-2010 academic year.

Next, we analyzed data from a survey completed by parents at the end of each workshop (N= 1720) to include the parent perspective in our study. Finally, we synthesized all of data mentioned above to determine what factors predict parent attendance, and make recommendations for an urban parent program.

Results, Best Practices, and Recommendations

After synthesizing all data, we noticed a great deal of convergence or overlap between the parents, staff, and grant administrator responses. Our analysis identified best practices in two distinct areas: working effectively with schools, and providing high quality experiences to parents. Each set of best practices, listed in Table 1, includes lessons learned and recommendations for a successful parent program culled from the perspective of parents, CBO implementation staff, and the grant administrator, as well as quantitative analysis of factors predicting parent attendance. Below, each is discussed in detail.

Working Effectively with Schools

Both qualitative and quantitative data from all three perspectives underscored the essential nature of a strong school-community partnership. Successful collaborations are mutually beneficial, yielding higher programmatic success for both parties, as well as alleviating strain on time and resources for schools and increasing outreach opportunities for CBOs. The key to any successful collaboration is learning to work together effectively. While

our findings show school-CBO collaborations can be an effective tool for boosting parent engagement in under-resourced schools, they can only be successful if schools and CBOs form positive relationships, share resources to support each other's strengths, set clear goals and expectations, and work together to tackle logistical hurdles as they arise. Below are best practices recommendations from lessons learned for effectively working together.

Continuously foster the working relationship between school and CBO staff to increase parent attendance.

Both qualitative and quantitative data identified the relationship between school and CBO staff as a major determinant of parent attendance. As mentioned above, we surveyed CBO staff about their relationships with the school point person at each school. They reported mostly positive relationships with parent coordinators with 62% of the relationships being rated as positive. This relationship was crucial to boosting parent attendance by several measures; schools with positive ratings had the highest average attendance, with over 10 parents on average, followed by schools with negative relationships (seven parents) or neutral (six parents) relationships. Schools with more positive relationships also saw more attendance at the high end of the attendance range, up to 25 parents, more than double the maximum at schools with neutral relationships, and triple those with negative relationships. In addition, a multiple regression model found that relationship quality was so important that it could actually *predict* attendance ($b = 25.77$, $t(56) = 2.13$, $p = .038$). This means simply knowing the relationship was positive, indifferent, or negative statistically indicates how high a school's attendance will be.

Since relationships are not static, it is important to continuously spend time fostering them. All interviewees noted the importance of on-site, phone, email check-ins, and where possible, back-to-school brunches, with school point people in growing their relationships. All staff interviewed also identified the relationship with the school point person as the linchpin to successfully recruiting parents. As one staff member said,

“We've had a lot of incentive ideas, and the ones that worked have been geared toward parent coordinator relationship building...we need the buy-in. At the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year we had a brunch for all the parent coordinators. We want[ed] to make a nice presentation for them, we ha(d) our new brochure with what we offer, we want[ed] to make this exciting so that they have a reason to want to schedule them.”

Use multi-service CBO's to implement both parent and youth programming, or form effective partnerships with youth-serving organizations to aid in recruitment.

Another factor that emerged as a key predictor of parent attendance in both our quantitative and qualitative data was the presence of youth-focused CBO programming. Having youth recruit their parents was an effective strategy. Of the 66 schools served by Building Family, just over half (58%) had both youth programs and Building Family workshops. Our multiple regression model also showed that the presence of youth-focused programming was also a strong statistical predictor of attendance ($b = 62.26$, $t(56) = 3.68$, $p = .001$). Together with the quality of the relationship with the school staff member, mentioned above, and the school grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school), which was not a significant predictor of attendance in the Building Family program, the presence of youth programming accounted for 26% of the variance in parent attendance ($R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 59) = 6.40$, $p < .001$). This means that by knowing the grade level of a school, the quality of the relationship between CBO and school staff, and whether a CBO also had youth programming



at the same school, we were able to account for one quarter of the differences in parent attendance between schools.

Eighty percent of program staff interviewees also identified the presence of youth-focused programming as an important recruitment tool. Clearly, it may not always be possible for CBOs to work with both youth and parents. However, youth-serving CBOs can still play an important role in recruitment if they partner effectively with parent-serving CBOs. In the best case scenario, the CBOs should communicate regularly about the needs of the families in their school community and work together to choose workshop topics and promote them to parents. If CBOs are just establishing their relationship, parent-serving-CBOs should still seek to reach out to the parents of youth being served through the youth-provider whenever possible.

Allocate both school and CBO time and resources to recruitment.

Workshops can only be attended if parents are aware of their occurrence. While Building Family sites were tasked with the primary responsibility for advertising upcoming workshops, qualitative and quantitative data show the most successful schools utilized CBO program support to recruit parents. While Building Family asks schools to coordinate workshop scheduling and advertisement, it demands much less school effort than other models that require them to organize, advertise, *and* implement parent program curriculum.

While schools may have access to master lists of parents, CBO staff can and should support school recruitment efforts whenever possible, a sentiment echoed in all interviews. For example, CBO staff can create standard outreach flyers and provide them to the school well in advance of workshops. These flyers can then be customized at a later date with time, topic, and location information. This support is beneficial at two levels in that it encourages adequate advertisement of upcoming programs to ensure parent attendance and helps busy school administrators. One staff member mentioned incentivizing parents themselves as a successful recruitment tool: *“Some schools have had a frequent parent card... so that every time they went to a workshop they could sign-in on this little punch card and then they would get a free t-shirt at the end.”*

Funders of both 21st CCLC and parent programs in general should be encouraged to allocate time and resources specifically toward recruitment.

Set graduated annual targets for parent attendance.

Attendance in the program started low and increased over time, which quantitative data show increases by about 30% each year. Schools, CBOs, funders should consider establishing graduated attendance targets so that both have realistic expectations in the first year along with time to foster the relationships that lead to high attendance while also being accountable to themselves and funders over time.

Build connectedness by giving school staff opportunities to talk to staff about positive topics.

Through time at schools, program staff learned that school staff members who work with parents often feel their relationships are limited to discussions of students' negative behaviors. Program staff reported that school staff felt encouraged by Building Family because they see it as a space for positive interactions with parents, a break from their normal conversation topics addressing problems. The strength of this feeling seemed amplified when point people also perceived the program as a good family-school engagement tool.

Collaborate with school staff on scheduling and location.

Schools have ongoing programs and commitments that utilize facility space throughout the year. In addition to facility constraints, workshops must be scheduled at times that are convenient for parents; 82% of parents surveyed in both 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 said they attended workshops because of their convenient date and time occurrence. Program staff must work with school administrators to determine ideal scheduling and location for workshop facilitation. This requires trust and flexibility by program staffers that they will be set up with the best possible facility for workshop implementation and a readiness to work around school functions. As one staff member said:

“One of the challenges is trying to match up scheduling workshops at times convenient to parents. Typical afterschool time is not really going to be the best fit because many of the parents are working more than one job, and so this is something we always consider – how to figure out what the best days and times will be for the highest parent attendance.”

Consider the strengths and weaknesses of stand-alone workshops versus workshop series.

The majority of Building Family programming is implemented using a stand-alone, non-sequential workshop approach, i.e. workshop topics do not build on each other but rather are presented independently. When staff were asked about their perception of whether a stand alone or a series format (i.e. topics which built upon each other across workshops) there were mixed perspectives on what strategy is optimal for parent engagement, diverging into pro “series” and pro “single” workshop formats. The series format is widely recognized as optimal for engaging youth because of the relationship-building opportunity created as staff and youth interact on a continued basis. Based on this optimal youth-engagement strategy, some feel it’s appropriate to infer that the strategy for parent engagement is similar. However, adults differ from youth with different life constraints and a greater understanding of what will be useful to their lives. As such, researcher recommendations are also divided. Recent studies show single workshops may be ideal for some parent program topics while short series (three to four sessions) are optimal for others (Leff et al., 2010, Sanders, Markie-Dadds & Turner, 2003).

Single workshop approach. Several staff said that single-format is beneficial because potentially a wider range of families can be reached. Additionally, the single workshop format is less likely to exclude families with busy schedules because parents can attend what they are able to without feeling like they have missed out. One drawback to consider, however, varying staff members at each workshop may reduce the number of opportunities for parents and program staff to connect. If a long-term goal for implementing such programs is to increase overall parent engagement, developing a relationship with families is likely a critical ingredient, which may be minimized by the single workshop approach.

Series workshop approach. When staff were asked about series, most mentioned the site that used a book club series approach. Staff reported that parents at that site were involved in choosing each book and workshop topic and that the school’s book club goal was to sustain long-term parental involvement. The implementer explained that the book club maintained a small, but consistent number of repeat parent attendees and focused on quality of parent engagement over number of parents engaged. Parents reported feeling more equipped to support their children’s schoolwork and that they have integrated content from the series into relationships with other parents and their families. This specific series implementation had two critically unique aspects: (1) one implementer facilitated each meeting; (2) the facilitator engaged with the school and

families outside the book club (e.g. implementer attends school's PTA meetings and made personalized gifts for the parents). It is unclear whether this series implementation success is attributable to the series format or this particular group leader; regardless a series format possesses strong potential for relationship building, and merits consideration as an implementation method when possible.

Providing High Quality Experiences for Parents

Although an effective collaboration with school staff is crucial for parent recruitment, many staff recommendations focused around ensuring a positive experience for parents who participate in the workshops. Taking care to meet the needs of parents will help ensure that parents return and that they recommend workshops to their friends in the school community. In Building Family, 97% of parents said they would attend again, and 99% would recommend the workshop series to a friend across both years. We believe these positive experiences help account for a great deal of the growth in parent attendance from year to year. Keeping in mind the recommendations below will help ensure that parents get the most possible out of each workshop.

Choose a highly trained dynamic and engaging facilitator who will be comfortable with parents (and vice versa).

Quality implementation is a basic consideration of any program—however the quality of the implementing staff are particularly critical when engagement is geared toward an adult audience. A number of measures utilized by TLP can be used by anyone, including comprehensive staff training that teaches facilitation and parent engagement techniques, and the use of feedback from post-workshop surveys that ensure best practices are applied. Quantitative data supports this, as surveyed parents indicated that presenter knowledge (95% in 2008-2009 and 90% in 2009-2010) and presenter fun and engagement level (90% in both years).

Additionally, consider the presenter's compatibility with each school's community of parents, namely in terms of content expertise and cultural competence.

A major barrier to success noted by nearly all staff interviewees was a lack of cultural knowledge and fit. Implementers should be mindful of the power dynamics important to the cultural groups they will serve, and note which individual and lingual characteristics might work best within a school community, especially as these may change from one neighborhood to the next. Though it is intuitive that strong program implementation staff will make a difference in the quality and efficacy of a parent engagement program, according to at least one interviewee it is precisely the program trainer quality which sets Building Family's parent engagement approach apart from other school-based parent engagement programs.

Foster relationships between parents by allowing time for parents to share stories and information.

Because the overarching goal of the parent workshop series is to build connectedness to schools and promote parent engagement, not solely to convey content, it is essential to structure the workshops to allow time for parents to connect with one another. In addition, it is important that facilitators recognize the expertise of the parents, and allow them to contribute. In both years more than 90% of parents surveyed strongly agreed that workshops made them feel connected to other parents.

In creating space that will be appealing and inviting to parents, the construction of a workshop is crucial to its success. Parents tend to get most engaged when there are opportunities for storytelling, sharing their personal experiences among each other. **To foster that relational parent network, it is useful to include time for parents to connect and bond with each other.** As a programmer, it is important to remember that though the program implementer is a critical ingredient to the success of a workshop—a significant contribution comes from the parents themselves. One staff member described the following as a successful example of this principle in action: “There’s always a moment where I remind them if they have a story or personal anecdote that they want to share – parents love to share.... It’s very surprising how forthright parents will be or how open in how they talk about personal experiences. And also, they’ll start to share with each other, which is really interesting. Sometimes the conversation – if it were a really great and dynamic room, it would almost carry forward itself, like I wasn’t even needed to facilitate because the conditions had been set.”

Build connectedness to the school by hosting workshops on school grounds, involving school staff members, and linking to school events. To ensure that the major goal of the 21st CCLC funders is met, CBO staff should make building connectedness to the school a major focus of each workshop. Even when school-connectedness is not the topical focus of the workshop, staff suggested focusing on connectedness by holding workshops on school grounds, inviting school staff members to attend, and linking workshops to other school events. Surveyed parents reported that workshops made them feel more connected to their child’s school (84% in 2008-2009 and 97% in 2009-2010) and increased their ability to communicate with their child’s school (85% in 2008-2009, 95% in 2009-2010).

Staff reported that schools served by the program often have low engagement at parent-school functions. Several staff reported that although school-based parent program point people perceived workshop content as valuable, sometimes the value of workshops for school point people was less about endorsing program content and more about increasing attendance at school functions. All staff reported that where parent attendance at school events was acceptable, point people scheduled Building Family workshops to overlap or combine with PTA meetings as a method to increase needed parent involvement.

“We had ideas of tacking on a workshop along with a school performance... or sometimes [a school has] a community day or a health fair, those have been effective if it’s something they’re already having at the school and then... we’re offering multiples of our workshops at the same time.”

Another staff member mentioned that:

“You will see a lot of [school staff] that link Building Family up with PTA meetings... so that it’s a reward for parents who are attending PTA meetings or it may also be an enticement to come to those PTA meetings.”

Be prepared to tailor workshop content to the needs of parents by offering a range of curricular topics.

As mentioned above, the Building Family program offers a wide range of curricular topic across multiple areas, and allows schools to create new ones to meet emergent needs. Interest in curricular topics was one of the highest-rated reasons parents reported attending workshops in 2008-2009 as well as 2009-2010. Several staff members mentioned that the program was most successful when they solicited input from parents and school staff to select workshop topics. For example, a staff member who ran a book club series explained its success this way:

“One of the things is, the parents chose the topics. So, I helped to choose the books, but they had a lot of say in what would happen next...I told them what the menu was, and asked what they thought would be best. They gave me ideas, and then I would say back to them ‘you guys have talked about this a lot, how about we do this’ and then they would say ‘okay,’ or they would say ‘we’d rather do that,’ so I pretty much did what they wanted me to do.”

In addition, Building Family staff also reported that workshops were more successful when they worked with school point people to gather information about parental skill level, e.g. parent proficiency with computers. Several staff explained that their goal is to select useful topics and structure materials to meet parents at their level. For example one staff member recommended that facilitators:

“Assess your audience, and if they’re really basic, you’re going down this path line. If they’re more comfortable, then you can go down this path line. Either I need to be prepared to make that shift, or I need to know a little more about the school before I arrive, to anticipate what that audience is going to be like.”

Another staff member offered that by meeting parents at their level, Building Family workshops contribute to the school as a safe learning environment for both students and parents.

Meet the needs of non-English speaking parents by enlisting the school point person or a participating parent to co-facilitate or translate workshops into the parents’ native language.

Building Family staff consistently reported that it is unknown how many languages will be present at any given workshop. One strategy to address this listed by several staff utilizes the school point person (who staff reported is often hired with the skills to speak the dominant non-English language at the school) be present at any given workshop to co-facilitate or translate; if they are unable to do so, enlist one or more parent participants to translate. While doing so requires a group effort, it seems to increase both family and school involvement in the program. Although multiple languages can present a considerable barrier, a strong programming staff can re-structure the implementation approach to meet the needs of the parents in the moment. As one staff member said:

“Sometimes when you go to do a workshop you’ll have parents with different languages but you may not have a [school staff member] there to translate. I know sometimes you might be able to get a parent to help you translate to the other parents. And though this makes it harder it can end up being a good thing because the parents end up being the facilitation partner.”

Conclusion

The current study used a mixed methods approach that included qualitative and quantitative data to garner the perspectives of parents, CBO implementation staff, and a grant administrator to learn which factors and strategies lead to high attendance in a large-scale urban parent workshop program. We synthesized their voices into user-friendly best practices and recommendations in two distinct areas--working effectively with schools, and providing high quality experiences to parents—to help other parent programs across the country better provide literacy and education services to low-income families. By sharing the stories behind programmatic growth, successes, and challenges, we hope to support the field of family-school engagement, and better serve the youth and families we aim to support.

Recommendations in Two Areas of Provider Impact

Working Effectively with Schools

Continuously foster a positive working relationship between the school and CBO to improve parent attendance.

Use multi-service CBO's to implement both parent and youth programming, or form effective partnerships with youth-serving organizations to aid in recruitment.

Allocate both school and CBO time and resources to recruitment.

Set graduated targets for attendance that allow for realistic expectations during the formative program stage and hold staff accountable for promoting growth over time.

Build connectedness by giving school staff opportunities to talk to parents about positive topics.

Collaborate with school staff on scheduling and location.

Use the single workshop approach to serve more parents and for certain topics. Use mini-series implemented by the same facilitator at each meeting. Be sure the facilitator can engage with the school and families at the school at times outside of the series.

Providing High Quality Experiences for Parents

Choose a highly trained dynamic and engaging facilitator who will be comfortable with parents (and vice versa).

Foster relationships between parents by allowing time for parents to share stories and information.

Build connectedness to the school by hosting workshops on school grounds, involving school staff members, and linking to school events.

Be prepared to tailor the workshop content to the needs of the parents by offering a range of curricular topics. Utilize parent and school staff input to select workshop topic. Then gather information in advance about the expected participant skill level and amend the workshop content accordingly.

Meet the needs of non-English speaking parents by enlisting the school point person or a participating parent to co-facilitate or translate workshops into the parents' native language.