



## Family Engagement Specialist Guide

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## Why Focus on Family Engagement?

Texas ACE focuses on engaging families statewide to meet a critical goal: participation in out-of-school (OST) time programs. To ensure family participation, planning, and leadership in ACE programs, we must work together in new ways, using research-based strategies and sharing good practices.

When OST programs engage families, everyone benefits. TEA evaluation reports and other national out-of-school-time research underscore the positive effects family engagement can have. The positive effects include:

- Continuing family participation: TEA's statewide evaluations of the ACE Program<sup>i</sup> show that once families start participating, they continue. In a statewide evaluation conducted during the 2003-2004 school year, data showed that participating adult family members not only return, but do so at a very high rate.
- Better outcomes: The TEA's 2005 and 2007 evaluation reports showed that when adult family members participated in center activities, students were involved in more activities than students whose family members did not participate.
- Family involvement with learning improves: Some research shows that family engagement in OST programs can be leveraged to improve family involvement in school events, increase help with homework, and boost encouragement for reading.<sup>ii</sup>
- "ACEing" TAKS: The 2007 evaluation found correlations with student attendance in ACE math activities and higher TAKS math scores. Cumulative attendance in ACE was also associated with significant decreases in 5-year grade retention rates in middle school.

These findings show that family participation in center activities will lead to improved student attendance, which can foster improved academic performance. These data, and subsequent evaluation reports have been consistent. That is why the TEA has made improved family engagement in the ACE Program a focus in recent years.

An additional benefit of this increased family engagement focus is the reinforcement of TEA's Critical Success Model. The Critical Success Model and its Critical Success Factor Behaviors, Milestones and Performance Indicators are tools used by TEA and program administrative staff to measure the intended outcomes. Specifically, Critical Success Factors 1 and 2 are designed to address the students & families we serve in the ACE program. When developing and planning for family engagement in their Texas ACE Program, Grantees should consider the milestones and behaviors outlined in the Critical Success Model. By doing so, Grantees will develop a rigorous program that drives strong student and family engagement along with the community's buy-in to the ACE Program. You can find the Critical Success Model in the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE, Appendix 1.

Implementing a Family Component at each Center is also a federal requirement. The purpose of the 21st CCLC program as outlined in the program's legislation is three fold:

- (1) provide opportunities for academic enrichment, including providing tutorial services to help students, particularly students who attend low-performing schools, to meet State and local student academic achievement standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and mathematics;*
- (2) offer students a broad array of additional services, programs, and activities, such as youth development activities, drug and violence prevention programs, counseling programs, art, music, and recreation programs, technology education programs, and character education programs, that are designed to reinforce and complement the regular academic program of participating students; and*
- (3) offer families whose students who are served by community learning centers opportunities for literacy and related educational development.*

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg55.html>

To further the third goal, each Texas ACE Program is required to implement TEA's Four-Component Activity Guide, which includes a Family and Parental Support Services component. You can find the Four-Component Activity Guide in the Appendix of the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE. Each center's activities must be balanced across the Four-Components and based on the campus' needs. A minimum of one activity from each category must be offered each term (Cycle 7 Request for Application [RFA], Part II: Program Guidelines, page 22). The activities should be educational, literacy related, and ongoing and consistent during the fall, spring, and summer. Family activities must be provided to immediate adult/family members (parents/ legal guardians) of students enrolled in the ACE program.

For more information about the family activity requirement see Cycle 7, Part II: Program Guidelines, page 24 and Task 4: Recruiting Participants in the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE.

### Family Engagement Specialist (FES) Position Requirements

Data historically reported by ACE Grantees shows that too few families are frequently involved in the ACE Program statewide. Grantees must improve their engagement with families to increase regular ACE participation. In the Cycle 7 Grant Application, TEA required that each Grantee employ a Family Engagement Specialist. The addition of a Family Engagement Specialist position for all Cycle 7 grant recipients is designed not only to increase participation, but to truly provide well planned activities that are specific to the needs of the participants (both students and their family members).

Each Cycle 7 Grantee must staff their program with a Family Engagement Specialist that:

- Is a full time position (minimum of 40 hours per week) for Grantees with 5-10 Centers.
- Is a part-time position (minimum of 20 hours per week) for Grantees with fewer than 5 Centers.

- Collects, analyzes and shares data related to the needs of ACE families with the Project Director and Site Coordinators.
- Identifies and builds relationships with community members, agencies, and vendors that Centers can partner with to support their Family Engagement Component.
- Works with Site Coordinators to help them coordinate the ongoing Family Engagement Component at their Center that is based on the needs of their ACE family members. The FES may deliver the family engagement activities, but is not required to do so.
- Attends at least one statewide conference per year to network and improve skills. A list of possible conferences related to afterschool is in Section E of the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE. Region XVI Education Service Center in Texas is charged with supporting the Title I Parent Involvement program across the state. They hold an annual conference and regional seminars on family engagement in addition to providing print and media resources. See their website for more information at <http://www.esc16.net/default.aspx?name=title1swi.home>.

For additional information about requirements for the FES position, see Staffing Requirement for the Family Engagement Specialist in the Cycle 7 RFA, Part II: Program Guidelines, page 23. A description is also included in the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE under Task 5: Resourcing your Program with Staff and Partners. A sample FES job description is included in the appendix. Keep in mind that this is just a sample and grantees can choose requirements for this position that are unique to their needs.

## What is Family Engagement?

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group propose three core principles of family engagement in learning, regardless of setting:

- Family engagement is a *shared responsibility* in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Family engagement is *continuous across a child's life* and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the *multiple settings where children learn*—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool and summer programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community. For more on defining family engagement, visit <http://hfrp.org/family-involvement>.

Family engagement in OST incorporates these three principles into strategies aimed at improving and supporting children's learning and development in and out of school. The ACE Program Family

component requirement will help Grantees allocate resources and implement activities to engage ACE families. TEA expects that Grantees will:

- Build strong relationships with families.
- Provide information and training for families to help them improve their child's education outcomes.
- Connect families to community resources they will benefit from.
- Provide educational opportunities to family members to help them advance their own education.

### How to Engage with ACE Families?

TEA developed a self-assessment inventory to help Grantees assess how their Family Engagement component is shaping up. It is included in the Appendix to the PRIME Blueprint for Texas ACE. We encourage the FES to work with each Site Coordinator in completing this assessment to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. In fact, many grantees who have already completed the self-assessment mentioned that they got so many great family engagement ideas just from reading through and answering the self-assessment.

As you assess your current performance, consider some of these strategies you can implement to strengthen your program.

**Create a Family Information Center** – Create a space at the Center where families can learn about the program, upcoming events, and strategies for parents to support students' education. Make sure the information center is in a location where it can be regularly seen by parents as they pick-up their students and attend programming. Some materials to consider for the information center include:

- ACE Program information. Make sure you make flyers, calendars and newsletters available that highlight upcoming program activities.
- Materials to help parents support their student's education. Free resources available from the U.S. Department of Education include booklets for parents that outline strategies on helping with homework and guiding students through adolescence. The booklets are in the public domain. Feel free to adopt whatever is useful or reformat the material to highlight the most relevant information. Find the Help Your Child Series here: <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/hyc.html>.
- List of community resources. Provide information about how parents can access resources in the community that can help their families such as free or low-cost vaccinations, housing services, financial planning services, etc.

- Suggestion cards. Offer parents an opportunity to provide feedback and offer suggestions for activities. Let them know that you welcome these cards and that they can be handed to any ACE staff member. Include a section on the card to let parents identify an area they are interested in or good at and call upon them to participate and lead activities with students. For example, if a parent is good at sewing he or she may want to volunteer to lead an activity or facilitate a Saturday workshop for other parents.

**Develop and Share a Family Handbook** – Head to the forms repository on MyTexasACE (<http://mytexasace.org/mod/data/view.php?id=49>) for an example of an ACE Program Family Handbook that can be adapted to your Center’s needs. The Handbook includes important information about the goals of the program as well as information parents need to know such as contact information for program staff, attendance policies, discipline rules, suspension/ expulsion policies, how to address student’s health needs, pick-up policies, and other transportation policies. This handbook will inform parents; create a common language about the ACE program and its features and benefits; and build trust to open the door for more communication.

**Build Trusting Relationships** – Help the families of your ACE students understand that you share their interest in their child.

- Be welcoming. Greet them when they arrive. Always smile and make eye contact with parents. This is basic, but critical to starting and building relationships.
- Communicate about your program and ACE Students in positive ways. Share the goals for the ACE program to improve student achievement, discipline and promotion rates. Share the mission to expand learning and enrichment opportunities for students. Share the successes of students. Share these positive messages in multiple methods and consistently via newsletters, conversations, emails and in-person meetings. Get your message out.
- Family nights are great ways to involve parents and will help you start building relationships with them. These events throughout the year are encouraged; they draw families in, let them learn more about the program, and enable students to showcase the work they are doing in ACE. Please note, however that while these events offer a way to get started, alone they do not fulfill the requirement to provide ongoing, educational activities for families as part of the ACE Program at each Center. Vidor ISD’s Texas Ace Program is a great example of integrating the family into the program. Vidor has implemented a monthly “Terrific Tuesday” family night that won the Texas Community Education Association’s Bright Idea Award in 2010. The program includes parent presentations on topics such as TAKS testing tips, concert etiquette, and facilitation of a Family Night at home. After the parent presentation, students from across Texas ACE campuses demonstrate activities learned through the program. The series has been a success, with an average attendance of 300 participants.

- Let parents and students know you are interested in them by involving them in decisions about the program. The required needs sensing activities will help you involve parents as you obtain their feedback. Demonstrating that you are listening by incorporating their thoughts and ideas into activity planning is critical.
- Encourage your staff to keep a parent communication log to track communication with parents. A simple log can remind you that you have not talked to a parent in a while and can help you identify trends in needs to inform changes in programming.
- Get involved with each campus' parent/teacher organization. Learn who parents listen to and communicate regularly with those leaders so you can stay informed about community needs and opportunities that parents can take advantage of.

**Staff and Train** – Supporting staff is important for improving family engagement. All staff must be trained on how to reach out to and communicate effectively with family members. The burden of communication should not solely be on the parents but should also be coming from the program staff.

- During weekly meetings, discuss thoughts and suggestions provided by families for improving programming. Make this a standing agenda item so it is addressed regularly.
- Train your staff. Check out the You for Youth (Y4Y) website's training on *Family Involvement*, <http://y4y.ed.gov/Publish/CourseLanding.aspx?CourseMasterID=5>. Take a look at the resources for *Knowing Families*. There are several resources that provide practical advice and strategies for building relationships <http://y4y.ed.gov/LML.aspx?CourseMasterID=5>. Select the most relevant resources for your program; use them when providing training to Site Coordinators and front-line staff who interact with parents. Note that the use of strategies used during training is highlighted as Critical Success Factor (CSF) 4 in TEAs Critical Success Model for Texas ACE.
- Work closely with the existing staff on each campus to bolster your efforts. For example, working with the Title I Coordinator at your Center to create a family engagement plan would be a great way to learn about the schools' parent involvement plans and leverage existing activities.

**Support Family Needs** – Families will be more engaged with the program if they know they can turn to program staff for support. Supporting families is as simple as letting them know that you are available for them. Families will feel supported when they communicate concerns and you are ready to respond. Listen to students and families to learn about their needs to help you focus your efforts. Some practical ideas to address common concerns include:

- Create an inventory of available community resources. Seek out community resources, meet with the leaders of those organizations or initiatives and make sure you can convey accurate information about services that are available. Don't try to reinvent the wheel or compete for

family attendance when there are already existing resources or initiatives that are similar to the needs of your families. Instead, seek to partner up with other service providers and perhaps agree to provide a service such as babysitting or buying supplies for family members of students enrolled in your ACE program. Train your Site Coordinators and staff about the availability of these resources and make printed information about the resources available for families.

- Host events that educate families about improving their health, meeting financial goals, and learn about community organizations such as the Texas Workforce Commission, local Food Bank and area faith-based organizations.
- Host education related events such as how to help students with homework, advocate for their student, encourage their child to attend college, and understand student assessment data.

**Connecting Families with Each Other, the School, and the Community** – Plan interactions, activities, and events to build more connectedness within your school community.

- Work with each Site Coordinator during meetings to help them identify and plan activities involving families in activities that are socially important to them, and that involve staff. For example, in Banquette’s ACE program, there is a common focus among multiple agencies to prevent diabetes. They have conducted multiple events in partnership with community health organizations. Events in which staff from the school day, afterschool program, other community organizations, and families participate together.
- Invite school and district staff to meet and greet parents and offer informational sessions about how to engage with the school and district to support their student.
- Work with your local college or university to provide information about extended learning opportunities for students and their family members.

### Use Data

The Family Engagement Specialist is expected to work with program data from four perspectives:

- Support Site Coordinators to ensure accurate reporting in TX21st,
- Work with Project Director and Site Coordinators to examine data related to the needs of families,
- Work with staff and families to understand the school and student performance data, and
- Support the Independent Evaluator when needed.

### Support Site Coordinators

When applicable, the FES should provide support to Site Coordinators to ensure that all family attendees are accounted for when participating in activities. This will be especially important if the FES was coordinating an event that Center staff could not attend. In that case, the FES is responsible for

ensuring that sign-in sheets are accurately maintained - include the name of the parent, student, and Center - and delivered to the appropriate Site Coordinators for entry into the TX21st system.

### **Examine the Needs of Families**

While the Site Coordinator is in charge of needs assessment, the FES is expected to play a pivotal role in identifying the needs of families the ACE program serves. In a large program, it may not be possible for the FES to collect all needs-related data pertaining to families. In this case the FES is expected to work with each Site Coordinator and the Project Director to develop a plan to gather baseline data for program planning, and a systematic plan to gather new information about needs during the year. The FES is expected to work with each Center during the year to ensure that program activities respond to ACE families' evolving needs.

### **Work with Families to Use Data**

Research and technical assistance resources emphasize the key role that afterschool staff - particularly the Site Coordinators and any front-line staff - can play in helping parents understand the academic support their student needs. The FES should help Center staff understand diagnostic tools or assessments used to determine student needs, and how staff members can communicate with parents about those tools and assessments. Centers that offer tutorials use pre- and post-tests to diagnose students' academic needs, then monitor student progress. The results of these tests, along with strategies to reinforce learning at home, can be shared with families. Review student performance and progress with parents, including homework completion and concept mastery during tutoring. The administration and use of pre- and post-assessment results is the third CSF within the Critical Success Model for Texas ACE. Grantees can tackle CSF 1, by engaging with students and families in understanding and using the data.

### **Support the Independent Evaluator**

The FES is also expected to work with the Project Director and Independent Evaluator to help design a data collection plan that includes information about family participation and engagement, especially because there are Performance Measures that specifically relate to family engagement and are required for the Final Yearly Report. The FES can help identify parents, provide contact information, coordinate interviews or focus groups, and participate in the independent analysis debrief. The FES is expected to use and share the relevant results of the evaluation to improve programming.

### **Budget Wisely**

Grantees choose their own strategies for budgeting grant resources and follow their fiscal agent's policies to carry out financial management strategies. Many grantees have created decentralized budgets and have developed a budget for each center. Family Engagement Specialists should work with Project Directors to determine funding for grant-wide activities and Family Engagement Programming at each Center.

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For example, the FES will need money to develop relationships with community partners that will have grant-wide impact. The benefits of these partnerships are likely to be realized across multiple Centers. Resources for these meetings will include flyers with information about the program and could include presentation materials. The FES must, however, ensure they follow guidelines; grant monies, for example, may not be used for fundraising.

The budget for the ongoing educational family activities each Center implements will likely be allocated at the Center level. To use these resources, the Project Director, Site Coordinator and FES will all be involved in designing Family Engagement Activities that will conform to the Center's needs and budget.

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<sup>i</sup> TEA evaluation reports, 2005 and 2007. A full list of published reports can be found at:  
[http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=2908&menu\\_id=949](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=2908&menu_id=949)

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Harris, E. & Wimer, C. (2004). *Engaging with families in out-of-school time learning*. (Out-of-school Time Evaluation Snapshot No. 4). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project [v] See, for example, Harris, E. & Wimer, C. (2004). *Engaging with families in out-of-school time learning*. (Out-of-school Time Evaluation Snapshot No. 4). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.