



Families as Partners Parent Champion Initiative

2018–2019

What is the Families as Partners program?

In 2016, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) was awarded a 3-year, \$1.75 million grant from the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) to strengthen family-school partnerships at up to 15 elementary schools. The primary objective of the Families as Partners program is to build authentic, trusting relationships between school staff and parents to more effectively support the success of students. Motivated by the dual-capacity framework for family-school partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), one initiative of the program is to enhance the capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence of parents. This report focuses on the capacity building of the 2018–2019 parent champions.

What did the parent champion initiative entail?

Using a [promotora](#)-like model, parent champions received specialized training from district staff and community members, and then they shared their knowledge with other parents at their child's school. In 2018–2019, 61 parents participated in the parent champion initiative at 14 elementary schools (Andrews, Barrington, Blanton, Cook, Guerrero-Thompson, Harris, Hart, Jordan, McBee, Padron, Pillow, Walnut Creek, Wooldridge, and Wooten Elementary). Parents became a champion in one of the following roles: literacy volunteer coordinator, technology support coordinator, social and emotional learning (SEL) coordinator, administrative assistant, English as a second language (ESL) coordinator, and refugee/newcomer ambassador.

Each parent champion role entailed unique responsibilities, but the primary responsibility of a parent champion was to work with community members as well as the school's parent support specialist, parents, and staff to complete projects that increased parent engagement. Parent champions were expected to facilitate peer education in their specialty area and to lead at least one parent workshop.

At the same time that parent champions trained other parents, they also built their own capacities. In addition to 30 hours of school-based work that each parent champion completed, parent champions also participated in a minimum of 10 hours of professional development activities. They received ongoing, one-on-one training from a variety of specialists within the district—most notably, the parent support specialist at each of the participating schools. Staff from a local non-profit organization, [Con Mi MADRE](#), and AISD staff provided workshops on topics such as public speaking, leadership skills, time management, resume writing, and interview skills. Many parent champions also took advantage of the classes and workshops that the Families as

Partners program offered to any parent or caregiver at all participating schools. Some of these capacity-building opportunities included General Educational Development (GED) classes with Austin Community College, English lessons through AISD’s Maestro en Casa ESL program, coding workshops with Austin’s locally owned Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station (KLRU), and early childhood literacy training with Advancing America. Research suggests that this collective effort of engaging families together—especially minority families—may be a more culturally responsive and effective way to leverage impact on students, schools, and communities than is the more traditional approach of involving individual parents (Ishimaru, 2019).

What types of workshops did parent champions lead?

Parent champions were required to lead at least one parent workshop in their specialty area. Some parent champions felt ready to work with other parents upon joining the parent champion initiative, while others needed more training before they felt comfortable sharing their knowledge with peers. By the end of the school year, parent champions had conducted a variety of meetings and workshops, including ESL classes, child literacy workshops, computer classes, online registration information sessions, book clubs, yoga and meditation sessions, and more. Exceeding their goal of at least one parent-led event each, the cohort of 61 parent champions conducted a total of 220 events with more than 4,000 parents or other adult family members in attendance.



One notable opportunity for parent champions to present to other parents was the district-wide, parent-leadership conference, *Adelante*. More than 200 people attended the Spanish-only conference, which was themed “proud of my bilingual family, culture, and identity.” Families as Partners parent champions led all of the morning break-out sessions, presenting on their specialty topics (e.g., technology, literacy, and social-emotional health).

The break-out session led by the SEL parent champions was particularly popular among conference attendees. In the session, parent champions described their personal journeys with SEL, including techniques they had learned to hone their self-awareness

Equity

Equity recognizes that some people are at a larger disadvantage than are others and aims to compensate the less fortunate to ensure that all reach their fullest potential. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation is committed to advancing racial equity, maintaining it is “essential to creating the conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success.”

Advancing equity is also a top priority of AISD’s SEL Department, which houses the Families as Partners program. The department aims to leverage the implementation of SEL—from the boardroom to the classroom and into the community—to advance the district’s commitment to cultural proficiency, inclusiveness, and equity. Peter Price, director of AISD’s SEL Department remarked that the Families as Partners program “is a powerful example of equity in action, empowering parents to partner with their schools for the betterment of children.”

In 2018–2019, 12 of the 14 schools participating in the Families as Partners program had fewer than 10% White students, and more than 90% of students at these schools were economically disadvantaged. Nearly all the parent champions were of minority races. One point of pride for the Families as Partners program was the ability to compensate parent champions. At the graduation ceremony, more than \$35,000 was awarded to the parent champions who fulfilled the requirements of the initiative, regardless of their immigration status.



and self-management. The presenters discussed culturally relevant parenting challenges that seemed to resonate with those in attendance, and they encouraged parents to adopt an emotion-centered approach to discipline in order to better understand the reasons children misbehave when they do. Attendees of the SEL session also participated in a make-and-take activity, creating a paper stoplight to serve as a metaphor for how parents should respond, rather than react, when a problem arises in the home. The parent champions noted that the stoplight is a tool children are familiar using at school, and that incorporating it into the home would help bridge the gap between behavior management techniques used at school and those used at home. Indeed, research on social capital supports this notion that shared expectations among families and schools can lead to improved behavioral outcomes for children (Turley, Gamoran, McCarty, & Fish, 2017).

A brief exit survey from the Adelante conference indicated that 100% of attendees agreed their knowledge and skills had improved as a result of participation in the parent-led training. Many of the parents noted the value of learning from their peers, stating that the best part of the training was “hearing personal experiences from parents” and “relating to the presenters, who are parents and have been through the same situations that I have.”



What were some other outcomes of the parent champion initiative?

AISD’s Department of Research and Evaluation administered a variety of surveys and conducted focus groups with stakeholders to evaluate how parent champions were affected by their participation in the initiative, as well as how campus culture and family engagement changed as a result of the Families as Partners program.

One survey created for the program was a self-efficacy survey that parent champions completed before and after the initiative. At the start of the initiative, parents reported being the least confident about their technical skills. For example, more than half of parents rated themselves as poor or fair at accessing documents online and writing professional emails. However, by the end of the initiative, parents’ self-efficacy had increased for each of the skills, and more than 75% of parent champions rated themselves as good or excellent at each skill. Of particular note was the increased percentage of parents who felt more confident in their ability to communicate with staff and their ability to recruit other parents to participate in events (Table 1).

Table 1.

Parent champions' self-efficacy increased for each of the skills during the initiative.

Skill	Pre-initiative	Post-initiative	Pre-to-post change
Accessing and updating documents online (e.g., Google docs)	41%	82%	41%
Writing professional emails	44%	77%	33%
Using technology (e.g., computers, social media)	62%	85%	23%
Recruiting other parents to participate in events	67%	90%	23%
Communicating with other parents at my child's campus	75%	98%	23%
Conducting a meeting	61%	81%	20%
Communicating with staff at my child's campus	84%	100%	16%
Preparing flyers, announcements, and agendas for meetings	75%	90%	15%
Knowing when to ask for help	84%	97%	13%
Presenting or demonstrating an idea to others	82%	94%	12%
Filling out forms	87%	97%	10%
Explaining things to other people	85%	90%	5%
Managing my time	84%	87%	3%
Listening to others' feedback	93%	97%	3%

Source. Self-efficacy assessment administered to parent champions, September 2018 and April 2019

In April and May of 2019, separate focus groups were conducted with parent champions, parent support specialists, and school principals, during which participants described changes they had witnessed since joining the Families as Partners program. Much of the conversation centered around changes observed in the parents and their level of engagement. Supporting the results from the self-efficacy survey, parent champions reported increased confidence over the course of the school year. For example, several parents used words such as “shy,” “embarrassed,” and “in a shell” to describe how they felt prior to becoming a parent champion, but reported feeling happier and better about themselves by the end of the initiative. One parent champion remarked, “I used to just be a grandparent, bringing my grandbabies to school. Now I’m volunteering, and I love it! And all the kids love me. I feel better about myself, too!” School staff also were quick to note the increased confidence of parent champions. One parent support specialist said, “This program helps parent champions gain the confidence they need to step up to the next level,” and one principal remarked, “This process helps give parents confidence; it’s a neat opportunity for them.”

Related to boosts in self-efficacy and confidence, parents reported feeling that the parent champion role gave them a renewed sense of purpose at their child’s school, moving them from just being another warm body in the building to a more meaningful role. One parent remarked, “Before, I was Sofia’s mom, the volunteer who would make copies

or translate a message. Now I am Ms. Daisy. Now, kids at the school see me as a teacher. They ask me for help with their homework, and that inspires me.” Parent support specialists also noted the development of parent champions from complaisant volunteers into more active leaders at their children’s schools, with some parent champions working alongside teachers or the parent support specialist to assist students or other families. This shift from parents working *for* school staff to working *with* school staff is remarkable; research with Latina immigrants in Texas indicates their involvement at their children’s school is often passive and at the directive of staff (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015).

Another common theme that emerged from the focus groups was a change in perspective by staff about the capabilities of parents. For example, one parent champion remarked that the program “made teachers look at me in a different way... I’m not just the mom who is always here at the school, but now they know my expectations for the kids, and they trust me.” Other parents described being treated with more warmth and respect by school staff: “Now I am greeted by name and others ask, ‘How can I help you?’ When I first started coming to the school, it wasn’t always like that.” In addition, some staff members acknowledged a shift in their mindset about parents. For instance, one parent support specialist said, “This program opened my eyes to what parents have to offer. I came to learn about my parents, get to know them. I learned about parents who have degrees from their countries, parents who were professionals. I was surprised!”

“This program continues to bring out the hidden talents of parents.”

**Toña Vasquez,
Parent Support Specialist Lead**

The Families as Partners program has maintained a strong emphasis on the importance of building authentic, trusting relationships, and as such, it was not surprising that relationship and community building were topics mentioned by parents and staff during the focus groups. Principals and parent support specialists said they liked seeing parents at their school meet parents at other schools. One parent support specialist remarked, “My parents met people they never would have met otherwise. Now, they get to see these other parents on a monthly basis, and they say, ‘Hi friend!’ when they see each other. I really enjoyed seeing this in my parents.” Parents also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with parents from other schools and acknowledged that building relationships with other students’ families has broadened their support systems. “There is much more support now,” one parent commented.

What’s next for the parent champion initiative?

Although 2018–2019 was the third and final year of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation grant, the Families as Partners program plans to continue the parent champion initiative in the 2019–2020 school year, with partial support from the [Genevieve and Ward Orsinger Foundation](#). Program staff also plan to conduct follow-up interviews with previous parent champions to learn how parents have progressed personally, professionally, and as partners in their children’s education.

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AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Chelsea Cornelius, Ph.D.

Department of Research and Evaluation



1111 West 6th Street, Suite D-350 | Austin, TX 78703-5338
512.414.1724 | fax: 512.414.1707
www.austinisd.org/dre | Twitter: @AISD_DRE

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