

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STARTER KIT FOR ALL



NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR
COMMUNITY AND
EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

IN COLLABORATION WITH
NCCEP'S FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
ADVISORY COMMITTEE



WHY THE STARTER KIT FOR ALL?

It doesn't matter if you're starting with seventh graders or eleventh graders – engaging their families will take time, effort, and intention. This Starter Kit is designed to walk you through the key elements of family engagement, from the needs assessment to maintaining relationships and elements in between.

This is meant for staff who are new to working with GEAR UP families or want a refresher on the basic tenets of family engagement. We recommend you read the full document to start with, then come back to it as you embark on the different stages of family engagement.

While this addresses family engagement in GEAR UP, it is not intended to provide an overview of GEAR UP. To learn more about GEAR UP, we encourage you to attend one of NCCPEP's events and participate in the session *An Orientation to GEAR UP*.

To access resources as you read, [click here](#).



Core Components:

Getting to Know Your Families

Lay a firm foundation for meaningful engagement (pp. 3-4)

Planning for Engagement

Engage in a sustainable way (pp. 5-6)

Trust

Build strong long-term relationships (pp. 7)

Data

Collect the data and review it to make sound decisions (pp. 8-9)

Getting Started

Create services around key topics (pp. 10)

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR FAMILIES

In this first section, we'll explore how to lay the foundation for meaningful family engagement. We'll offer a series of exercises you can complete with your GEAR UP team and relevant partners, along with some example resources.

The Community Context

Every community is made up of people who have norms, values, traditions, and written and unwritten rules. The physical layout of a community, demographic, business, and more, can impact the way a community interacts and functions. Communities are complex and understanding even a fraction of the community can help you begin to connect with the people who live there.

To start learning about your community, you can answer some questions in our community mapping exercise. This is most beneficial when done with members of your team and any other partners who you'll be working with to implement family engagement.



SHOW FAMILIES THAT THEIR PRESENCE IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!

-Yisel DeOleo, The College Crusade of Rhode Island

The goal is to figure out what your GEAR UP program is already doing, what other community organizations are doing, and how these types of initiatives typically function within a community. For example, do organizations meet families at schools? Or do they meet them somewhere else in the community? Is there a community center that is used for multiple initiatives where families feel comfortable and go to regularly? Are there policies that support family engagement work in schools?

Understanding the community is an ongoing process – you may revisit annually to see if there are new organizations, different trends, or other opportunities. Regardless of how often you revisit, you should begin to familiarize yourself with the community as a starting point in your family engagement work.

Resources:

- The College Crusade of Rhode Island, Case Study: Community Health Resources
- NCCEP, Constructing a Locality Map



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR FAMILIES

Conducting a Needs Assessment

There is a straightforward way to find out what your families need: ask them. While data about the community, information from other stakeholders, and input from your program are all helpful in building your family engagement services, you should begin engaging with families by asking them what they think they need.

This can be done through a needs assessment. Although this sounds simple, you will need to strategically plan what questions to ask, the length of questions, accessibility, and how to distribute. For example, you might meet families at the pickup / drop off area at the school, sporting events, or other high traffic places and events whether they are virtual or in-person.

Conducting a needs assessment is common in the GEAR UP community, so you do not need to reinvent the wheel. Many GEAR UP programs have created tailored needs assessments that have been shared widely – you can modify one of them to your community. This is also an ongoing endeavor. You may want to conduct a needs assessment once a year to see how needs have changed, what families want, and how to best engage with them.



Resources:

- Chicago GEAR UP, Needs Assessment

PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Engaging families should go beyond sending flyers – it should be a sustained, two-way relationship in which family members have the opportunity to ask questions, provide feedback, and lead initiatives. Let's explore ways to foster engagement and create momentum through recruitment, communication plans, and strong relationships.

Recruitment

Starting slow with recruitment is okay! There is nothing wrong with taking the first few steps carefully so that you create a strong foundation for future engagement. Remember, a GEAR UP grant is 6-7 years in length, so you will have some time in middle school to begin building the relationships. By the time students are ready to transition into high school, you should have a community of families who support one another and cheer each other on as their students prepare to enter postsecondary education and beyond.

Creating and sustaining this type of momentum will require strategic effort. This process is iterative. You'll need to continually revisit what your families need and how to best engage with them.

To get started with recruiting families to attend GEAR UP events, consider their language and cultural values, work schedules, and childcare structure. Take time to figure out who some of the influential GEAR UP parent/guardian leaders already are on the school campus and get to know them. Connect with school faculty and staff who already have strong relationships with families. When you recruit families, consider wearing your GEAR UP gear to events and other places where families go, and engage regularly with them. If your grant has the resources, you may want to explore hiring parent/guardians to support outreach and engagement.



This is a lot to consider as you recruit, and it will take time to get the ball rolling. Once things are jump started, however, be ready to sustain the two-way engagement and continue creating opportunities for families to be involved with your GEAR UP program.

Resources:

- East St. Louis GEAR UP 189, Babysitting Certificate
- East St. Louis GEAR UP 189, Job Posting - Parent Position

PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Communication Plan

Building a communication plan is a key element of working with families. From recruitment to distributing information, you should be strategic about your outreach.

BUILD GENUINE
CONNECTIONS WITH
FAMILIES AND
SHOW THEM YOU
CARE.

-Rebeca Figueroa, YES-Appalachia, Appalachian State University GEAR UP

There are great resources about communication plans, generally, that are easily searchable. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will focus on how to tailor communications for families.

First, consider the language you use. Specifically, language and tone that's appropriate for parents/caregivers (adults), rather than students. Differentiate your communications between these two audiences.

Second, know where families get their information. This can be part of your needs assessment – ask whether people prefer newsletters, newspapers, emails, texts, phone calls, flyers, or word-of-mouth. Meet them where they are.

Lastly, consider how families can interact. In other words, when you send them a piece of information, how can they reply and interact with you? Should they call you? Email? Come see you in person? Build this type of two-way communication into your overall plan.

Resources:

- CSUF GEAR UP, Call Script
- Appalachian State GEAR UP, Parent Flyer



TRUST

As you're engaging with families, recruiting them to participate in your program, and building momentum, think about how you are building long-term relationships. Part of the reason we want you to read this all before you begin to actively use it is because, while this is the third part, it is foundational to all the other work. Without a focus on building strong, trusting relationships, family engagement will be consistently more challenging.

Trust is the foundation of family engagement. It might take days, weeks, or even years. However, without it, relationships with families will lack a strong foundation – a foundation that is a key element of family engagement. Families are trusting you to guide not just them, but their child. Chances are, nothing is more important to a parent or guardian than the well-being of their child.

So, you have a big job that includes being honest, transparent, and honoring the family. Some specific ways to help build trust are showing up when you say you will, calling when something is important, and providing the services that families need in a way that they can understand and ask questions.



When you build this foundation of trust, you are creating an environment in which a family can have confidence that the support you are providing through your GEAR UP program is legitimate and they can count on you to support their child.



The example in this resource section represents how trust is the foundation of family engagement. Region One ESC GEAR UP starts with building trust in order to gain momentum in programming. As you review this resource and all of the resources provided as part of this kit, consider how trust can make services more meaningful and how you can foster trust in your GEAR UP program.

Resources:

- Region One ESC GEAR UP, Engaging Families & TOT Flyers

DATA

The national strategy for NCCEP and GEAR UP is: Excel, Prove, Mobilize. The previous sections focus on Excel and Mobilize – building continuous improvement into family engagement and communicating with families. This section will focus on Prove, or the importance of making sound decisions based on data, research, and evaluation. In the context of family engagement, a major part of Prove is collecting data that is accurate and consistent so that you and your GEAR UP program can use that data to improve family engagement efforts.

Data Collection

Your grant will require you to collect certain information to track which services were provided, who and/or how many students' families attended, and other information that is submitted as part of your GEAR UP grant's Annual Performance Report (APR). This is a required component of the grant, so you will need to adhere to your grant's protocols regarding data collection and entry. Be sure you communicate with your colleagues responsible for the APR and ask questions so that you can be efficient and accurate in your data collection.

You might also consider what type of information you're interested in collecting to better support your families. You can see what other sites collect within your GEAR UP program, what other GEAR UP programs do, as well as look outside of the box for creative ideas.

Regardless, we encourage you to ensure data collection is accurate so that you can improve services. If you are looking for templates to help you collect data and stay organized, check out the templates in the resource section.

Resources:

- GEAR UP Tennessee, Sign-In Sheets



DATA

Using the Data

Within GEAR UP, data is important for reporting. Beyond this basic requirement, data can be used for a host of other purposes.

Within family engagement, it can help us understand what works to get families involved and where services could be improved or targeted. We can use this information to continually improve and reach more families. Consider what elements of the data you can tease apart to better meet the needs of your families.

Often, it takes a team of people to review the data and figure out next steps. Your GEAR UP director, the data manager and/or evaluator, and those who also implement direct services can help you review data to create more impactful services. You can review participation rates, the types of events families attend, and more to target your services more effectively.



The resource listed in this section from GEAR UP 4 LA describes a series of steps they took to target services. After reviewing data, they created tiers that reflect the availability of GEAR UP families to participate in services. Then, they identified which services matched the tiers of availability so that those with less availability can focus on the most important services for their child. This is a good example of how reviewing service and other data can lead to meaningful family engagement for all.

Resource:

- GEAR UP 4 LA, Using Data-Family Engagement

GETTING STARTED

The focus of this *Starter Kit for All* is on building rapport with families so they participate in the GEAR UP services you provide to support their children. Those services will align with national GEAR UP goals, local GEAR UP goals, and the needs of your families. How to create a slate of services could be a whole document itself. For the purposes of this Kit, we won't dive into those details, but we would be remiss if we didn't flag the high-level topics that you can include in your GEAR UP service offerings.

Put together by the members of NCCPEP's Family Engagement Advisory Committee, the topics here are viewed as foundational to GEAR UP and especially impactful during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Whether you are new to GEAR UP or a veteran, we hope to inspire and help you build your services.

College Knowledge

This foundational GEAR UP topic is key to helping families support their children. By teaching key terms, general information about higher education, and more, these education topics will guide many of your other services. Remember to tailor content to adults.

Financial Aid

Another foundational topic in GEAR UP, financial aid is critical for families to understand. Families should know how to calculate the cost of college and ways to pay for college, particularly with the impacts of COVID-19

Technical Literacy

Accessing and being able to use student portals, virtual meeting platforms, and other tools is now instrumental in family engagement. Tutorials, instructions, and other learning tools can be provided to help families stay up-to-date on using technology.

Social-Emotional Learning

More than ever, this topic has been relevant for GEAR UP students and families. Helping families understand what it is, how it works, and how they can implement practices into their lives can help improve health and well-being.

Student Motivation

Coming up with creative services centered on motivation can help families support their children. As students navigate in-person, virtual, and hybrid education with dramatic levels of uncertainty families are seeking ways to help their children stay engaged.



Resources:

- CSUF GEAR UP, College is Affordable
- CSUF GEAR UP, Ready, SET, GO! Platforms
- GEAR UP Tennessee, College Knowledge - Parent Engagement PD
- Region One ESC GEAR UP, Cha-Ching Flyer

CONCLUSION: THE LAUNCH

Moving Forward

Whether you're launching your family engagement program for the first time or refreshing the work you do, we hope you review and use some of the information and resources identified here. By starting with these basic practices and being intentional in your programming, we hope you can build something truly impactful for your families.

The work does not stop here, however. Your families will grow and evolve over time, requiring new ideas and services. As you seek to continuously improve your family engagement, we encourage you to keep learning and taking advantage of opportunities to grow ideas.

Joining the Conversation

To stay connected, you can join [the Quad](#), attend our [NCCEP/GEAR UP events](#), sign up to receive the weekly [GEAR UP Digest](#), and take part in [professional learning](#) opportunities. The GEAR UP community is here for you, so don't hesitate to reach out and join the movement to help more students succeed. [Contact us](#) for more information.

[Click here](#) to access all of the resources listed in this Kit.

