

Social-Emotional Learning Parent Camps

Families as Partners Program

What are parent camps, and what purpose do they serve?

Parent camps are opportunities for parents to develop their “4 Cs”: **capabilities** (skills and knowledge), **connections** (networks and relationships), **cognitions** (beliefs and values), and **confidence** (self-efficacy) (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Building parent capacity in the 4 Cs is one objective of the Austin Independent School District (AISD) [Families as Partners](#) program. With the help of funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Families as Partners program offers at least two parent camps each year so that parents can deepen their learning and build relationships with staff and other parents.

Educating parents about social-emotional learning (SEL) is a natural extension of ongoing [SEL implementation](#) in AISD. Indeed, one priority of the AISD SEL 2.0 Strategic Plan is to invest in adult development. Whereas initial SEL implementation efforts were focused on instilling skills in students, there is now more emphasis on educating staff and parents about how to model SEL competencies.

What happened at the Spring 2018 parent camps?

In February and March of 2018, the Families as Partners program hosted two, half-day parent camps at Padrón Elementary School for families of the ten schools participating in the program (Blanton, Guerrero-Thompson, Hart, Harris, Lucy Read, McBee, Padrón, Walnut Creek, Wooldridge, and Wooten). The focus of the parent camps was SEL, and most of the camp sessions were facilitated by AISD SEL specialists.

At the first parent camp, approximately 20 parents participated in small-group sessions on the following topics: self-care, understanding the child’s brain, bullying, and mindfulness. Most sessions included a hands-on activity, during which time parents were encouraged to make a tool or resource to help foster SEL in the home. Parents also received the book, [Your Fantastic Elastic Brain](#), to read with their children and encourage a growth mindset.

Over 30 parents attended the second parent camp, some of whom had also participated in the first camp. In addition to the sessions offered at the first camp, there were also presentations on SEL themes in literature, [Conscious Discipline®](#), and school-based mental health. At each of the parent camps, some sessions were presented in English and some were presented in Spanish, and AISD’s Multilingual Education Team provided interpretation services. All parents and presenters wore headsets to be able to listen to translations as they were provided in real-time.

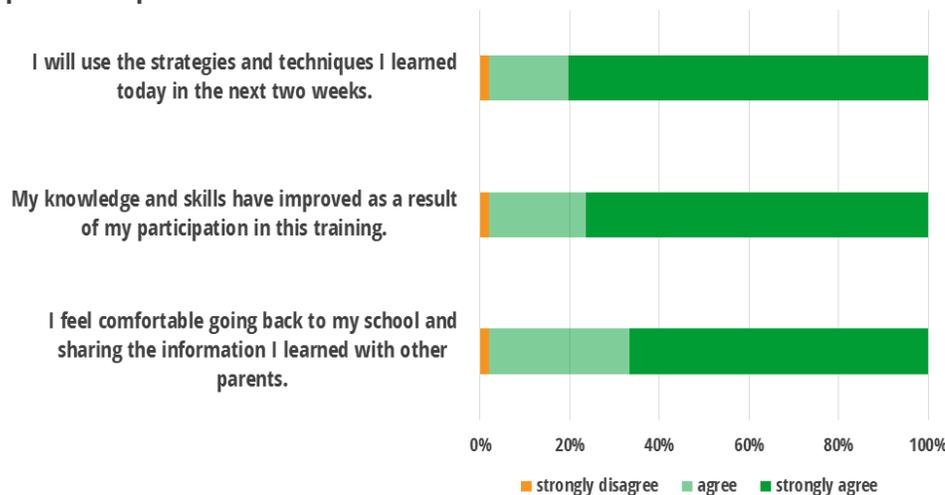
What did parents say about their experience at the parent camps?

At the conclusion of each parent camp, an exit survey was administered to collect feedback from parents about their experience. Parents were encouraged to share what they liked best about the training, one thing they would change about the training, and topics they would like to learn more about at future trainings. Fifty-one parents completed an exit survey.

Most parents responded that the Conscious Discipline session was their favorite. For example, one parent reported, “The best part of today’s training was learning new rituals to help my kids transition into their day.” The sessions on mindfulness and understanding the child’s brain were also listed as favorites among parents. In response to the question about what parents would change about the training, most parents suggested “more time” — both within each session to learn more information and between sessions to facilitate transitions and allow for short breaks. In response to the question about what topics would be of interest for future trainings, parents mentioned nutrition, helping children deal with their emotions, self-care, and understanding the brain.

On the exit surveys, parents also were asked to rate their level of agreement with three statements about what they had learned that day (Figure 1). Nearly all parents agreed their knowledge and skills had improved as a result of the training and that they would use the techniques they learned within the next two weeks. More importantly, over half of the parents strongly agreed they would feel comfortable sharing the information they learned with other parents. This willingness of newly-trained parents to conduct peer education at their schools is an essential component of a sustainable parent engagement program.

Figure 1
Most parents strongly agreed their knowledge and skills improved as a result of the parent camps.



Source. Exit surveys administered to parents upon completion of the Spring 2018 SEL parent camps.

SEL and family engagement

In 2016, AISD was awarded a 3-year grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to expand parent engagement and community involvement. To ensure sustainability of the initiative after the grant period, it was proposed that activities that support parents as leaders and self-advocates would become part of AISD’s well-established SEL Department.



Coordination with family and community partners is one component of SEL implementation in AISD. To measure this component of implementation at each campus, an SEL specialist documents the frequency of communication with families about opportunities to engage in SEL as well as the number of SEL trainings that are offered to parents and community members. Recent research indicates that the parent/community engagement component of SEL implementation predicts students’ academic achievement on state assessments and discipline rates (Lamb, 2018).





Photograph of parents and staff wearing paper models of the brain they assembled at the March 2018 SEL parent camp.

How are parents using what they learned at the parent camps?

A few especially inspired parents have become SEL Parent Champions on their campuses. Among other responsibilities, this role entails collaborating with AISD staff to conduct workshops for other parents who are interested in SEL. In May 2018, parents at three schools (Lucy Read, Walnut Creek, and Wooten) took the initiative to host workshops about the importance of self-compassion. Incorporating research by [Dr. Kristin Neff](#), the SEL Parent Champions led an exercise that asked parents to contemplate how things would be if they showed themselves the same compassion they show to others in times of struggle.

What's next?

As Families as Partners enters its final year of the grant-funded period, the program will expand to include five additional elementary schools. Program staff will continue to build parent capacity through a Summer Leadership Academy in June 2018, where up to 50 parents will build their leadership skills and SEL competencies. Collaborating with local organizations and AISD SEL specialists to provide intentional learning opportunities for parents will be a focus of the program in the 2018–2019 school year.

References

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