

Communications Playbook Case Study:

Resources for Families, Schools and Communities on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development in Children

★ BACKGROUND

In 2018, Learning Heroes and the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development collaborated to develop a Communications Playbook. The resources are designed to accompany the [Nation at Hope](#) report released by the Commission in January 2019 as a way to help educators, youth-development professionals, and leaders of community-based organizations communicate with families about the interconnectedness of social, emotional, cognitive, and academic learning and the shared responsibility of home, school, and community in developing those skills.

Learning Heroes worked with three collaborating partners—UnidosUS (formally National Council of La Raza), Higher Achievement, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)—to “road test” the [Communications Playbook resources](#) between November 2018 and March 2019 as a way to learn how they can be used in a diverse range of settings and further refine them based on experience. Learnings were gathered through site observations, interviews, and surveys. Parents and staff in the pilot sites completed a pre/post survey developed by Learning Heroes in collaboration with the partners. Sharing these learnings broadly is an important part of the work, as the resources are designed for groups to adapt and modify based on local cultures and contexts.

★ KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- The Communications Playbook content is relevant and builds a sense of community among parents and educators;
- Training helps set the context for adapting and using the resources within a local setting;
- Buy-in from leadership and planning that involves leaders, on-the-ground managers, and staff helps with implementation of the materials.

The [Communications Playbook](#) includes a suite of resources developed by Learning Heroes and the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

[Developing Life Skills in Children resources:](#)

- **Research report and key findings slide deck** from the *Developing Life Skills in Children: A Road Map for Communicating with Parents* report, based on a 2018 national survey of more than 2,000 parents of public school children in grades 3-8;
- **Workshop Facilitator’s Guide and slide deck** for a *Parent Perspectives Workshop* to engage families about the skills they most want for their children to learn and grow;
- **Infographics and Social Media Toolkit** on talking with families about life skills.

[How Learning Happens resources:](#)

- **Family and Caregiver Conversation Tool** is a conversation starter to help families discuss what social, emotional, and academic development looks like in school and out-of-school settings;
- **Poster series** engaging families about the value of social, emotional, and academic development;
- **Video** showing learning in action;
- **Visuals** for social media posts, posters, or professional development about how learning happens, based on research.

UnidosUS

Building Community Among Latino Parents

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

★ APPROACH:

[UnidosUS](#) embedded the *Developing Life Skills Parent Perspectives Workshop* into their Padres Comprometidos meetings, a longstanding series of workshops for K-12 parent leaders (in both English and Spanish). The pilot included local affiliates at the Tejano Center in Houston, TX; the Gads Hill Center in Chicago, IL; and the Hispanic Services Council in Tampa, FL, reaching 140 Spanish-speaking families. Each site had multiple sessions including 12 to 15 parents or caregivers. UnidosUS used the facilitator's guide and incorporated the *How Learning Happens* video, posters, and fact sheets into their parent group sessions. UnidosUS provided parents with small gift cards as incentives—as well as snacks and child care—to be responsive to parents' time and effort for participating.

★ RESULTS:

Based on the pre/post survey, parents reported significant increases in agreement with these statements following the workshop: "Learning is both a social and emotional process where children learn how to manage their emotions and/or the emotions of others," and "I feel like I know a lot about life skills and the connection between social, emotional, and academic learning." Staff similarly reported significant increases in their understanding that learning is a social and emotional process and were interested in further discussing the topic with parents.

Jerry Silva, who facilitated the parent workshops at the Gads Hill Center in Chicago, said, "This was a curriculum that parents hadn't received before, so all of the content was fairly new to them; fairly new to us. All of them were really engaged and asking for more." Maria Garavito, with the Hispanic Services Council in Tampa, FL, said, "We experienced the same here in Florida. Parents feel that their kids need these life skills and they think they are very important, and they were so engaged during the workshop."

Staff reported that the video was powerful and gave parents a reason to pause and reflect on who is in charge of their child's development. UnidosUS staff requested basic definitions to the social-emotional terms used throughout the workshop activities so facilitators would feel better equipped to lead these conversations with parents; Learning Heroes has since added definitions to the facilitator's guide.

UNIDOSUS

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

Higher Achievement

Parents of Children in Youth Development Program Share Their Voices

OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME ORGANIZATION

★ APPROACH:

[Higher Achievement](#) embedded the *Developing Life Skills Parent Perspectives Workshop* into group meetings with the parents of 5th-8th grade students enrolled in Higher Achievement's after-school program at Cherry Hill Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore. Higher Achievement used the facilitator's guide to lead two group sessions with approximately 20 parents each. Parents received small gift cards and incentives, as well as a meal, to build community and support attendance among the target audience of low-income, English-speaking parents. Higher Achievement is also posting links to the Communications Playbook materials on its website for parents, staff, and community members to access directly.

Cornelia Calliste, the Director of Programs for the Baltimore affiliate, who facilitated the workshops, used the guide's recommended best practices and expanded on the activities to create dynamic sessions. These included: an opening activity that built community by having everyone stand in a large circle to introduce themselves; a think-pair-share activity to enable small group discussions among parents before they shared with the larger group; a poster paper "parking lot" to record parent comments or questions for later discussion; and a PowerPoint to walk parents through some of the activities both visually and aurally.

A school administrator, teacher, and guidance counselor also attended Higher Achievement's workshop, which added to the conversation about the role of home and school in developing life skills. While educators were particularly appreciative to hear parents' perspectives on social, emotional, and academic development, Calliste said educators need more support to have these types of conversations with parents. In particular, noted Traci Callender, the Executive Director of the Baltimore affiliate, parents rely on teachers as their primary source of information, but in parent-teacher conferences, "there may be 15 different priorities the teacher wants to talk to the parent about, and it often doesn't include life skills." Higher Achievement suggested the Playbook include additional resources for school leaders to understand how they can support teachers in having such conversations.

★ RESULTS:

It was evident during site visits that parents were highly engaged during the workshops and shared intimately during the discussions. "A lot of what parents are working on with their scholar [child] isn't related to academics; it's more the social skills like responsibility and grit," said Calliste. "I was excited that the parents had an opportunity to let their voices be heard."

Based on the pre/post survey, parents reported a high level of interest in efforts to support children's life skills development in their school/community and felt the workshop "helped me think further about the life skills that are important to me and my child."

As a result of Higher Achievement staff feedback, Learning Heroes designed a PowerPoint slide deck that can be used and adapted by facilitators when presenting the workshop. Higher Achievement also suggested developing a short brochure to share with parents and school leaders that includes links to all of the Communications Playbook assets.



**HIGHER
ACHIEVEMENT**

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)

Engaging Teachers in Integration of Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

TEACHER STANDARDS ORGANIZATION

★ APPROACH:

[National Board](#) staff incorporated discussions about the Communications Playbook resources into one-on-one and group coaching sessions with teachers in: Tuscaloosa City Schools, Semmes Elementary School, and Shades Cahaba Elementary School in Alabama; San Felipe Pueblo Elementary School in New Mexico; and JKL Bahweting School in Michigan. Assets used included the *How Learning Happens* video and posters. The specific goals of the pilot were to have teachers use the resources to encourage a better flow of communication about social, emotional, and academic development with parents and to help teachers make connections between the resources and NBPTS's core propositions and standards.

NBPTS's five core propositions focus on board-certified teachers knowing and teaching the whole child, said Michelle Accardi, who ran the pilot, "and these resources help them to do that in a meaningful way by providing 'ready to use' resources to support, or initiate, conversations with students and families. Without this grant, resources of this caliber would simply be out of reach for many of these teachers due to budgets or even the knowledge that they are available."

★ RESULTS:

"I see this project as an initial step in helping teachers and education systems move forward with the support they desperately need to proactively build social and emotional learning and communications supports for their students and school community members," Accardi said. "The teams participating in our pilot group are so grateful for the resources but clearly need more, both in terms of resources and time to engage in conversations with other professionals and especially community members."

While the materials were extremely useful for internal staff development, she added, teachers needed more training to feel confident in offering the parent workshop. "It's so different from what comfortably occurs in schools," she said. "This [workshop] is more than just a parent-teacher night. Having an opportunity to feel adequately trained, to practice and role play, I think would really prepare educators and build confidence." She also said some schools struggled to find the time and ability to prioritize a focus on social-emotional learning; this suggests the importance of tying social-emotional learning to academic outcomes and a need for broader awareness building.

Based on the pre/post survey, teachers overwhelmingly concur that learning is both academic and social-emotional and they are interested in efforts that support children's life skills development in their school/community. Though no doubt individual teachers and principals take on conversations with parents about children's life skills development, it does not generally show up as a job expectation. Indeed, less than half of the teachers in the pilot regularly communicate with parents about this topic; only 28 percent of teachers felt they know a lot about parents' perspectives on their child's development of life skills. Accardi observed that building the Communications Playbook resources into her coaching sessions with teachers raised awareness and sparked deeper conversations about how to more intentionally engage parents as partners in children's social-emotional learning.

NATIONAL BOARD
for Professional Teaching Standards®



LESSONS LEARNED ACROSS THE CASE STUDIES

The content built a sense of community: All three organizations reported that the content engaged parents and educators. Said one UnidosUS facilitator: “The workshop’s topic and structure allowed parents to connect and bond in a way the facilitators hadn’t seen before. Although the topic of social, emotional learning was initially new to most parents, parents were really engaged and learning from one another. Even after the session was over, parents stayed to talk, which doesn’t always happen after typical parent group sessions.” Schools participating in the NBPTS pilot reported the value of having high-quality materials to use for internal staff development. “People couldn’t get over the fact that resources of this quality were available to them,” said Michelle Accardi, who ran the NBPTS pilot. “People just loved these resources and were so grateful to have them.”

Training is key and helps strengthen adaptation: The organizations that participated in training prior to using the materials noted this initial support helped them navigate the resources and use them successfully. In contrast, sites that didn’t do the training reported some confusion about how to integrate the resources and needed more support after the fact. As one pilot site leader reflected, “The more sites need the resources, the more important quality training and support becomes for them to effectively use the resources.”

Additionally, training can help teams brainstorm adaptations of the materials for local context. Teachers and program leaders often are given prescribed materials that they must follow by rote. The Playbook resources were meant to be adapted to local contexts. This led some staff to struggle with how—and whether—to modify them. Although the Playbook explicitly encourages that the resources can be modified for local communities and cultures, this will be further emphasized in the materials and in future training sessions.

Buy-in from leadership is fundamental: Perhaps not surprising but important to note, staff that had both buy-in and engagement from leadership throughout the process had the most success prioritizing this work and fully integrating it into their existing model. Having school leaders attend the parent workshop conveyed the message that the school valued social-emotional learning. One of the organizations had national leadership, local leadership, as well as local staff participate in the training and all levels were involved in carefully mapping out the integration of the resources through a detailed plan. Another organization had a lot of excitement from top leadership but lacked a detailed plan and buy-in from on-the-ground managers and staff. Although these staff saw the value in the resources and needed them, they didn’t have strong guidance on integration and prioritization.

The case study was developed with the generous support of the Wallace Foundation and the Bezos Family Foundation. We’d also like to thank UnidosUS, Higher Achievement, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development for their collaboration. The case study was prepared by Lynn Olsen in collaboration with Windy Lopez-Aflitto and Michelle Chaudoir of Learning Heroes.

If you have questions or would like to learn more about this work, please contact Windy Lopez-Aflitto at Learning Heroes – wlopez@learningheroes.org.

To access the Communications Playbook resources, visit nationathope.org/communication-tools/ or bealearninghero.org.