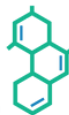# FIELD GUIDE: HOW TO HOST A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Bright spots and opportunities, challenges and lessons learned

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stem next **OPPORTUNITY FUND**

family engagement **PROJECT**

Photo by Annushka Ahuja

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Introduction

How can we support a child's interest that starts in a summer robotics camp or in an afterschool coding program? Family engagement is the "secret sauce" to sustain engagement in STEM. And yet, most organizations offer limited opportunities for families. And, the kinds of family engagement offered, are not always built upon practices that address the needs and assets of youth and families.

STEM Next created **the Family Engagement Project** so that every family in every community has the chance to explore STEM and every caregiver can support their child's sense of wonder. With this Project, we developed a suite of resources including **a white paper for practitioners, a guide for funders, and case studies** and **blogs** that highlight promising practices to support family engagement. While these resources have been well received, we received requests for help to put them into action and take family engagement to the next level. Our response has been to offer professional development through communities of practice that build capacity for impactful and equitable family engagement.

Photo credit: Deaf Kids Code

Family engagement is the "secret sauce" to sustain engagement in STEM.

Community of practice: A model for impactful professional development

Impactful family engagement requires more than one-time events or short bursts of activities. Likewise, professional development for impactful family engagement requires more than one-time webinars or one-hour conference presentations. Participation in a community of practice is a game changer for family engagement.

Participants in a community of practice make a serious commitment of their time to learn, share, and plan with partners. They are introduced to a rich set of resources including **The STEM Family Engagement: A Planning Tool** that helps put goals for effective family engagement into action. This field guide describes what we've learned about how to plan and support a community of practice.

Photo by Nicola Barts

Our journey in support of family engagement: Our lessons learned

Supporting partners in their family engagement has taken us on a journey. We are indebted to every member of every community of practice that we hosted. We learned so much from our experiences leading three communities of practices. We started small with a pilot with partners at Girls Inc., Boys and Girls Club, and the YMCA in Imagine Science-Orange County. We moved on to bigger training endeavors, supporting partners in the 50 State Afterschool Network.

From these communities of practice, we learned strategies to support organizations as they move from promising practices into impactful and equitable family engagement. Our successes are encouraging. Our misses are valuable too. By sharing our lessons learned we hope to help you get a jumpstart on hosting a successful community of practice and avoid our missteps. This is the resource we wish we had when we started down our path planning our first community of practice.

Note: The ideas we describe in this field guide are specific to family engagement in STEM and with partners in out-of-school time. We believe that the ideas that worked for our communities of practice can be applied to different topics and with different groups.

Community of practice in action: The nuts and bolts

Application process

Be clear on goals and expectations. Define the time commitment required to read assignments, participate in sessions, and plan with partners. We suggest sharing a draft of your agenda and selection of readings in advance, so that everyone knows what to expect.

We suggest "face-to-face" discussions with prospective participants. You might host a mini webinar to announce your community of practice and answer questions. You might talk with applicants before their acceptance to discuss how the community of practice fits into their plans.
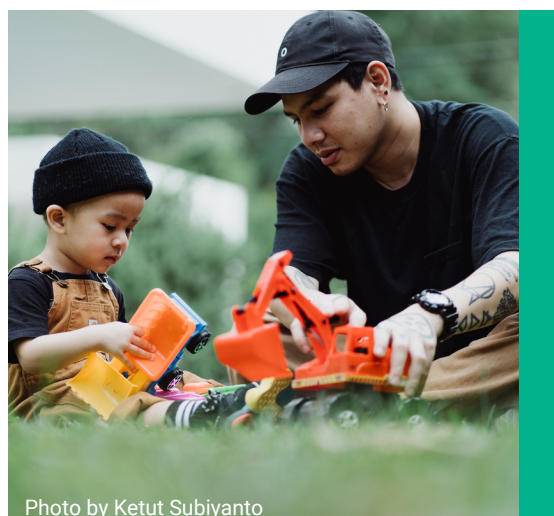

Photo by Ketut Subiyanto

Lessons learned:

You want to work at the front end to avoid any misunderstandings before the launch of your community of practice. We discovered that even when we thought our application process was clear, there could still be gaps between expectations and deliverables.

Recruitment

Recruit teams. We suggest at least two persons and up to four or five persons per team, if possible. Not only will this help participants plan with a partner, but it will enhance sustainability of the knowledge and resources gathered if a member is absent during one of the sessions, or leaves an organization.

◆ **Lesson learned:**

We made exceptions to this rule and won't in the future. While individuals benefited from their participation, they shared that they would have liked to have someone within their organization to set goals and support plans for family engagement.

Photo credit: Techbridge Girls

Plan for diversity as you recruit. The participants in our community of practices represented considerable diversity across several domains -- rural and urban communities; museums, nonprofits, and universities; and in support of a variety of communities that are underserved and underrepresented in STEM. Members appreciate connecting with colleagues in similar roles and settings as well as learning from those who serve different communities. They feel less isolated and appreciate that the challenges they face are shared across communities. They also like learning new ideas and approaches.

Lesson learned: ◆

There can be challenges having diverse members. Our communities have included members with considerable differences in years of experience and in the sector they represented. We didn't fully understand how these differences would impact experiences. Our takeaway is to be mindful of program staff at both ends of the experience spectrum. We suggest providing leadership opportunities for the experts with decades of experience. For those who are newer to the field and feel hesitant to speak up, we suggest supporting their engagement and validating their perspective and fresh point of view.

Community Building

Prioritize community building. Get to know participants and facilitate relationships among participants. In a community of practice, relationships are so important, helping people share experiences, ask questions, and express vulnerability as they share challenges. The act of community building in a community of practice is reflective of what participants are trying to build within their community of families. Reflecting it back to them reinforces the necessity of it.

Get to know participants

We recommend that you host "lightning calls" at the start. These conversations help build trusting relationships. They provide valuable information – not just about the kind of support that members are looking for but also the superpowers for family engagement that they bring. Knowing who likes to listen, who needs a little nudge to speak up, and who brings confidence and expertise will help you facilitate productive discussions.

We let participants know in advance of these calls that we would be asking the following questions:

- What is your role?
- What has been your journey to family and community engagement in STEM?
- As we build an inclusive community of practice, it's important for all our voices to be heard. How do you like to contribute to conversations? What do you need to feel comfortable sharing and learning in this space?
- What do you hope to learn?

Help the group get to know one another

We suggest a pre-assignment where members write a short bio in which they share a bit about their work and a personal highlight. We suggest that everyone describes how to pronounce their name. This activity will help introduce members. Even though time is short, it is important to build community with short activities at each session. We like the idea of activities that participants can use with partners in meetings and with families during family engagement events. Here are two of our favorite activities.

- Who do you dedicate your learning to in this session?
- What's your superpower in family engagement?

Lesson learned:

We focused more on our readings and discussions early on. We now appreciate that being intentional about community building from the onset is just as important.

Communications

We suggest sending reminders two weeks, one week, and one day before each session. Follow-up with emails after each session and include access to the recorded sessions and resources shared.

We suggest personal follow-up responses for those who don't attend a session and hadn't explained their absence in advance. Check in and let members know they were missed and see if they need special support. Their reason for missing may end up as a conversation starter for the next session. (Some of our participants missed a session to present/launch one of their community-of-practice-inspired projects.) For participants who drop out, try and schedule a conversation to understand why.

Schedule

Create a schedule that meets the needs of your community. Set the dates and times in advance so that participants can make plans to attend when they register. Every minute counts. We encourage you to ask participants to call in a few minutes early so you can start on time, especially if one of the participants will be leading an icebreaker.

Our recent community of practice supported six sessions that were 75 minutes long. Previously, we hosted one-hour sessions, which didn't allow enough time for discussions. While we heard from several participants that we found the "sweet spot" for learning and sharing, we heard from one participant that she wanted more. We are exploring two options that offer additional opportunities for discussion, making them optional for those who want more. 1) Extend time to interact at the end of sessions. 2) Offer one or two additional sessions that are more open-ended with discussion around topics based on the group's interests.

Session format

We tried several formats until we found the right mix in support of a rhythm and flow. Our sessions include the following elements: welcome, community-building activity, review of agenda, framing of session's topic, discussion of readings, highlights of resources, shout outs, and reflections.

Photo by Mikhail Nilov

Readings

Provide readings in advance. We spent considerable time in search of resources that are easy reads and make connections between research and practice. We created a shared document in which we archived readings for each session along with resources which were recommended by participants. Check out the **Living Library** from our last community of practice. You can build off this reading list if you aren't quite ready to host a full-scale community of practice. Some organizations have invited staff to lead discussions on selected readings from our Living Library, which were relevant to their family and community needs.

Lesson learned: ✦

It takes a bit of time to find the format that works for each unique community of practice. Feedback will help you make adjustments and find the right mix between sharing resources and facilitating discussions. Our advice is to try your best and be patient. It is a process that takes time.

Lessons learned: ✦

We felt anxious before each of our launches especially around the selection of readings. Learn from us; do your best, but don't sweat the process. We thought at first that everyone should read the same readings. We have come to realize that this isn't essential. Participants really like having choice; you can tap into this preference by providing a variety of readings. We landed on offering three levels of readings—those that are required as well as two sets of optional readings that go into more depth. While it takes more effort to curate these sets, it is liberating knowing that you don't have to find the one or two "perfect" readings for each session.

STEM Family Engagement: A Planning Tool

Readings are organized around a framework for family engagement in STEM known as CARE: Connect, Act, Reflect, and Empower. Members of our communities of practice asked for help in taking ideas from the readings and putting them into action. In response, STEM Next, in collaboration with the Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth, created the **STEM Family Engagement Planning Tool**. The Planning Tool provides strategies, examples, and links to additional resources and helps program leaders and frontline staff take a strengths-based approach to family engagement.

The Planning Tool includes **the Family Engagement Planning Workbook**, which includes guided reflection prompts to establish a strategic vision and plan for family engagement. We use this workbook in each session and invite participants to complete activities that help them build a team, craft a vision, identify strengths and barriers, set goals, and create a roadmap. By the end of the sessions, participants are ready to take action.

Reflections on readings

We admit that this element is a work in progress. We ask members to complete their reactions a few days before meeting. While the deadline is meant to give us an opportunity to incorporate ideas and questions into sessions, some participants do the readings at the last minute. In our coaching calls we learned that some participants didn't feel they had time to write reflections. Some worried about their writing skills while others didn't think they had enough experience or expertise to share. In our recent community of practice, we tried positive reinforcement and sent personal messages commenting on reflections. What was a bit more productive was giving a space during our sessions for participants to share their thoughts on the readings.

Lesson in progress:

We have not yet found a successful strategy for reflections on readings. Do we make them optional? Do we give up on the idea that hasn't worked as we hoped over three communities of practice? Stay tuned for future updates on this activity.

Photo by Matheus Bertelli

Give and get

Some communities of practice bring in "outside" experts to share their work or present research. We tried this once but weren't satisfied with the result. We choose to spend the precious time of each session lifting up the expertise within the community of practice. Outside perspectives come through the readings and resources.

One activity we use to shine a spotlight on expertise within the group is Give and Get. We invite participants to share a superpower within the CARE framework where they have expertise or ask for help with a challenge they are working through. These Give and Get spotlights generate rich discussions.

Lesson learned: ✦

We learned that this activity generates a lot of interaction; it's important to allow enough time for the deep dives. With our recent community, 20 minutes worked well.

Photo by Dziana Hasanbekava

Discussions

Make discussions the heart of your community of practice. Think creatively and expansively in promoting participation across channels – in chat, breakouts, and group discussions. We encourage you to share guidelines about stepping up and stepping back and revisit these at each session. For those who hold back, invite them in advance to share something interesting you glean from their coaching call. While this may take some members out of their comfort zone, participants enjoy stepping up under the right conditions. Also, appreciate that sometimes participants are actively listening and learning even though they aren't talking. Another consideration for communities of practice held virtually is to turn off the screen share feature during discussions. We found that this led to more engaging conversations when participants could see one another.

Members like to choose their breakout room based on the topic. For example, we offered the following topics for one of our sessions - #1 In light of adjustments due to COVID-19, what new ways of connecting with families do you want to preserve? Is there anything you need help with? #2 Thinking of your Network partners, where can you find support to put listening into practice and build interest and capacity for deeper family engagement. What challenges might you need help with? We provide discussion topics in advance so that participants can think about them. For some, this is extremely helpful and sets them up with confidence to participate in discussions.

Allocate at least 15 minutes for breakout discussions and keep the groups small. We found that this amount of time worked well for small groups. Our preference is three members per group so that everyone has a chance to share. We offer guidance for these discussions and encourage a quick go-round so that each person can share an idea followed by time for discussion.

Use a tool like Jamboard or Padlet so members can record their personal reflections and ideas generated in their groups. Afterwards, allow a few minutes for everyone to read these comments. We use different approaches to highlighting ideas from the breakouts. Sometimes, we lift up big ideas and other times participants share in a quick round-robin. Archive these responses so that participants can return to them and share them with staff and partners.

Lesson learned:

Even with the best of intentions at supporting breakouts, challenges arise. We heard from some participants that they wanted us to moderate discussions. We did not want to dominate or influence discussions and tried to remain out of the breakout rooms. In the end, we joined as observers and only stepped in when we felt it was necessary to make space for sharing ideas. Ultimately, the smaller the group, the better chance that everyone's voice is heard.

Coaching calls

We've learned that when we encourage members to reach out for help, most do not. We make coaching a required element and participants readily engage. These calls elicit discussions around a wide range of topics – challenges members are working on and new ideas in the planning phase. The calls help generate insights into how we could support members and valuable input to improve upon a community of practice.

In advance of the calls, we send the following email. "Our goal for these calls is to create a space where we can support your work at your Network in activities you're currently or planning to pursue. Here are ideas to help plan for the call:

- Discuss what you'd like help with. This could be a resource you're developing, a proposal you're working on, STEM kits you're developing, strategic plan for partners, or training for partners.
- Share how the community of practice has impacted your ideas and practices for family engagement to date.
- What's working well in our current community of practice and what might we consider changing as we plan for a future community of practice cohort?

Lesson learned:

We felt some discomfort after a few of the coaching calls on hearing what wasn't "perfect" in the community of practice. After a little sting from the feedback, we were able to glean insights into how program elements could be adjusted. We also realized most of the feedback was very positive.

Photo by Andrea Piacquadio

Photo by Nicholas Githiri

Feedback

Ask for feedback. The feedback we receive after each session informs our agenda for the next session. Here are prompts that we use.

- My learning in today's session was enhanced by the pre-readings.
- I understood the learning objective of today's session.
- The information and activities presented in today's session were useful.
- Today's session had a good balance of presentation and group work.
- This session has given me opportunities to build my network.
- I will share something I learned in today's session with a colleague.

Be transparent about what you learn and show how you put feedback into practice. For example, we shortened our introductions and increased discussion time. We visited breakout sessions to facilitate discussions with a light touch. Participants told us that they appreciated how we connected the dots between their input and the format and content of sessions. They also appreciated how we modeled how they can request and use feedback from families.

Lesson learned:

When you ask for feedback, you need to let go of trying to be perfect and be open to input that drives change and hopefully improvements. This is especially important when you are planning your first community of practice. Our takeaway is that you can't please everyone all the time. It helps to try and be less sensitive and reactive to feedback. Embrace a growth mindset and welcome feedback as a gift.

Measuring impact from a community of practice

We measured satisfaction with program elements of our community of practice in enhancing the quality of family engagement of participants. We encourage you to pay particular attention to how the experience expands support for families that have been left out of STEM opportunities. Items included:

- The Family Engagement CoP sessions were organized and structured well.
- The Family Engagement CoP provided readings and resources relevant to my work.
- Through the Family Engagement CoP I have expanded my professional network with others.
- I will share the information I learned from the Family Engagement CoP with others in my organization.
- Because of the Family Engagement CoP, I have strategies to promote equitable family engagement.

What comes after a community of practice?

Consider hosting a reunion so that participants can share updates on their work and solicit support on upcoming projects. This is an opportunity for you to share new resources and learn of the longer-term impact of your community of practice. We are planning our first reunion and look forward to learning from it.

Staffing

We recommend two persons to plan and host a community of practice. You will want to schedule a few meetings in advance of each session to plan and review the "run of show" (detailed agenda) and a debrief after each session.

Resources on community of practices

For more information about community of practices, check out these resources:

[Follow STEM Next](#) to learn about upcoming communities of practice. It's a great way to gain confidence and firsthand experience as a participant.

[Introduction to communities of practice](#) by Etienne and Beverly Wegner-Traynor.

[Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier](#) by Etienne C. Wenger & William M. Snyder.

About us

Dr. Linda Kekelis is an advisor for STEM Next Opportunity Fund with a lifelong passion for ensuring that all youth, particularly girls and underrepresented youth, have access to opportunities in STEM. Parent engagement has been part of Linda's life work. As the Founder and former CEO of Techbridge Girls, she made family engagement one of the vital elements of the program. Linda advises STEM organizations on empowering families and shares research and resources with them. Linda supports girl-serving organizations, participates on advisory boards, and works with professional groups and corporate partners to promote females' participation in STEM. Her expertise in research and practice supports parents, educators, and role models. Linda has a master's degree in Linguistics from the University of Southern California and a doctorate in Special Education from the University of California, Berkeley. She enjoys her new role as a grandmother, discovering family engagement in a whole new way.

Bunmi Esho is part of the leadership team of the **Endless OS Foundation** where she leads the strategy and execution for outreach initiatives. Prior to EOSF, she was Director of Strategic Partnerships at Techbridge Girls, leading the strategy for building national partnerships and also served as the California Executive Director, leading program operations, fundraising and strategic planning for the California region. Bunmi is committed to empowering youth to see themselves in STEM as a STEM graduate herself. She has years of experience in the corporate, nonprofit and education sectors in the United States and Cambodia. She is an active philanthropist and community leader, with past leadership roles at the Urban League of San Diego County, Women Give San Diego, Mission Valley Sunset Rotary Club and Education Co-Chair with the Full Circle Fund. She is a Steering Committee Member for the National Academy of Engineering's EngineerGirl and a recent 4.0 Fellow and 4.0 Angel Syndicate. Bunmi holds a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin and M.Ed. from the University of Arizona. She loves road trips and has traveled cross-country through the US and abroad.

Let us know how we can support you

It is exciting to see how communities of practice build capacity for sustained family engagement. We hope you are inspired by the ideas in this guide. We are available to support and advise you on putting your plans into action.

Photo by RODNAE Productions

STEM Next Opportunity Fund is a leading advocate for afterschool, summer, and informal STEM learning spaces. STEM in out-of-school time offers important benefits including gains in STEM interest, STEM career interest, and life skills that include perseverance and critical thinking. STEM Next believes that family engagement has the potential to change the entire field when it is a core element of programming and funding. It is taking a leading role in raising awareness and inspiring programs, foundations, corporate partners and policymakers to take action on family engagement. The Family Engagement Project is a multi-year project leveraging research, convenings, publications and a national social media campaign.