



Successful recruitment and family/student engagement can lead to better attendance and better outcomes for participants. The primary goal of your efforts is to not only “register” students for a program, but to also strategically engage parents and build student excitement for the summer.

This section describes research-based best practices for student recruitment and family engagement.

Many of these research-based practices were developed in collaboration with the [Wallace Foundation](#), [RAND Corporation](#), and [Crosby Marketing](#) as part of a national randomized controlled trial implemented in Boston and four other cities. In this work, practitioners found recruitment & engagement related directly to student daily attendance. This work spans from the time a student is identified for a program (winter) through the final day of site programming (August).

Consider visiting the [Attendance section](#) for strategies to complement your recruitment and family engagement efforts. One best practice of note in the Attendance section is a field guide developed by the Boston Nature Center and New Sector Alliance. This focuses on strategies to engage families and promote student daily attendance. Lessons learned from this field guide were also featured in a journal article about family engagement, student attendance, and positive student outcomes. Find the [journal article here](#).

A. Recruitment Preparation & Tactics

Successful preparation and tactics for student recruitment are the first steps in operating a successful program. After all, the hard work you’ve invested in transportation, curriculum, and scheduling all depend on the right students coming through your program doors every day in the summer.

Here are some strategies to engage parents and build student excitement for the summer:

Recruitment preparation

Here are some strategies to plan effectively for future recruitment:

- Set eligibility guidelines for program participants (age, grade, academic level, etc.). Who is your target population? What type of student will benefit the most from attending your program? Knowing this, and recruiting based on it, is crucial to ensuring your programming will be beneficial and engaging to your students.



- Identify target schools for recruitment and establish communication with the administrative staff and/or teachers about the summer program.
- Create recruitment materials that engage both students and parents. Messaging should be affirmative, empowering and positive, and include program details (program location, program dates and time, transportation options); include “sign up” instead of “apply” (as the word “apply” elicits negative reactions from parents based on parental focus groups); include, if applicable, the term “no cost” instead of “free” (“free” is sometimes synonymous with cheap, based on parental focus groups).
- Looking for creative ways to market your summer program to students and families? Check out this [Key Message Platform](#), developed by Crosby Marketing and based on parental focus groups conducted nationwide.
- Consider translation of recruitment and registration materials, and identify a person or organization that can fulfill translation requests.

Recruitment tactics and strategies

OK, now you’re all prepared for recruitment. Here are some ways to launch recruitment for your program:

- Backpack express: Staple your program’s flyer and registration materials together and send home with students at least two times during the registration period. Need a template for your program flyer? Look no further; [click here](#).
- Send home personal notes attached to the registration materials to parents of target students, encouraging them to complete, sign, and return.
- If home addresses are available, mail the flyer and registration to the homes of target students.
- Make individual phone calls to parents of eligible students about this exciting opportunity. Sometimes paper isn’t enough, a personal connection made over the phone or in person (see below) can make a difference.
- Classroom presentations or assembly: Hold a presentation to target students about your program. Program staff should attend and present. Ensure that the presentations are engaging and show examples of activities (former participant presentation, videos, slideshow, etc.).
- Distribute postcards to parents of target students at drop-off and pick-up times. Check out this [postcard template](#), and once you’ve customized it, hand it to parents and students with a smile!
- Presentations about your programming at any relevant meetings, e.g., PTA or parent/teacher conferences. If possible, consider hosting a parent information night at a local school.
- Meet individually or in small groups with parents/guardians of students who are a good fit for your program.
- Post program flyers on parent bulletin boards in local school. If the school has a school marquee, be sure to highlight your program.



- If possible, post about the program using your organization’s social media. Encourage followers to share the post, or recommend the program to friends. Make sure to include the flyer and registration forms online so that parents can access everything they need.
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B. Retention Outreach

“Engagement” indicates keeping parents/students who have registered (for example, registered in May for summer programming) engaged to ensure they will show up on Day 1.

Here are some strategies to ensure strong retention among registered students and families:

Formal written communication

- Newsletters: these could include countdowns to program start date, reminders, event calendar, and answers to frequently asked questions Check out a [template here](#) for newsletters.
- Flyers: send home full color flyers with pictures of last summer’s program, student quotes, contact information, and the program start date.
- Personal letters/notes: handwritten letters may be a good way of connecting with hard-to-reach parents.
- Birthday and/or Holiday Cards: Cards should be personalized, and handed to students, placed in their backpack, or mailed to students’ homes. Possible holidays to consider: Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, April Fools Day, Memorial Day. Need a birthday card template to help a student celebrate their special day, while reminding them about summer? Check out our [birthday card template here](#).
- Emails: duplicate any flyers or notes sent home via email; email can also be a tool for answering parent questions and sending event invitations.
- Direct postal mailings: important programmatic materials can be sent via mail.

Check-ins

Personal face-to-face or phone call conversations are important to keeping students and families engaged, after they’ve registered.

- Informal check-ins: program staff can use pick-up and drop-off times at school (or afterschool program) to check-in with students and parents.
- Parent-teacher conferences can be utilized to remind parents about the summer program.
- Check-in phone calls: these can come from administrative or program staff and should remind parents of the summer program and answer any questions.
- Text messages: send brief reminders to parents through text, such as program start day and what to bring for Day 1 of programming.



Fun incentives

Incentives can be a fun way to connect with a student, and to simultaneously reinforce their commitment to your summer program. Check out a [sample logo here](#) of a local summer program. This logo was placed on T-shirts provided to students and also placed on sunglasses provided to students in spring (before Day 1 of summer programming). Both the shirt and sunglasses were distributed through each child's school in the spring, but could have just as easily been distributed at a central event to remind them about Day 1 and build excitement.

C. Family/Student Engagement Events

It is important that parents understand the structure of the program and feel comfortable sending their children to the program site. These pre-summer events are great for answering questions, completing paperwork, and building relationships with staff.

For examples of past events and the strategy behind them, please check out the following Snapshots from the Field:

- <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2013/12/13/spotlight-open-house-at-jacksonmann/>
- <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/sailing-into-summer/>
- <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2014/01/29/spotlight-school-level/>

Here are some proven ideas for successful engagement events:

Family events

- Depending on context, family events could be an informal get-together, a simulation of a program day to get parents and students excited about summer, or a more formal orientation.
- *Snapshot from the Field:* Open House at Jackson Mann (read more: <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2013/12/13/spotlight-open-house-at-jacksonmann/>)
- *Snapshot from the Field:* Courageous Sailing's Orientation Agenda (read more: <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/sailing-into-summer/>)
- Consider having "parent ambassadors" available to speak about their positive past interaction with the program or having children talk a bit about their favorite experience. Follow [this link](#) to see how Hale Reservation captured parental video testimonials to share with other parents/guardians at future events.
- Holding raffles for prizes related to the program can be an effective way to increase attendance at the event.



Student workshops

Hold an event, during or after school, to extend activities from the summer into the school year. Examples: an art class, science experiment, recreational activity (See blog and photos from one event held in 2014: <https://bostonslp.wordpress.com/2014/01/29/spotlight-school-level/>).

“Holiday” event at summer site

Bring families together to celebrate “holidays” – an opportunity to create a themed event: Valentine’s Day, St Patrick’s Day, April Fool’s Day, and Memorial Day are options. Event can take place before or after the actual holiday so attendance will be higher.

Field trips

- Could happen during the school day (with school permission), immediately following the end of the school day, or on a weekend/vacation.
- Strategies include: students attending site after school for activities, or inviting students and families to site for simulation of program day.
- Consider serving dinner at this event.

Community service event

A strategic date to organize a community service event would be Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which is the National Day of Service. Or pick another day where students who have registered for your program can volunteer together and get to know each other (and staff) before the program begins.