



Strengthening Coordination and Connections

How Out-of-School Time Intermediaries Build
Relational Infrastructure and Boost
Recruitment and Retention

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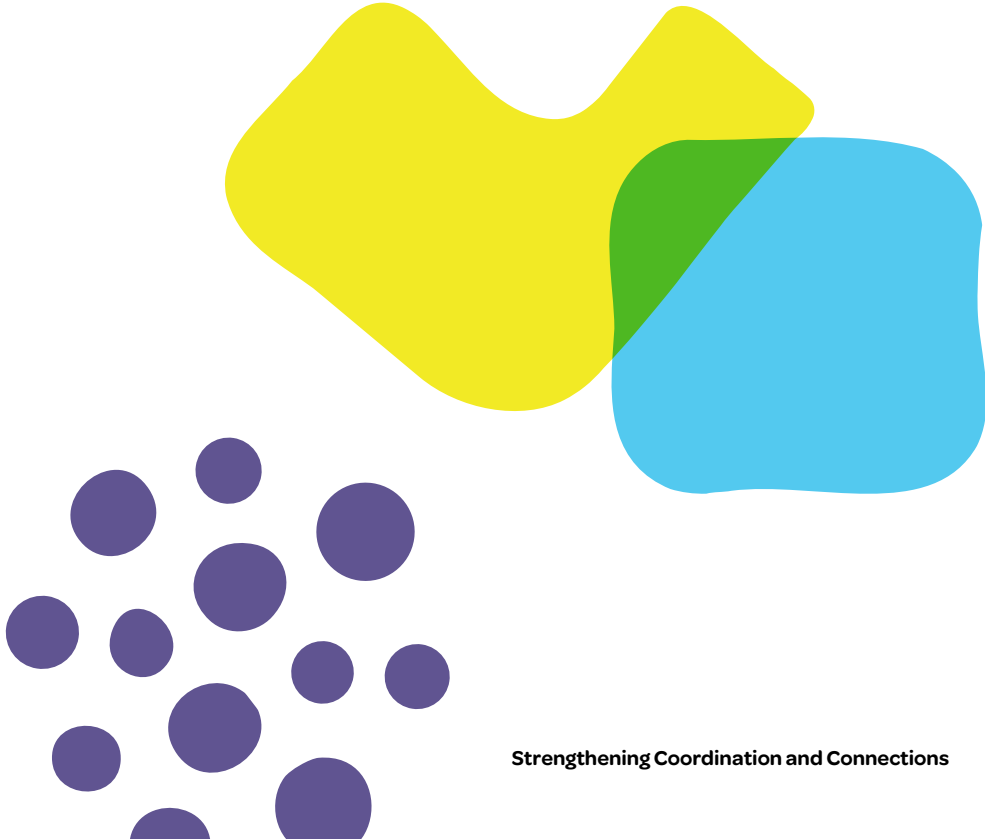
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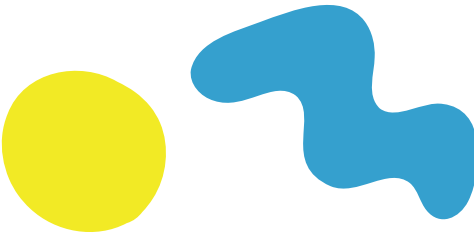
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Introduction

Out-of-school time (OST) programs are ideal settings for learning connected to young people's interests, identities, and communities. After a program sparks an interest, however, young people often struggle to persist in deepening their knowledge and developing skills. This struggle manifests in the challenges OST organizations face in recruiting and retaining learners who would most benefit. An underlying problem is the limited coordination across programs and weak linkages between in-school and out-of-school learning experiences.



We've been facing real challenges with recruiting and retaining youth in our STEM initiatives. Many teens want instant results and struggle with the idea that skills like coding take time and commitment. It was reassuring to hear that other OST programs are experiencing similar difficulties. We're not alone. We all need to get more creative about how we engage and sustain young people's interest over the long term.

- Heather White
VP of Program Impact,
Boys & Girls Clubs of Garden Grove



At the core of our work is a question of what it really takes to create strong pathways and handoffs for young people – especially in rural, under-resourced communities that don't have the same infrastructure as urban areas. We're focused on how to build human capacity in these places and how to shift from a scarcity mindset to one of collaboration.

- Michelle Sullivan
Executive Director,
Wyoming Enrichment Network





What is an out-of-school time intermediary (OSTI)?

OSTIs are “organizations that coordinate and support a community’s afterschool, summer, and other out-of-school time programs” (Hartmann et al., 2024) in order to support a thriving afterschool ecosystem (Ignite Afterschool, 2025). Many types of organizations can perform the role of an OSTI, including OST providers, state and regional networks, school districts, and other types of nonprofit intermediaries. The types of activities that OSTIs engage in vary widely and can include facilitating partnerships, offering professional development and technical assistance, developing and operating collaborative programs, refining and promoting policy, and fundraising.

OST Intermediaries (OSTIs) play a vital role in addressing this problem by strengthening coordination and fostering connections among organizations. They perform many functions that knit together and grow the impact of regional OST programs and organizations, including fundraising, policymaking, and developing partnerships. This guide focuses on one of the core functions of OSTIs—coordinating between programs and organizations—and the impact these activities have on recruitment and retention of young people.

OSTIs employ three types of coordination practices that support partnerships, programs, and practices that knit together learning opportunities across a regional OST ecosystem:



Developing collaborative programs

OSTIs can lead the design and implementation of programs that include multiple organizations and build on their unique strengths. This can include developing collaborative proposals, shared metrics and standards, and designing and managing programs.



Building capacity

OSTIs provide training and technical assistance that improves the effectiveness of programs and regional coordination, such as offering training on positive youth development or specific programs.



Brokering resources and opportunities

OSTIs also play an essential role in brokering opportunities to and between organizations and individuals in a region, including program funding, scholarships and other resources, as well as employment and partnership opportunities.

When implemented in sustained and effective ways by OSTIs, our research has documented how these practices can have a positive impact in youth recruitment and retention, particularly in regions and in fields with limited capacity (Dahn, Pepler, & Ito, 2023). Drawing from a multiyear research-practice partnership between the Connected Learning Lab, STEM Next Opportunity Fund, and The 50 State Afterschool Network, this guide offers insights and recommendations for how OSTIs can effectively enact these coordination practices to improve recruitment and retention. Each of the eight organizations that we documented as part of this research saw an increase in their enrollment, improved retention, or both as a result of the coordination practices they implemented.

Strengthening relationships and coordination between our out-of-school time (OST) and school educators had a dramatic impact in our enrollment and retention numbers. We saw a notable increase in students enrolling through school-based educator referrals. Students were excited to be able to apply the learnings from their interest-based OST projects in STEM subjects in school, particularly because their teachers were aware of and connected to the work they were doing in our programs.



- Gyla Bell

Senior Executive Director, The TGR Learning Lab

OSTI Featured Partners



Guide Overview

This guide is organized by four guiding principles for effective coordination that were exemplified by partner OSTIs. For each guiding principle, we offer background on what we observed through our research, recommendations and examples for how to put the principle into practice, and an example of an OSTI putting this principle into action.



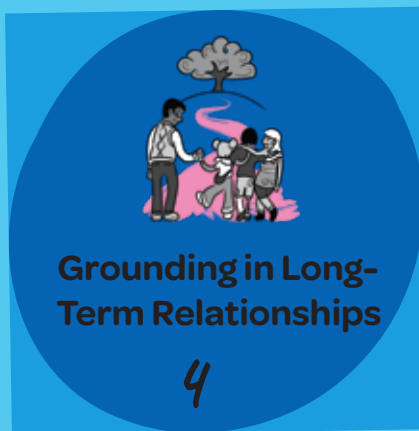
Young people are vital assets in recruiting peers to OST programs and fostering engagement and a sense of belonging through peer connection. OST programs can tap this potential by empowering youth to be program ambassadors, organizing near-peer mentorship programs, and connecting alumni to opportunities, resources, and networks. By engaging young people as near-peer mentors and alumni leaders, programs can spark excitement among younger participants while retaining older youth—all while building confidence, leadership, and career readiness skills.

When OST programs are designed around what young people are genuinely interested in, their participation deepens and learning becomes more meaningfully connected to their lives. This leads to higher learner motivation, confidence, belonging, and agency, which in turn leads to higher program recruitment and retention.



OST programs and intermediaries can broaden access and sustain engagement by being responsive to family and community contexts. This means actively investigating family needs and addressing financial, logistical, and cultural barriers.

OSTs and programs can work together to provide stipends, align program hours with family schedules, coordinate transportation, and link families to supportive services. They can also go a step further by engaging caregivers and communities in the programming itself, elevating family voice, strengthening ties to the community, and supporting culturally sustaining programming.

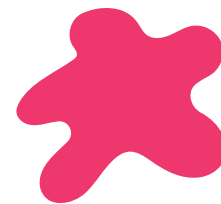


Long-term partnerships build on authentic relationships that form the foundation to connect and sustain programs and pathways for young people. Coordination and alignment are established and maintained through trust, personal connections, and shared routines and practices that transcend a specific program or project. OSTs play an essential role in maintaining these relationships across individual programs and organizations.

Guiding Principle #1

Youth as Network Builders

Youth Are Vital Assets in Recruiting and Retaining Peers



Why it Matters

Young people are vital assets in recruiting peers to OST programs and fostering engagement and a sense of belonging through peer connection. OST programs can tap this potential by empowering youth to be program ambassadors, organizing near-peer mentorship programs, and connecting alumni to opportunities, resources, and networks. By engaging young people as near-peer mentors and alumni leaders, programs can spark excitement among younger participants while retaining older youth—all while building confidence, leadership, and career readiness skills.

Hiring older youth staff was an innovation... They were affordable and... it provided the older youth with great opportunities. We started getting data back about how appreciative the regular staff were. The elementary and middle school youth really light up when the high school student walks into the room. They get excited and energized by that near-peer energy.

- Alison O'Toole

Network Lead, Beyond School Bells, a statewide OSTI in Nebraska



What it Takes

Design and support of leadership roles for alumni and older youth need to take into account their school, work, and other commitments. Programs must also invest time and resources in developing the confidence and instructional skills of near-peer mentors, since these young leaders are still developing themselves. Effective youth leadership programs require consistent support for training and compensation, in order to be sustained and spread. OSTIs like Nebraska's Beyond School Bells (BSB) have addressed these needs by coordinating programs that develop youth leaders, mentors, and alumni, and by securing resources to engage them.

STEM Near-Peer Mentorship

Beyond School Bells, Nebraska

In Nebraska, Beyond School Bells (BSB), the statewide OSTI, led the development of a near-peer mentorship program as part of its Engineering Pathways project. The effort placed older youth at the center of network building, guiding younger peers through hands-on STEM activities, supporting family STEM nights, and helping lead explorations of engineering career pathways. Younger students connected with high school and college mentors, which led to more excitement about engineering and increased confidence that they, too, could become engineers. The older youth benefitted from training, paid work, and leadership experiences that expanded their own knowledge of STEM and, in some cases, sparked interest in teaching or engineering careers. In one program, the near-peer mentorship program drew on a robust high school and local college workforce. In another, competition math team members stepped into mentorship roles, with support tailored to local assets and needs.

In the role of an OSTI, BSB engaged in the following coordination practices:

Developing collaborative programs

BSB provided resources and technical guidance to help partners build the infrastructure, curriculum, and professional development needed to implement the near-peer mentorship model. This approach supported the development of strong working relationships between BSB and program staff. BSB tailored support to the needs of each cohort of older youth—offering a ready-to-use, plug-and-play curriculum for some programs and co-creating culturally and locally relevant curricula with others.

Building capacity

BSB supported a regular cadence of “learning sessions” with site leaders. By embedding feedback loops and continuous professional development, BSB ensured that adult staff across sites were equipped to implement and adapt the near-peer mentorship model to their local contexts. Drawing on real-time experience, BSB shared lessons across sites as the program evolved—for example, learning to co-create schedules with near-peer mentors to better align with their limited availability and finding the right balance of adult staff support during older youth-led STEM activities with younger youth.

Brokering resources and opportunities

BSB brokered high school and college mentors as personnel resources for the program implementation. BSB additionally brokered financial resources to ensure youth mentors and leaders were fairly compensated and motivated to participate, rather than taking on other afterschool jobs. It additionally brokered scholarship opportunities through its lead funder and partner, the Kiewit Foundation, which hoped to attract more young people across the state to apply.

By coordinating a structured near-peer mentorship approach across a region, BSB positioned youth as network builders, maintained mentorship consistency and quality, and developed a network of continuous learning and adaptation. Over the course of a year, the

program recruited 183 youth participants and mentors. After the fall program, 63% returned or were retained for the spring semester, significantly outperforming expectations and prior program recruitment and retention.

What it Looks Like



Developing collaborative programs that empower and position youth as relatable mentors and ambassadors for OST participation across a network:

- Creating near-peer mentorship programs staffed by program alumni and other youth recruited from the community
- Sustaining program alumni networks through newsletters, social media groups, and regional alumni networks
- Assembling youth advisory councils and reflection and feedback tools to get input on program design and strategies



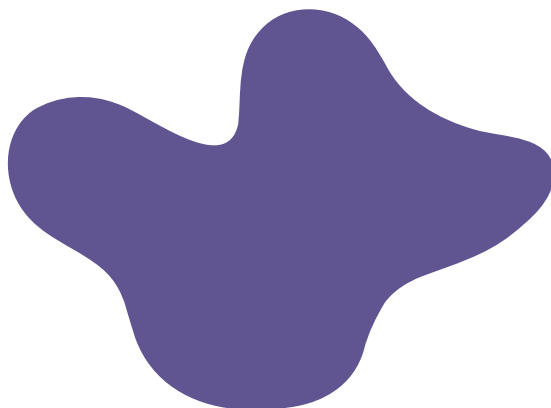
Building capacity through consistent, high-quality training and standards so youth leaders across a network can model leadership, attract new participants, and inspire peers to stay involved:

- Training that addresses both content-specific skills and youth development practices
- Coordinated cross-program training sessions that build community across organizations
- Dissemination models and standards for how programs value and incorporate youth contributions



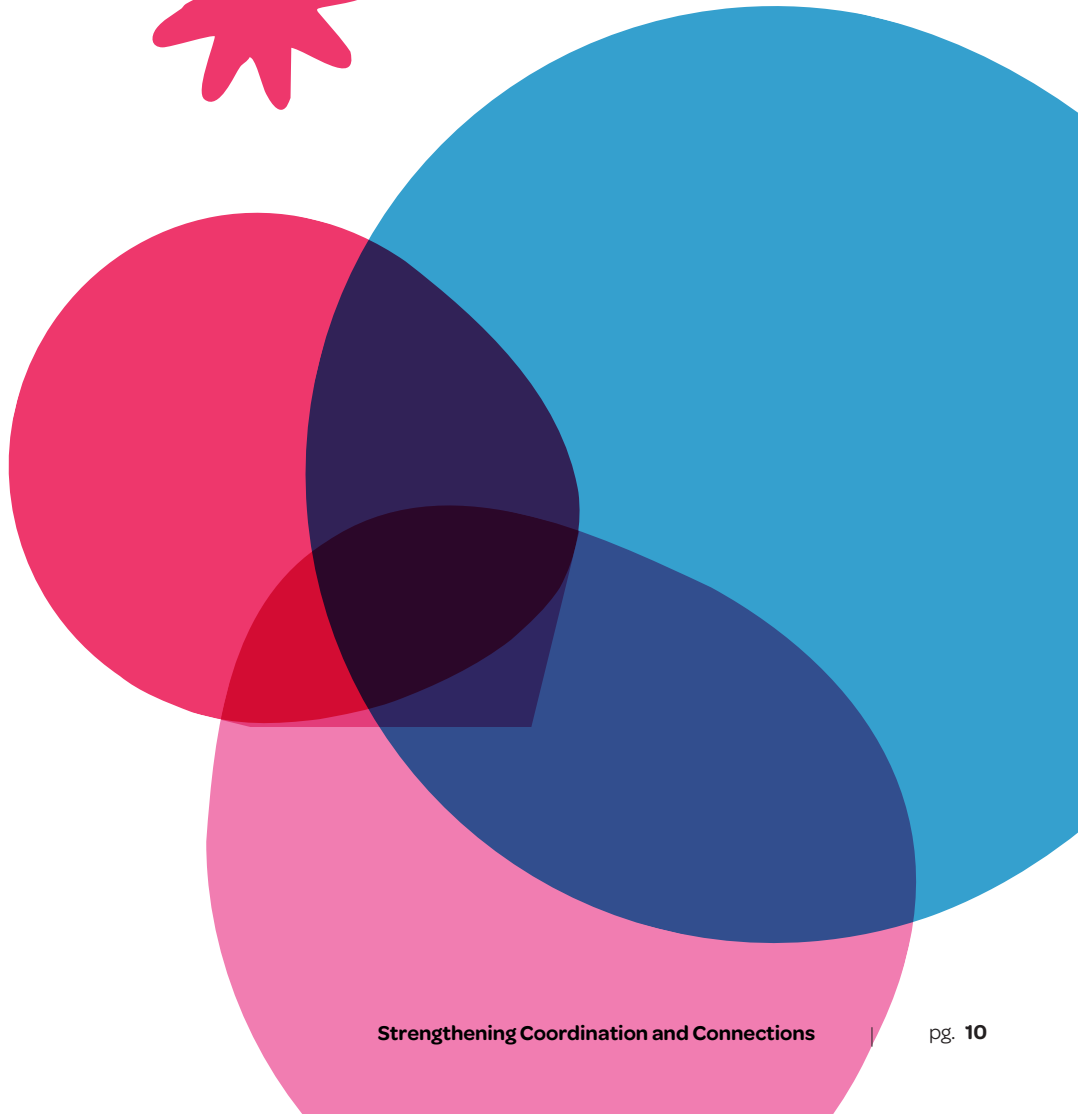
Brokering opportunities and resources to sustain and recognize the work of youth leaders:

- Securing funding and brokering stipends for youth leaders and mentors
- Developing and offering certificates and other tangible forms of recognition
- Supporting youth leaders in accessing educational and work opportunities through recommendations and introductions



Ideas for Getting Started

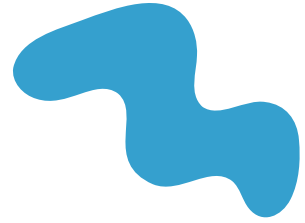
- Create an email list or social media group for youth in the community to share information about events and opportunities
- Survey alumni on interests and availability for mentorship and share with partners and program
- Organize a drop-in mentorship day and invite partners to bring their youth to connect with alumni around specific academic or career paths



Guiding Principle #2

Interest-Driven Learning

Programs Are Centered on Youth Interests and Identities



Why it Matters

When OST programs are designed around what young people are genuinely interested in, their participation deepens and learning becomes more meaningfully connected to their lives. This leads to higher learner motivation, confidence, belonging, and agency, which in turn leads to higher program recruitment and retention.

When we surveyed youth members ... , we found low interest in some STEM topics at multiple sites, which reinforced the need to survey youth members to learn more about the types of programs they are interested in. A high-quality interest survey can help us make better decisions about programming and where we should narrow our STEM focus.

- Heather White

VP of Program Impact, Boys & Girls Clubs of Garden Grove



What it Takes

When program design begins with adult expertise, existing curriculum, or grant requirements rather than with the interests and culture of young people themselves, engagement and belonging can fade. Centering programs on youth culture and identity means investigating youth interests, and adapting programming based on these learnings. This means engaging youth through surveys, focus groups, or co-design, as well as developing new programs and related staff professional development and feedback systems. OSTIs like the Boys & Girls Clubs of Garden Grove have addressed these needs by developing a youth interest survey and offering professional development and coordinated feedback to align program design and practices with youth interests.

Understanding and Aligning With Youth Interests

Boys & Girls Clubs of Garden Grove, California

Boys & Girls Clubs of Garden Grove (BGCGG) has developed systems to translate youth interests into sustained STEM engagement and career exploration. Operating across more than 50 school-based sites in Orange County, California, BGCGG plays a coordinating role similar to a regional hub or statewide OSTI—linking program leaders, STEM specialists, and community partners to ensure youth interests inform programming across contexts. After seeing youth engagement waning in programs driven by adult or funder priorities, BGCGG began building tools and processes to capture and act on what genuinely excites young people. This included the development of a STEM interest survey and a youth personas tool that helped staff identify and respond to diverse types of learners—ranging from confident, STEM-interested youth to those who had previously felt excluded from STEM spaces.

BGCGG engaged in the following coordination practices:

Developing collaborative programs

BGCGG organized communities of practice—structured working groups that met regularly to share strategies, review data, and align programming—with program staff representing nine of its teen-serving school sites (seventh–twelfth grade). Through these groups, it brought together STEM specialists and staff from partner organizations, such as Girls Inc. and 4-H, to analyze members’ responses to STEM interest surveys. By linking shared curricula, professional learning, and site-specific adaptations, BGCGG ensured that youth interests guided programming across community contexts.

Building capacity

BGCGG coordinated professional development and ongoing learning sessions through the communities of practice. These sessions improved the ability of staff and STEM specialists to recognize, interpret, and act on youth interests. Staff were trained to use interest survey data and youth personas as design tools, enabling continuous refinement of program offerings. BGCGG also provided tools and training in how to establish feedback loops between youth, site leaders, and STEM specialists so that programs evolved alongside members’ changing interests.

Brokering resources and opportunities

BGCGG brokered access to STEM curricula and materials that aligned with the youth interests that surfaced during its inquiry. This included access to Sphero Robotics and Water Guardians through its Imagine Science partnership and connections to community and industry partners who provided mentorship and exposure to real-world STEM.

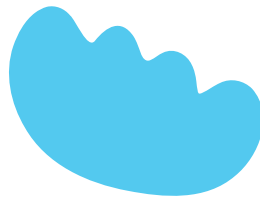
Like many OST organizations, BGCGG struggled to attract older youth but saw a substantial boost in enrollment and retention with this new focus on interest-driven learning and associated set of practices. In the first year, across nine sites where BGCGG offered more STEM programming, 357 middle and high school students enrolled in STEM activities. Forty-five percent of the students chose to come back for more STEM activities over that time period. The students who did return took an average of 2.4 additional activities over the course of the year.

What it Looks Like



Developing collaborative programs to identify and respond to what connects with young people's interests, culture, and identity:

- Working with program staff to co-develop youth interest surveys and personas to capture authentic, diverse voices
- Convening staff and partners to co-design and adapt curricula based on youth feedback
- Hosting workshops and interest exploration sessions that allow youth to discover new passions and connect them to program opportunities



Building capacity to identify and translate youth interests into program design:

- Facilitating professional development on culturally sustaining, interest-driven learning practices
- Providing shared design frameworks that help staff move from adult-directed to youth-centered approaches
- Supporting staff in using survey data and interest-mapping tools to align program offerings with what youth value most



Brokering resources and opportunities to offer programs and connect with partners in areas of interest to youth:

- Coordinating shared access to interest-aligned curricula, materials, and digital tools
- Holding events and offering resources that highlight a range of career pathways, learning opportunities, and emerging fields
- Connecting programs with community and industry partners who reflect youth interests and identities

Ideas for Getting Started

- Create an interest survey that OST programs can adapt to local needs when surveying their youth
- Generate a one-pager of local opportunities aligned with different interest profiles or personas for OST program partners to share with participating youth
- Ask partners to share key practices around youth-centered programming with other program partners

Guiding Principle #3

Responsiveness to Family Contexts

Material Barriers and Family Needs Are Actively Addressed

Why it Matters

OST programs and intermediaries can broaden access and sustain engagement by being responsive to family and community contexts. This means actively investigating family needs and addressing financial, logistical, and cultural barriers. OSTIs and programs can work together to provide stipends, align program hours with family schedules, coordinate transportation, and link families to supportive services. They can also go a step further by engaging caregivers and communities in the programming itself, elevating family voice, strengthening ties to the community, and supporting culturally sustaining programming.



Something was missing from how we think about STEM in afterschool in Minnesota—in contrast to how the corporate world thinks about STEM, how nonprofits think about STEM. We were having this feeling that STEM wasn't connecting with who we wanted to connect with. How do we truly engage those people to introduce them to STEM and have a cultural shift in terms of how folks in the communities think about opportunities in STEM, similar to how they think about opportunities in sports?

- Keem Anderson

Associate Director, Ignite Afterschool

What it Takes

Engaging families and offering wraparound support falls outside of the traditional focus of program providers; infrastructure, staff capacity, and resources can be scarce. OSTIs play a critical role in filling these gaps by brokering partnerships, leveraging community resources, and creating systems and centralized coordination that address barriers comprehensively.

Family-Centered, Culturally Sustaining Engagement

Ignite Afterschool, Minnesota

Ignite Afterschool, a statewide OSTI in Minnesota, saw a need to expand equitable access to OST STEM programs by rethinking its partnership with families in addition to removing logistical barriers. Working alongside community-based organizations in North Minneapolis and Duluth, Ignite brought together OST practitioners, school-based educators, and local program partners to elevate family voice and address the practical realities that shape participation. Through this coordinated approach, families were invited not only to access STEM opportunities but to influence how those opportunities are designed, talked about, and connected to futures that feel meaningful and culturally relevant. As a statewide OST intermediary, Ignite served as a convener and facilitator across these groups, ensuring that listening, relationship building, and practical support became shared commitments across the ecosystem.

Ignite Afterschool engaged in the following coordination practices:

Developing collaborative programs

Ignite co-created a Family Listening Session model and a four-tier Family Engagement Framework with local partners to help organizations center caregivers' experiences, cultural perspectives, and needs. These tools supported programs in building trust, structuring dialogue in culturally sustaining ways, and surfacing opportunities and barriers that families encounter when navigating STEM.

Building capacity


Through its Professional Development Exchange (PDX), Ignite offered training and supported project planning and facilitation for OST staff, school-day educators, and community partners. This professional development helped practitioners grow their confidence in engaging families, integrated caregiver insights into STEM programming, and shifted organizational assumptions about who participates in STEM and why. This capacity-building approach empowered partners to adopt and adapt the model in ways that reflect their local contexts.

Brokering resources and opportunities

Ignite aligned multiple funding streams to support childcare, transportation, food, and family stipends, ensuring that caregivers could fully participate in listening sessions. By coordinating resources and leveraging trusted community relationships, Ignite helped partners create welcoming, accessible environments while also modeling how programs can systematically address the everyday barriers families face.


In the first year focusing on these new practices for engaging families, Ignite Afterschool shared the Family Engagement Framework with over 30 sites, some of which began implementing family listening sessions.

What it Looks Like




Developing collaborative programs grounded in what families need and value:

- Organizing and coordinating family listening sessions or advisory groups with caregivers and community partners
- Using caregiver input to shape activities to be culturally relevant
- Structuring events in which families can share expertise with the OST community



Building capacity for engaging and supporting families with training, tools, and shared routines:

- Offering joint professional learning on engaging families and developing culturally sustaining programs
- Providing facilitation support and modeling for welcoming, trust-building conversations with families
- Offering shared frameworks or protocols to gather and act on caregiver insights




Brokering resources and opportunities to remove obstacles that limit participation:

- Securing and coordinating funding to provide transportation, childcare, food, or family stipends
- Partnering with community and social service organizations to connect families with additional supports, as needed
- Using shared data to identify and target where material and logistical barriers are most significant



Ideas for Getting Started

- 
- Share existing family engagement frameworks and other family engagement resources with OST partners
 - Create a family engagement council to advise on decisions across OST programs
 - Host a listening session with families in collaboration with partners, offering practical supports such as a stipend, childcare or a meal

Guiding Principle #4

Grounding in Long-Term Relationships

Relational Infrastructure as a Foundation for Coordinated Programming

Why it Matters

Long-term relationships form the foundation for authentic and sustainable partnerships that connect young people to high-quality programs and future pathways. Relational infrastructure allows organizations to work fluidly with one another in ways that establish trust as they create a sense of shared purpose and practice. OSTIs play an essential role in developing this relational infrastructure by planning for and making connections across individual programs and organizations.

Long-term partnerships with the Anaheim Union High School District, North Orange County Regional Occupational Program, and Providence enable us to consistently expand access to hands-on, career-connected learning at The TGR Learning Lab Anaheim. Through sustained collaboration—from co-designed, profession-based projects for students to AI externships with local educators—these relationships amplify our impact, ensure program relevance, and deepen community trust year after year.

- John Lee

Senior Vice President of Programs and Education at TGR Foundation



What it Takes

Relational infrastructure is established and maintained by building trust over time, making personal connections, and engaging with shared routines and practices that transcend a specific program or project. OSTIs support this development by getting to know organizations in their region, understanding the strengths and needs of individual partners, staying in touch during and after active collaboration periods, building and sustaining shared communication tools, and taking the long view of relationship-building. Resilient relational infrastructure is grounded in intentional trust-building over years of collaboration on projects and initiatives.

Relational Infrastructure for Career-Connected Programming

TGR Foundation, California

The TGR Learning Lab, an OSTI operated by TGR Foundation in Anaheim, California, provides out-of-school programming for its local community. Over nearly three decades, it has built strong partnerships through sustained trust with organizations, school districts, and industry partners. Senior Executive Director Gyla Bell, who has been with the Lab since its opening in 2006, noted that Anaheim Union School District leaders were involved from the earliest conversations about the Lab's purpose—and remain active partners today. TGR Foundation leaders serve on a district advisory committee, allowing ongoing communication and relationship maintenance, and they work strategically to align district goals with partnership plans.

Building on this relational foundation, TGR Foundation developed a Career-Connected Learning program that helps youth explore careers aligned with their interests and identities. Working collaboratively with district CTE educators and industry partners, TGR Foundation staff designed a framework and set of lessons offered in Anaheim schools, paired with field trips to the Learning Lab. Students also participate in extension activities that use lab tools, engage them in workplace-style problem solving, and introduce them to professionals who share insights about their work, training pathways, and career opportunities.

TGR Foundation engaged in the following coordination practices:

Developing collaborative programs

The TGR Learning Lab was developed with input from the school district from its founding, setting the foundation for an authentic and organic long-term partnership. This long-term relationship supports ongoing collaboration between TGR Foundation staff and district educators in joint efforts like the CTE program. Activities that support collaborative programs include joint planning sessions, alignment on shared goals, and routine project communication.

Building capacity

TGR Foundation invested in both district CTE educator and TGR Foundation staff learning to ensure alignment with the shared program model and approach. While students engage in extension activities and career panels at The TGR Learning Lab, CTE educators participate in professional development offered by TGR Foundation on hands-on, inquiry-based practices. TGR Foundation also ensures that multiple staff members hold relationships across organizations and gives staff time to support those relationships.

Brokering resources and opportunities

TGR Foundation has developed a range of infrastructures and supports to expand access and opportunity. This includes a busing infrastructure to get students from schools to The TGR Learning Lab and an internal database of people they can contact for mentorship and guest speaking opportunities. TGR Foundation also works to expand relationships and opportunity, working with partners to pursue new grant opportunities and checking in regularly with industry and community partners to maintain connections and surface potential opportunities.


The successful development of the Career-Connected Learning program provides a concrete example of the benefits of TGR Foundation’s sustained investment in relational infrastructure to support youth recruitment and retention. One illustrative case is the healthcare strand of their career exploration work, which operated across four schools and was intentionally designed in partnership with a single industry partner. More than 400 students participated overall. Sixty students served as class representatives and gave presentations. The top 16 presenters were given the opportunity for an industry visit. Additionally, 28 students took part in micro-internships—a 30-hour program that allowed participants to explore a specific healthcare career pathway and work on a real-world industry problem in greater depth.

What it Looks Like




Developing collaborative programs that build strong relational infrastructure to support partnerships:

- Partnering with schools, organizations, and industry partners with long-term goals in mind that extend beyond a particular funded project
- Hosting regular networking and social events with partners that bring together teachers, OST educators, and industry partners
- Serving on advisory councils or attending events to which your organization is invited



Building capacity through a relational infrastructure that includes shared tools, routines, language, and practices:

- Ensuring that relationships are held by multiple people across an organization
- Establishing and sustaining shared routines, such as regular reflection and co-planning sessions to refine shared curriculum, strengthen relationships, and maintain alignment
- Working with partners to pursue opportunities that would help to deepen the relationship



Brokering resources and opportunities for sustaining programs and connection between partners:



- Structuring partnerships where partners offer mentorship, professional guidance, or career advice to OST programs on a regular cadence
- Developing agreements for transportation, equipment, or technology sharing across OST and in-school contexts
- Collaboratively pursuing grant opportunities

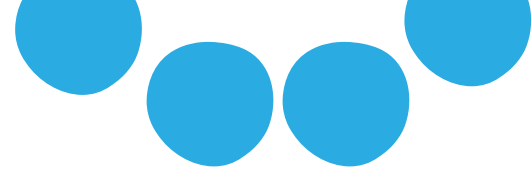
Ideas for Getting Started



- Host a holiday or informal lunch to connect with partners and reflect on and celebrate collaborative work
- Establish a recurring call with partners to keep in touch even when there is not active project
- Take inventory of current relationships with partners and create short-term and long-term goals for fostering and sustaining new and existing partnerships

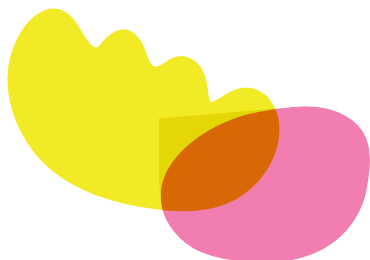


Summary of Principles and Practices

Guiding Principle	What it Looks Like		
<p>#1 Youth as Network Builders</p> 	<p>Developing collaborative programs that empower and position youth as relatable mentors and ambassadors for OST participation across a network:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating near-peer mentorship programs staffed by program alumni and other youth recruited from the community • Sustaining program alumni networks through newsletters, social media groups, and regional alumni networks • Assembling youth advisory councils and reflection and feedback tools to get input on program design and strategies 	<p>Building capacity through consistent, high-quality training and standards so youth leaders across a network can model leadership, attract new participants, and inspire peers to stay involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training that addresses both content-specific skills and youth development practices • Coordinated cross-program training sessions that build community across organizations • Dissemination models and standards for how programs value and incorporate youth contributions 	<p>Brokering opportunities and resources to sustain and recognize the work of youth leaders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing funding and brokering stipends for youth leaders and mentors • Developing and offering certificates and other tangible forms of recognition • Supporting youth leaders in accessing educational and work opportunities through recommendations and introductions
<p>#2 Interest-Driven Learning</p> 	<p>Developing collaborative programs to identify and respond to what connects with young people's interests, culture, and identity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with program staff to co-develop youth interest surveys and personas to capture authentic, diverse voices • Convening staff and partners to co-design and adapt curricula based on youth feedback • Hosting workshops and interest exploration sessions that allow youth to discover new passions and connect them to program opportunities 	<p>Building capacity to identify and translate youth interests into program design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating professional development on culturally sustaining, interest-driven learning practices • Providing shared design frameworks that help staff move from adult-directed to youth-centered approaches • Supporting staff in using survey data and interest-mapping tools to align program offerings with what youth value most 	<p>Brokering resources and opportunities to offer programs and connect with partners in areas of interest to youth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating shared access to interest-aligned curricula, materials, and digital tools • Holding events and offering resources that highlight a range of career pathways, learning opportunities, and emerging fields • Connecting programs with community and industry partners who reflect youth interests and identities



Guiding Principle	What it Looks Like		
<p>#3 Responsiveness to Family Contexts</p> 	<p>Developing collaborative programs grounded in what families need and value:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing and coordinating family listening sessions or advisory groups with caregivers and community partners Using caregiver input to shape activities to be culturally relevant Structuring events in which families can share expertise with the OST community 	<p>Building capacity for engaging and supporting families with training, tools and shared routines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering joint professional learning on engaging families and developing culturally sustaining programs Providing facilitation support and modeling for welcoming, trust-building conversations with families Offering shared frameworks or protocols to gather and act on caregiver insights 	<p>Brokering resources and opportunities to remove obstacles that limit participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Securing and coordinating funding to provide transportation, childcare, food, or family stipends Partnering with community and social service organizations to connect families with additional supports, as needed Using shared data to identify and target where material and logistical barriers are most significant
<p>#4 Grounding in Long-Term Relationships</p> 	<p>Developing collaborative programs that build strong relational infrastructure to support partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnering with schools, organizations, and industry partners with long-term goals in mind that extend beyond a particular funded project Hosting regular networking and social events with partners that bring together teachers, OST educators, and industry partners Serving on advisory councils or attending events to which your organization is invited 	<p>Building capacity through a relational infrastructure that includes shared tools, routines, language, and practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring that relationships are held by multiple people across an organization Establishing and sustaining shared routines such as regular reflection and co-planning sessions to refine shared curriculum, strengthen relationships, and maintain alignment Working with partners to pursue opportunities that would help to deepen the relationship 	<p>Brokering resources and opportunities for sustaining programs and connection between partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structuring partnerships where partners offer mentorship, professional guidance, or career advice to OST programs on a regular cadence Developing agreements for transportation, equipment, or technology sharing across OST and in-school contexts Collaboratively pursuing grant opportunities



Project Background

The Making Connections project investigates how to build connections and transitions between out-of-school time (OST) programs to support coordinated and culturally sustaining STEM ecosystems. With support from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and Samueli Foundation, the Connected Learning Lab (CLL) partnered with the STEM Next Opportunity Fund, afterschool networks across the U.S., and OST organizations in Orange County to conduct research and support capacity building. This guide draws from ongoing research from 2021 to 2026, with a focus on the following activities conducted in 2023-2025:

- Eight semi-structured interviews with OSTI leaders and staff about their collaborative practices
- Monthly check-ins with OSTI leaders during which the research team documented their engagement with partners and discussed ways to support coordination and connection
- Collection and analysis of data on student OST activity with eight organizations over time and across settings

Research team members analyzed these sources to surface common approaches, and examples of how these approaches were embodied in OSTI partner practices. While the project focused on gender equity in STEM learning, the OSTI coordination and connection strategies for this guide were also considered for their alignment more broadly with the connected learning framework, which is relevant across varied fields and communities. Connected learning is a research and design framework that builds relationships and opportunities that grow from learners' interests, identities, and communities (Ito et al., 2020). We also drew from related research we have conducted on relational and cultural supports for OST STEM (Le Lay et al. 2022) and arts learning (Peppler et al., 2023), as well as prior analyses applying the connected learning framework to OST coordination and connection building (Dahn et al., 2023).

About the Connected Learning Lab

The Connected Learning Lab (CLL) is an interdisciplinary research institute at the University of California, Irvine, dedicated to studying and supporting learning and development in a digital age. CLL's focus is defined by the "connected" in connected learning, which refers to both social relationships and emerging digital and networked technologies. Connected learning differs from institution-centered approaches to learning and technology in being people-first; prioritizing student interests, cultural relevance, and the life of communities. CLL takes a uniquely interdisciplinary and cross-sector approach that brings together the learning sciences, social sciences, design, informatics, and computing to develop new research frameworks, engage in pressing real-world problems, and develop and test breakthrough innovations.

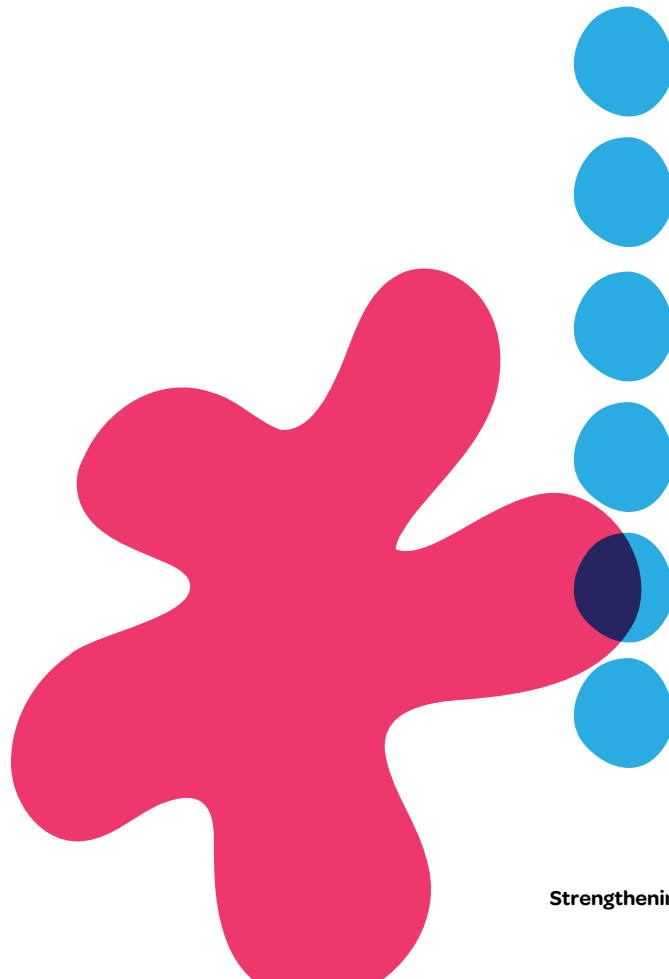


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<https://connectedlearning.uci.edu/projects/making-connections/>.



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To access more resources for strengthening coordination and making connections, visit:

<https://clalliance.org/connected-out-of-school-time/>

To learn more about the Making Connections project, visit:

<https://connectedlearning.uci.edu/projects/making-connections/>

