

Mixed-Methods Insights from District Leaders



ACTION FOR
HEALTHY
KIDS 

2023–2024 AFHK Family-School
Partnership Program

July 2024

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Introduction

Report Overview

This mixed methods report includes data collected as part of a larger evaluation of the Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) Family-School Partnership program. This report focuses on school district grant project leads' perspectives on their experience with AFHK Family-School Partnership grant in the 2023–2024 school year.

Program Background

In the 2023–2024 school year, AFHK implemented the Family-School Partnership (FSP) program, partnering with districts, schools, and families to improve wellness policies, implement best practices, and build the capacity of parents, caregivers, and educators to form sustainable family-school partnerships that support kids' health. AFHK partnered with six school districts, providing:

- The assessment of school health policies and practices;
- The development and implementation of action plans for improving nutrition, physical activity and social-emotional health programming, systems, and policies;
- Training, technical assistance, and coaching for school/district staff, caregivers, District Wellness Committees, and School Health Advisory Committees;
- Family engagement through Family Connectors, who are trusted parents, caregivers, and community members trained to facilitate family-school partnerships that improve kids' health; and
- The implementation of programming across the following domains, in alignment with district/school needs: NourishEd (Food Access and Nutrition Education), EnergizEd (Physical Activity and Active Play), ConnectEd (Social-Emotional Health and Risk Behavior Prevention).

The goal and objectives for the Family-School Partnership program are listed below.

- **Goal:** Leveraging AFHK's key program areas of NourishEd, EnergizEd and ConnectEd, with families, schools and districts, working together to prepare kids to be healthy in body and mind by ensuring access to three foundations of lifelong health: optimal nutrition and physical activity, safe and supportive environments, and nurturing adult-child relationships.
- **Objective 1:** Districts improve child health and well-being through policies and systems
- **Objective 2:** Districts and schools implement practices to ensure equitable and comprehensive healthy school environments
- **Objective 3:** Parents and caregivers advocate for health at school and promote health at home
- **Objective 4:** Families and schools improve collaboration to ensure equitable and comprehensive healthy school environments

Methodology

This report includes data from an evaluation of the Family-School Partnership program conducted during the 23–24 school year. The evaluation gathered information on the program processes and outcomes using a mixed-methods parallel convergent design. The quantitative strand of the evaluation included ongoing activity tracking and year-end surveys. Qualitative data was also gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions. Data collection methods discussed in this report include:

- Semi-structured interviews with five school district leads completed at the end of the 23–24 school year
- Reports completed by six school districts at the end of the 23–24 school year

Six school districts participated in the Family-School Partnership program during the 2023–2024 school year. These districts are geographically diverse, located in California, Colorado, New York, and Texas, in town, city, rural, and suburban locations. The districts vary in size, with student enrollments ranging from 276 to 72,620. Across the participating districts, the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch ranges from 49% to 89%.

In April and May 2024, district grant leads from all six school districts completed year-end grant reports. Reports were completed using SurveyMonkey and collected information on grant impacts, successes, and challenges.

Five district leads also completed semi-structured interviews. These individuals were employed by their school district and managed the implementation of AFHK Family-School Partnership grants. Additional information on the district lead interviews, including specific interview questions, can be found in the [Appendix](#).



Results

Results from district reports and district lead interviews are discussed below. Themes from the semi-structured interviews are used to structure the report, with descriptions of sub-themes integrated with quantitative data from district reports. A table of interview themes and sub-themes is available in the [Appendix](#).

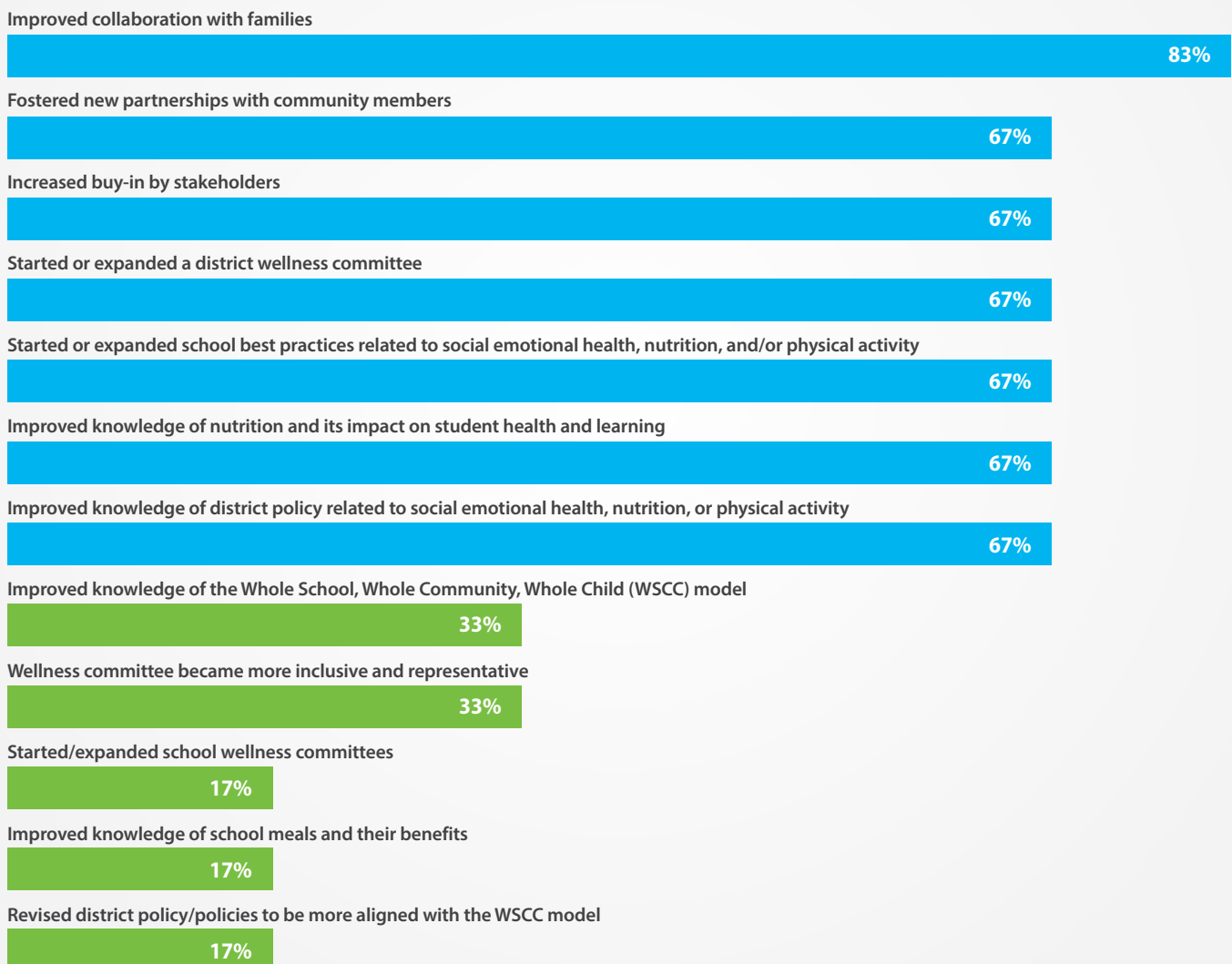
Theme #1: Grant Impacts

Districts increased family engagement, collaboration with stakeholders, and programming/best practices related to child health and wellbeing.

Quantitative Data

In their year-end reports, the most common impacts shared by districts were related to **family, community, and stakeholder engagement**, as well as improved **knowledge of nutrition and district policy**.

Please indicate your district's accomplishments from the options below.



Interview Sub-themes

New or continued programming

In interviews, all districts described using AFHK grants to implement new or continued health and wellbeing programming (see example). Most districts focused on nutrition programs, providing nutrition education, taste testing, or gardening opportunities. One district implemented after-school physical activity and socioemotional programming with grant funds.

Student and school staff engagement

Most district staff interviewees shared that students and staff enjoyed and benefited from the grant-funded programming. This included increasing nutrition knowledge and exposure to healthy foods.

Family engagement, connection, and trust

Most interviewees shared that the grant enabled their district to host more or better events for families that successfully built stronger connections between families and schools. One interviewee noted that they were able to create more trusting relationships with families as a result.

“I think the family connection piece... a lot of the time, sites will have events and, you know, maybe they’ll have, a school carnival or something, and a lot of the families will come. But I really appreciated the specialized and thought-out events that [the family connectors] did. It was really education-oriented.”

~ DISTRICT LEAD

Example

Using their AFHK grant, Brush School District offered students weekly fresh fruit taste tests throughout the school year. Not only did students gain access to and familiarity with healthy fruits, but they also took ownership of the project, with students organizing and distributing the fruit every week. This project gained the support and collaboration of food service staff, janitorial staff, and teachers. As teachers sampled the fruit alongside students, this sparked conversations around healthy eating.



Theme #2: Facilitators of Success

Field Managers and funding are critical catalysts of success for districts.

Quantitative Data

In their year-end reports, the majority of districts reported that **Field Managers, funding, and Family Connectors** were helpful forms of support. District leads also highlighted these facilitators of success in their interviews.

Please select the strategies your district found most helpful throughout this school year.

One-on-one calls with AFHK Field Manager

100%

Funding

83%

Meetings with the AFHK Family Connector

67%

Other ongoing support from AFHK Field Manager

50%

Other ongoing support from Family Connector

50%

Workshops/events hosted or supported by the AFHK Family Connector

50%

WellSAT policy review and report

50%

AFHK School Health Index

33%

AFHK learning sessions

33%

Other AFHK digital tools and resources

17%

Interview Sub-themes

Field Managers and WellSAT

All districts expressed that their relationship and communication with the AFHK Field Managers was one of the most critical supports to the success of their grant. They described the Field Managers as knowledgeable, helpful, good at listening, easy to communicate with, and flexible. They noted that it was helpful to have the Field Managers as thought partners in the work and that this facilitated greater impacts in their district. Specifically, all but one interviewee noted that the Field Managers' technical assistance in completing the WellSAT was helpful and supported a more active or effective District Wellness Committee.

"I just want to reiterate how unique I think this grant is because we have someone like Natalie who can reach out to us and have more of that personalized connection. I think that is an unspoken piece of the grant that's almost like a monetary award in itself. . . I really just enjoy how Action for Healthy Kids becomes more of a partner than just a grant source. . ."

~ DISTRICT LEAD

Funding

Several districts noted that funding was a key element of their project's success. They shared that the funding enabled new or expanded programming. A few noted that flexibility of the fund use and relatively low burden of grant reporting was helpful. Districts expressed that they hoped to continue receiving funds from AFHK.

"The strengths would definitely be the funding that you guys provide for us. There's no way we could do the [project] if it wasn't for that."

~ DISTRICT LEAD

District-managed, school-tailored

Several interviewees noted that the implementation of their project was successful because a district staff member was doing most of the work to manage the grant and plan the activities. A few shared that they offered school staff event/activity options from which to choose, giving schools the ability to tailor the grant to their specific needs.

"I feel like it's good to have someone overseeing a grant, and not just someone get it and say, 'Here's the money.' So I felt like that was kind of important, and it was appreciated, by the principals to help 'cause they got so much on their plate. . . You know, trying to give them ideas instead of just saying, 'Here, use it towards this.' And then I could—any of their questions, I could take it on."

~ DISTRICT LEAD

Theme #3: Grant Challenges and Suggestions

Challenges emerged with the capacity of schools and districts to implement grant activities, especially with a short grant timeline.

Quantitative Data

Half of the districts reported in their year-end reports that **time and staffing limitations** were barriers to implementing their grant project.

Please select the top barriers/challenges your district faced from the options below.

Insufficient time or staff to dedicate to the activities

50%

Focus on other priorities

33%

Lack of family involvement

33%

Lack of buy-in from stakeholders

17%

My district didn't experience any challenges

17%

Insufficient funding or resources

0%

Inadequate support from AFHK

0%

Interview Sub-Themes

Grant timeline and sustainability

All districts shared that the grant timeline was a challenge to the success of their project. They noted that checks often were not received until December, allowing them only a few months to implement the funding. They suggested longer grant timelines and inviting districts sooner so that they can plan before the summer and begin their projects at the beginning of the next school year. A few interviewees also noted concerns around financial or capacity-related sustainability, noting that projects started by the grants may not continue if funding isn't renewed or support staff aren't available.

School capacity and buy-in

Most interviewees noted that school principals have a lot on their plates and many schools have experienced cuts due to staffing. This can limit the time principals and school staff have to commit to grant projects. Interviewees noted that there is a tough balance to strike when providing support from the district level for school-based projects, as principals often need administrative support but also need to be bought-in to the project and process.

“I didn’t wanna put a lot on the principals’ plates because it’s been a—just been a busy year and probably a tougher year than most years because . . . a lot of districts were having a lot of cuts in staffing.”

~ DISTRICT LEAD

Limitations to policy changes

A few interviewees noted that there were no district-level or policy impacts that resulted from the AFHK grant. They shared that policy change is a long and complicated process. One grantee noted that even when policy changes are made, they might not be followed.

“I think we talked about [policy changes], but I don’t know if they were ever completed. You know when you do policy changes, they have the cycles of when they can do them, and school board stuff is—that is tricky stuff.”

– DISTRICT LEAD

Grant focus

A few grantees shared that they prefer the grant focus not to change each year or for the focus to be on child health and wellbeing more broadly, with the option to tailor their projects to their district’s needs. A few grantees noted areas they would like to explore in future years, like nutrition or socioemotional health.

“I think when [the grant focus is] more broad . . . around wellness, that allows me to really make it more meaningful and impactful on where I can see it fits . . . I feel like it just allows us to be more innovative and creative . . .”

– DISTRICT LEAD

Desire for collaboration and resources

Interviewees expressed a desire to interact with and learn from other districts, as well as to receive additional resources from AFHK. Suggestions included opportunities to connect with other grantees and share wellness resources throughout the grant period as well as an annual conference. Resource suggestions included best practices and examples from other districts and updated resources to share with families on physical and socioemotional health topics.

“I do wish that we could connect with other districts who are involved with Action for Healthy Kids. That’s something that I really enjoy with other grant programs that we’re involved in.”

– DISTRICT LEAD

Conclusion

This evaluation report synthesizes data from the Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) Family-School Partnership program, emphasizing transformative impacts across six participating school districts. Key findings highlight enhanced family engagement, increased collaboration with stakeholders, and improved health and wellness practices within these districts. The report provides insights into the outcomes of the program and foundational steps for future enhancements, focusing on the experiences and feedback from district leads. The evaluation demonstrates significant progress in fostering sustainable family-school partnerships, advocating for healthier school environments, and promoting holistic wellness practices.

This report has several strengths. Notably, the mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, offers an enhanced understanding of the program's impact by capturing numerical trends alongside rich narrative descriptions from district leads. In addition, by highlighting both successes and challenges, the report provides actionable next steps for future programming.

The report also acknowledges several limitations. It should be noted that sample sizes for interviews (N=5) and District Reports (N=6) were small. Therefore, the findings are applicable to the AFHK District Grant program, but not generalizable and may not represent broader district needs around child health and wellbeing. In addition, reliance on self-reported data has the potential to introduce recall bias or subjectivity into the findings. Despite these limitations, the report provides valuable insights and a nuanced understanding of the program's impact.

Appendix

District Lead Interviews

Overview

In May and June 2024, semi structured interviews were conducted with five district staff members who oversaw AFHK Family-School Partnership grants in the 2023–2024 school year. The table below includes relevant demographics of interview participants.

	Role	Family engagement model embedded in district?	AFHK Family Connector assigned to district?
Participant 1	District Grant Lead	YES	YES
Participant 2	District Grant Lead	YES	NO
Participant 3	District Grant Lead	NO	YES
Participant 4	District Grant Lead & Family Connector	NO	YES
Participant 5	District Grant Lead & Family Connector	NO	YES

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand districts’ experiences with and perceptions of the AFHK District Grant program, as well as their experience with and perceptions of Family Engagement. Interview questions were as follows:

1. Can you describe your role or involvement with AFHK District Grant program?
2. How long has your district participated in the District Grant program?
3. Can you describe your experience with the grant program in your district?
4. Which of the program components have been most helpful to your district? Why?
5. What results or impacts have you noticed because of the District Grant program?
6. What would make the District Grant program more effective?
7. Can you describe what family engagement looks like in your district?
8. What successes has your district experienced in connecting with families?
9. What challenges has your district encountered in connecting with families?
10. In your experience, have Family Connectors been successful at connecting families and schools?
11. Can you describe any collaboration that occurs between the person responsible for parent support at the district level (i.e. parent support specialist/Title 1 district staff) and other school or district staff (i.e. PE/nutrition/counselors)? What are some facilitators of this collaboration?
12. What are some barriers to collaboration?
13. What plans, if any, does your district have for family engagement going forward?
14. How could the Family-School Partnership grant program support districts in family engagement efforts?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding your experience with the Family-School Partnership grant program?

Results

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach in Atlas.ti. Below is a table of relevant codes, themes, and sub-themes that emerged.

Code	Themes	Sub-theme
FSP Grant Experience	Impacts	New or continued programming
		Student and school staff engagement
		Family engagement, connection, and trust
	Facilitators of Success	Field Managers and WellSAT
		Funding
		District-managed, school-tailored
	Challenges and Suggestions	Grant timeline and sustainability
		School capacity and buy-in
		Limited policy change
		Grant focus
		Desire for collaboration and resources