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**For Immediate Release:
February 9, 2006**

New report: Engaging families in after-school programs promotes youth development and learning

BOSTON -- Open houses, PTA meetings and classroom volunteer opportunities are tried and true ways that schools involve parents in their children's learning. Research shows this participation helps students succeed. Now the latest research in child development is also suggesting that after-school programs need to reach out to family members on a regular basis to support positive youth development. But hectic schedules and a lack of opportunities can present challenges – for families and providers – in the after-school arena.

United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB), Harvard Family Research Project (HRFP) and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet) are today announcing the publication of a new national resource that recognizes that involving families in after-school programs promotes children's social development, informal learning and academic growth. With support from the Wallace Foundation, this partnership has produced *Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School*, a new guide for after-school providers.

The guide presents current research on the benefits and challenges of engaging families after-school and strategies that after-school programs can use to engage families. From the most basic practice of designing a parent suggestion box to the more complex, like offering parents customized leadership opportunities, the guide offers practical approaches aimed at supporting the child's learning. The guide also recognizes that while younger children may cherish a surprise visit to the classroom by their parent, older youth may prefer engagement that respects their quest for independence, such as seeing their families among others at a formal event.

“We know from the research that children benefit when their families are involved in their in-school and after-school activities,” said **Milton J. Little, Jr.**, president and chief executive officer at United Way of Massachusetts Bay. “We also know that so many families today struggle to balance work commitments with those of family. This guide takes into consideration the challenges and more importantly, the strengths of the working family.”

“Partnering with families to support children's education and engage them in children's activities after-school involves a variety of strategies,” said **Priscilla M. D. Little**, Associate Director at the Harvard Family Research Project. “When practitioners, including after-school providers, think about family engagement, they often only think about activities like classroom-based volunteering. But engaging families also can mean providing opportunities for parents to spend time with their children, learn more about children's schooling, receive support about life needs and participate in program decision-making.”
(-more-)

2-2-2-Engaging families in after-school programs advances youth development and learning

A recent review by HFRP of after-school programs across the country finds that family involvement in after-school programs yields benefits for young people, from greater involvement in school events to increased family assistance with homework. And locally, a study of 78 after-school programs recently released by UWMB also underscores the importance of parent outreach and engagement strategies. The Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS) found that youth who showed the most improvement in their relationships with adults were significantly more likely to attend programs where there was good communication with parents at pick-up time.

But despite these benefits, many after-school programs do not have formal family engagement components. HFRP's scan of 100 after-school programs across the nation found just 27 mentioned that they had a family engagement component. And only 10 percent of program coordinators surveyed by MARS said they spoke with parents on a regular basis to provide updates. The most common reason that staff communicated with families was to discuss a problem, such as a behavioral or attendance issue.

"There are a multitude of barriers that families cite to becoming more involved in their child's after school program – from lack of time, to a lack of formal ways to become involved," said **Maryellen Coffey**, Executive Director at **BOSTnet**. "The guide provides solutions for the after-school provider to design and implement comprehensive and realistic ways to link family engagement practices to children's social development, informal learning and academic growth."

Focus on Families also offers in-depth profiles and best practices of three Boston-based after-school programs actively working to engage families – **Greenwood Shalom After School Program**, **Hyde Square Task Force** and **East Boston YMCA**.

"Encouraging family involvement and engagement in children's activities after school is an important part of our mission of surrounding children with opportunity, said **Nancy Devine**, Director of Arts & Communities at **The Wallace Foundation**. "We hope *Focus on Families* will help providers increase parent participation in the crucial hours between three and six."

Strategies recommended by the new guide include:

- Support families by focusing on families as assets, considering the concerns and needs of the families and children served, and by soliciting family input;
- Communicate and build trusting relationships by communicating frequently and in positive ways, being there for families and providing leadership opportunities for families;
- Hire and develop a family-focused staff, such as designating a staff member with family-engagement responsibility and hiring staff who share parents' experiences and backgrounds; and
- Build linkages across individuals and organizations, such as collaborating with local organizations, offering to act as a liaison between families and schools and helping parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.

A complimentary copy of the guide is available to after-school programs on partner web sites uwmb.org, bostnet.org, and hfrp.org.