

# Issue BRIEF

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## Promoting Family Engagement, Stability, and Well-Being Through Youth-Enrichment Grants



Larimer County is a community of nearly 350,000 in northern Colorado, home to Rocky Mountain National Park and Colorado State University. The county's workforce center, with locations in Fort Collins and Loveland, serves the nearly 1,500 families that participate in the Larimer County Works Program—the local version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—each year.

The rules for participating in this program often create complex and burdensome expectations for parents. As a result, the direct-service staff spend considerable time and energy trying to message, encourage, warn, and otherwise elicit engagement in program activities and compliance with program rules. In response to this persistent challenge, the Larimer County Works team decided to experiment with an innovative strategy that would promote engagement while also providing a benefit to the family. That is, rather than simply focusing on messaging, the agency offered easy access to a tangible incentive, with a focus on children ages 12 to 18.

### A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

A recent survey of parents conducted by the workforce center highlighted three important trends among families in the Larimer County Works Program:

- Few children are fully engaged in at least one extracurricular or enrichment activity outside of school or the home (such as sports, Scouts, the Boys and Girls Club, or the 4H Club)
- Many children spend summers at home with parents or caregivers, with little structured activity
- Most parents would jump at the opportunity to enroll their children in a no-cost summer program, if one was offered

These insights (see Figure 1) affirmed the workforce center's interest in a creative strategy to engage parents by serving their children. With philanthropic funding from the local Bohemian Foundation, the center offered parents with an active TANF case the chance to request a \$200 enrichment grant for each child in their household. A child could receive a grant regardless of whether he or she "counts" as part of the official household composition for TANF eligibility determination.

To request a grant, parents simply completed a short online form indicating the number of children, each child's name and age, a proposed activity or tangible need for each child, activity start and end dates, and a payment due date. Coaches in the Works Program promoted the grants during their meetings with parents and requested that parents provide receipts (although this was not required). Grants were offered between June 2017 and April 2018.



In sum, this approach was intended to provide a “no strings attached” incentive to encourage parental engagement with the workforce center,

while also delivering a tangible benefit to the children to promote stability and well-being in the home.

### Results from a survey of parents about their children’s engagement in extracurricular activities

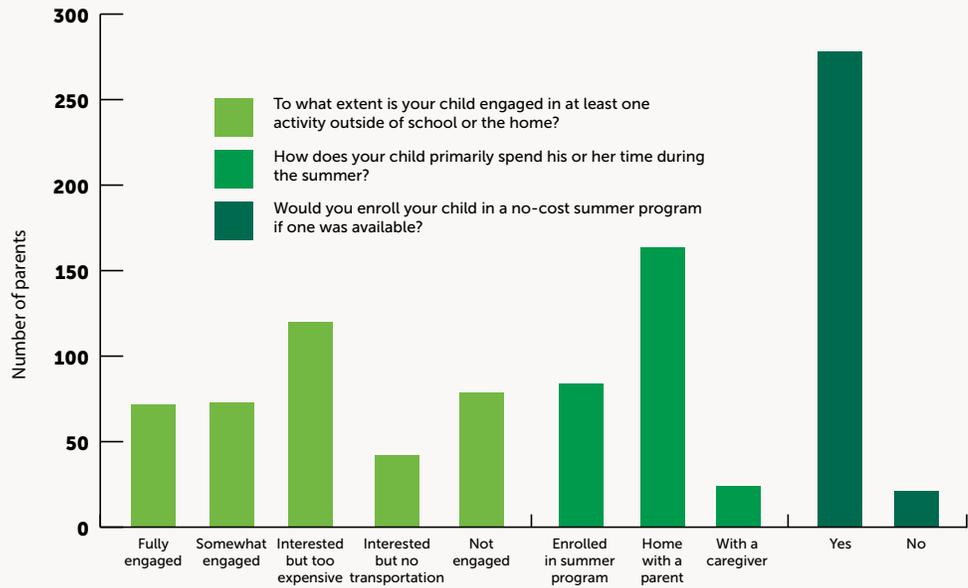


Figure 1

### WHAT WERE FAMILIES’ EXPERIENCES?

To explore the experiences of the 166 Larimer County families who took advantage of the enrichment grants, Mathematica Policy Research conducted 11 interviews with parents. We also analyzed data collected through an online survey voluntarily completed by 59 parents whose child or children received a grant.

The Works Program received nearly 300 requests from parents and ultimately funded 282 distinct grants for youth between June 2017 and April 2018. These grants funded a wide range of activities and resources, including archery lessons, summer camps, ice skates, art kits, school supplies and fees, trips to Denver-area museums, and more.

Parents overwhelmingly reported that the grants provided a positive family experience, enabled the parent to provide an experience for the child that he or she otherwise could not have

afforded, and helped the parent achieve goals for his or her child. Furthermore, most parents said that the program staff who communicated with them about the grant were knowledgeable, were able to answer questions, and seemed interested in the family’s goals. Most parents also said that they were more interested in the workforce center’s programs, had better opinions of the staff, and were more likely to recommend the workforce center to others as a result of their grant experiences. Of the 59 parents who completed a survey, only 6 reported an overall negative experience with the grants. Exhibit 1 summarizes the survey results.

Through more in-depth interviews about their experiences, parents described particular ways in which these grants affected their families. At least three major themes emerged from parents’ stories: empowerment of choice, increased social connectedness, and family strengthening through positive bonding experiences.

**Exhibit 1. Parents’ survey feedback about the grant experience**

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Coach was knowledgeable and able to answer my questions	6	0	0	7	46
Coach was interested in my family and our goals	6	0	0	4	49
Grant provided a positive experience for my family	6	0	0	4	49
Grant allowed me to provide an experience for my child(ren) that I otherwise would not have been able to afford	6	0	0	4	49
Grant helped me achieve the goals I have for my child(ren)	6	0	0	9	44
I am more interested in the workforce center’s programs because of my experience	6	0	3	13	37
My opinion of the Works Program staff improved because of my experience	6	0	4	6	43
I am more likely to recommend the workforce center’s services to others because of my experience	6	0	0	9	44



**1. Empowerment of choice**

A key element of the grant process was the ability of children (depending on age) to choose or provide input on how to use their grant money. One parent, Jamie, said that when her son heard about the grant, “he was like—‘No way, are you serious?’ And he was so excited to pick [new football cleats] out. A lot of times when you’re getting things like this, you don’t get to pick it out. We’re new at being poor. My son has been so great about that—not one complaint. But that he got to pick it out—that made a difference.” Parents repeatedly noted the value of their children being able to make choices, whether it related to trying out a new sport, buying a well-fitted wardrobe, or picking out a pair of ice skates.



**2. Social connectedness**

Parents also emphasized the value of the social connections their children made as a result of the grants. One parent said that her daughter “is a freshman, and she had friends in junior high, but they all went to different high schools. She was withdrawn and didn’t know anyone. Now [that she joined the soccer team], she’s active and telling me what’s going on in her day—she goes to her friends’ houses. She has a blast at the team dinners. It’s been amazing to see her blossom and grow and start to like high school.” Kay, another parent, recounted how her son used his grant to purchase a set of

free weights, which he began using routinely at home. This led her son, who has autism, to join a free-weights club at school and to begin building social connections with his peers in ways he had not before.

Parents recognized the value of enriching activities for their children. One parent said, “I was on the swim team when I was in high school, and my husband was in sports, and we knew the thrill of being on a team, to do the team-building activities. It’s so fun and so rewarding.” Another parent, Vena, had a different experience, but her conclusion was the same: “I wish I could have had opportunities like this when I was a kid—for kids to discover who they are and what they’re good at.”



**3. Family strengthening**

Parents also reported deepened connections within their families. A parent described taking her family to her daughter’s soccer games and talking about the team around the dinner table. Several families shared this experience, with parents and siblings becoming increasingly engaged in and enjoying their family member’s activities. Another parent, Lisa, said that her son used his grant to purchase ice skates; in turn, his older sister planned to use her next paycheck to purchase a pair for herself so that they could skate together. “He’s rubbing off on her!” she added.

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Yet another parent, Sara, said, “It’s been really helpful for [my daughter’s ADHD] diagnosis and for me and her to be able to bond because I was having trouble wanting to do things with her—it was so different for me. We got a bunch of Disney puzzles—we’re working on Beauty and the Beast, and when we’re done, we’re going to glue it together and put it on her wall. This is the first time my family did something like this.”

### **WHAT WERE THE COACHES’ EXPERIENCES?**

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Reflecting on their experiences administering these enrichment grants to families, Larimer County Works coaches stressed the personally rewarding nature of this unique opportunity. TANF case managers, broadly speaking, handle difficult circumstances in their work with families; they are often the “emotional first responders” to the stress and trauma of the families they serve. Coaches consistently reported that this initiative was a highly inspiring, meaningful, and motivating part of their job.

Coaches also acknowledged the pros and cons of the flexible approach to this initiative—namely, that very few “strings” were attached to the grants. Coaches recalled a few instances in which parents received a grant but never followed up about how they used the funds with their child. Despite a few negative anecdotes like these, coaches stressed that the “no strings attached” approach was a key strength of the initiative—the ability to tangibly fulfill a child’s need or wish was both unique and highly valued among staff. In fact, coaches recommended discarding the optional request for parents to submit receipts, noting that the request made

some situations “awkward” or insinuated some degree of mistrust. Coaches believed that it would be more beneficial to provide the “no strings attached” grant rather than risk insinuating mistrust toward the parent through a request for proof of how the funds were spent. Coaches also said that, in most cases, parents returned to their next program appointment excited to share an update about their child.

### **AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION AND INNOVATION**

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How might we more meaningfully engage whole families on the path to economic security? This is a question of continued interest to the Larimer County Workforce Center.

Circumstances and resources did not permit Mathematica to perform a deeper analysis of the impact of this initiative on family outcomes and program engagement. But our qualitative findings suggest that there is value in exploring nontraditional ways to motivate engagement with the program.

If TANF parents have more opportunities to support their children in meaningful enrichment activities, will they be more willing and able to engage with employment services? Could such an incentive strategy go so far as to improve child well-being? The Larimer County Workforce Center and Mathematica invite other human services providers and researchers to consider these questions with us—and to pursue opportunities to conduct more rigorous analyses that might provide answers.

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