

MAINSRING SCHOOLS

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Organizational Manual

# Program Guide to Family- Centered Engagement

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## Where It Starts

*Why does an early childhood education center need programs for parents and caregivers?*

**M**ainspring's three-pillar structure separates the organization from nearly every other early childhood provider: Innovative Education, Physical and Emotional Health, and Family-Centered Engagement. The third pillar relies on a two-generation (2Gen) approach, which means that caregivers as well as enrolled children receive support, encouragement, and opportunities for growth and healthy attachment.

One reason that Mainspring is different than any other organization is because we give ourselves permission to be a community. Yes, we are a non-profit following a specific business model with specific goals. Yes, we are the opportunities and limitations of our funding sources. And yet, our strength is making long-term, lasting connections with families that go beyond traditional programmatic boundaries. Our strength is in relationships. Once we make a relationship, we are part of those lives.

Mainspring's success comes from being fully, radically, and unapologetically committed to the school community. We are a school with hours of operation. We are a staff of educators. However, the kids in our classrooms don't separate themselves from their home life, or from larger social and economic systems, when they walk in our door. They can't! They're under the age of five. Children bring their family experiences with them to school, and we must acknowledge, honor, engage, and support all these relationships in order to grow and excel together, and in order to break the cycle of poverty.

**Our program, then, is the marriage of education with child and family development.**

### What Do We Mean By "Family"



Families at Mainspring are diverse not only economically, but also in age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, politics, belief systems, and relationship. Between 20-25% of the children at Mainspring have experienced the foster care system, so their understanding of family may include foster, adoptive, and biological caregivers. Mainspring children are being raised by single parents, teen parents, gay parents, straight parents, step-parents, grandparents, and family friends. Some families are refugees who have experienced tremendous loss, or who are separated from their loved ones. Our work starts with a basic respect for all families, no matter their shape, size, or dynamic.

Some of our families have navigated separation or divorce, and some are currently experiencing acrimonious court proceedings or are working to settle custody issues. We can not and do not take sides in these complicated matters, but hope to be a safe place for all parties. We will comply with legal documents, including birth certificates, court-ordered custody arrangements, and CPS placement paperwork, with the understanding that the safety and wellbeing of children in our care is paramount.

## Serving the Individual Caregiver



We aim for our enrollment to be 25% full fee families and 75% subsidized families. This is more than any other early childhood center in the region. We do this because of our history as the first early childhood center to be built within a federal housing project, and because we remain deeply connected to the community in which we operate.

Financially challenged caregivers are not in the circumstances that they're in because they are broken. Generational poverty isn't about one person's action or error. It is a result of systems that continue to cause mistrust and skewed social narratives primarily around race, gender, and economics. Mainspring's family services program values strength and survivorship as well as rest and recovery for each individual caregiver. We believe that our world would be better for everyone and function more equitably if more families were empowered to contribute to it. We work to undo the negative effects of these embedded issues by being a place of secure attachment, where for up to five years we can try to undo the big damage.

Other programs believe that implementing common requirements serves families. We don't. No one has to meet any specific requirements to be part of the Mainspring community. We ask that caregivers participate in 8 hours of our family programming per year, which include parent support groups, parent council, and parent suppers organized around topics like personal finance, nutrition, time management, and job interview skills. But every caregiver has bandwidth. We can't require more than they have.

Some of our funding sources for tuition subsidies do involve meeting thresholds for education or employment. However, we do not use them as selection criterion for a child's enrollment. We also do not use them to measure success in our family programs. There is no starting position for the caregiver to achieve and there is no ending position for the caregiver to achieve. We don't push caregivers to be fully employed and off public benefits by the time their child(ren) graduate from our PreK classroom. Sometimes we enroll a child regardless of what the caregiver is doing or decides to do.

We have seen the upkeep that public benefit systems require. An overwhelmed caregiver will fail at some element of compliance and then be punished with the withholding of a benefit they desperately need. When a caregiver doesn't have stability, or has never had stability, or when a caregiver has experienced trauma or generational poverty, they may not have enough personal bandwidth for yet more requirements and more compliance. Our goal is to move forward based on the caregiver's individualized need and capability.

Moreover, a caregiver who avoids engagement is a caregiver who may be in crisis or who may appreciate personal outreach. We try to find an opening to make a connection, hold space, have a conversation, and ask questions. That's how any relationship starts and how trust begins to grow. We recognize that trust takes awareness and open communication. Through our programs, we hope to give a caregiver the space to let their own trauma response slowly relax so that they can increase their bandwidth and invest in their relationship with us.

**This can take years. It can take more than the five years we have with their kids.**

## School as a Therapeutic Opportunity



Some think that “mental healthcare” only means addressing severe diagnoses. But our families have frequently experienced food insecurity, family violence, sexual violence, poverty, job-insecurity, educational insecurity, homelessness, racism, and other kinds of trauma. These issues, singularly and in combination, can contribute to mental health issues. So we can’t *not* acknowledge mental health in the

lives of Mainspring families.

However, we are neither diagnosticians nor clinicians doing direct care. So the Mainspring family services program thinks of our work as more like mental healthcare maintenance, which includes acknowledging personal histories, being alert to the emotional needs of exhausted and overworked caregivers, strategizing daily self-care for mind, body, and spirit, and referring to outside services.

We focus on healthy attachment and unconditional positive regard so that they can be held and heal. Part of that is modeling what forgiveness and secure attachment looks like in the face of conflict. When one thing goes wrong, many families are used to losing benefits, relationship, affection, family, friends. However, our model upends that assumption. In our programs, families can mess up and still maintain their connection to Mainspring staff and programs.

**Family Services use skills to resolve conflict, set the tone for how we treat families, coach teachers on effective and assertive communication, and work to address concerns and create a solution.**

## Recognizing the Part That Racism Plays



We recognize that racism plays a substantial role in generational poverty and in the obstacles faced by many of our families. We are committed to direct, open conversations about race, economics, micro-aggressions, and social and economic power. We talk about skin and appearance in our classrooms and in our parenting programs. We recognize history. We actively encourage families to connect across

racial, economic, gender, sexuality, and social experiences, through parent council, family fun nights, parent supper topics, and roundtable conversations.

We work to own our place at the table, recognizing the power dynamic in any relationship between staff and caregivers. We advocate for racial equity to maintain trust with caregivers and to make sure that systemic power dynamics are acknowledged and revisited. We consistently challenge ourselves in the leadership of the program, challenge our own internal biases, and advocate that the organization does the same.

The way we conduct our classrooms – the way we speak about, involve our high-needs kids creates a framework about how to be empathetic, love through challenges, we undo the bullying effect. There are no “bad kids.”

## TBRI



Trust-Based Relational Intervention originated at TCU, in the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development. The program began as a way to break down the process of creating earned secure attachments within adoptive families, making a complex, often upper-level therapeutic intervention accessible to everyone.

At Mainspring, we use TBRI not only for behavior management, but as the basis for social-emotional learning. Our entire program centers on the importance of attachment, so we seek to facilitate secure attachment relationships with children as well as parents and caregivers.

For us, TBRI is about knowing each child's history, giving children voice, connecting with them in a genuine manner, and raising or lowering expectations as needed, on an individual basis. This makes TBRI applicable to all children, with any history, and with any ability. In fact, when used with typically-developing children, it creates impressive emotional intelligence, empathy, and autonomy.

**A starting place for learning more about TBRI is the book "The Connected Child," which we have copies of in the Family Services office.**

TBRI has three pillars:

- Empowering, which is about making sure that children have all their physical/physiological needs met. This pillar recognizes that small children, and especially children from hard places, are particularly sensitive and can become easily dysregulated due to blood sugar, thirst, sensory needs, and personal stresses. Empowering principles help us set up each child to be their best selves before we even think about influencing behavior.
- Connecting, which teaches the concept of true connection and stresses the importance of doing it on each individual child's terms. Connecting examines a child's history, incorporates mindfulness practices, and reframes the way we think about behaviors as needs. Connecting principles also examine what the caregiver brings with their own attachment history and engages the caregiver in asking how they can be more open/vulnerable/effective.
- Correcting, which provides the framework for actual behavioral change. TBRI gives specific strategies for caregivers' responses as well as the language to use. It also provides a framework for the appropriate mood or style of engagement for any given situation.

The Director of Family Services is involved in the planning and operation of Nurture Groups, a social-emotional learning group based on Jude Cassidy's 4 Skills for Meaningful Relationships, as well as school-wide trainings in the process. A 16-week curriculum is available on the google drive. Please see the General Education organizational manual for more information on how TBRI influences our teaching and learning models.

# What It Looks Like in Practice

*There is no such thing as someone else's child.*

**E**nrolling a student is the first step in Mainspring's family services program. From the time that we meet a family to the first day of a student's attendance, to the last day before graduation and advancement to Kindergarten – for up to five years – the family services program is involved in the process of engagement. This takes the form of paperwork management, case management, referrals for services, and navigating social services.

## Enrollment



The general Mainspring application includes information required by state licensing, some signed releases, a tuition agreement, and feeding/care plans. We also require vital documents like birth certificates, insurance cards, ID's, and shot records. If a family is paying full tuition privately, this is the extent of what they need to complete.

Many times, caregivers are trying to finish school or start a new job, or they don't have a place to live, or they don't have transportation, and it is counterproductive and contrary to our philosophy to demand that they jump through hoops, prove their life stories, or travel the city to gather documentation in order to be part of the Mainspring community. However, our funding sources frequently do require additional materials.

### **Texas Workforce Commission**

Most of our subsidized families receive authorizations for funding through the Commission's Childcare Services, which is a completely external application process that families must go through before they can enroll with us. Authorization is made on a sliding-scale, determined by family income level, with the caveat that caregivers be working or in school a minimum of 25 hours per week, or enrolled in TANF. Funding for kids placed in foster care also comes through Workforce. We help families keep track of authorization dates, renewal requirements, and parent co-pays.

### **AISD**

Mainspring is an in-district charter school with Austin ISD, which means that eligible 3- and 4-year olds also need to complete registration for the school district.



Eligibility is based on income, homelessness, English-as-a-second-language, active military status, and whether the child has *ever* been in the foster care system. AISD registration is required annually.

### **Early Head Start**

We are partnered with the local Head Start grantee organization, Child Inc., to provide EHS services for 32 of our youngest kids (ages 0 – 3). Qualifications for this program are income, homelessness, or *current* placement in foster care. EHS program requirements include regularly updating vaccination records and health checks, monitoring attendance and providing supporting documentation for absences, and participating in home visits.

There are a number of people who don't make it to that first day of attendance because it is difficult to complete the enrollment process while they are in crisis. We do not view the enrollment process as a time for "teaching" families or expecting anything from caregivers. Rather, we do whatever it takes to help them get the enrollment tasks completed. This sets the tone for our relationship, and when done right can begin to solidify the message that "We are in this together, we are working **ALONGSIDE** of you, and we really want you here."

#### **Enrollment is where family services programming begins.**

The orientation meeting is intended to establish a connection and begin to build a rapport with the caregiver. It includes a visit to the child's new classroom and walking the caregiver through our parent handbook so that they have an understanding of what is expected of them as parents, what pick-up and drop-off look like, food and bottle guidelines, and requirements for involvement in programming.

It is critical to note that enrollment is based on a specific ratio of 75% subsidized families and 25% full fee families. The ratio is chosen purposefully. When we invest in connecting families across that socio-economic lines because we believe it is valuable for both sides of that spectrum, but we effectively prioritize the needs and voices of subsidized families. We make sure that every program considers the circumstances and perspectives of subsidized families.

With fewer than 100 spots, openings are rare. Caregivers sign up for our waitlist via the Mainspring website. A child can stay on the waitlist until they have aged out of Mainspring enrollment. When a space opens up, the family who is pulled off the waitlist will likely be of the same funding source as the family who has left. Family Services keeps a complicated spreadsheet that tracks projections of enrollment by funding sources, as well as AISD participation, EHS participation, and HACA residents.

We fill the space in a process that is generally first come-first served, although some priority groups are taken into consideration. Those priority groups include kids in foster care, Meadowbrook/HACA families, siblings of current Mainspring students, and occasionally community connections such as legacy families. We value building and serving our community.

Because the Director of Family Services is responsible for balancing the needs of new and current families, the program staff, the Center Director, and teachers collaborate to determine when children will move up into the next classroom level. These decisions are influenced by funding, the needs of new enrollments, teacher strengths and personalities, and the developmental needs of each child. The final decision falls to the Director and the Center Director.

## Case Management



Family services includes developing and maintaining connection to caregivers in order to address basic needs that come up, including housing, food insecurity, emotional and mental health challenges, as well as working on informal goal-setting and problem-solving.

The Family Services Director makes a point of knowing each family well, and to have an idea of what they're going through, working to achieve, or dreaming about becoming. We provide case management to this effect, checking in regularly, asking about goals and progress, offering program options that may fit their needs, and encouraging every step.

The Family Services Director has an open door policy for families around crisis and mental health. Families know they can stop by the office whenever they need support, and they frequently do. Often our Mainspring team notices a struggling caregiver or behavior changes in a child, in which case the Director may offer an “impromptu” check-in. These often turn into therapy sessions, and can range from problem-solving to simply holding space so that they don't have to manage hard emotions alone.

The amount of support we provide each family in accessing these needs depends on the judgement of our Family Services team and the current bandwidth of each individual family at any given time. We make it a point to let families know they can always come to us with *any* need, tangible or emotional. We will work together to find a solution.

**Hurt and complex trauma occur through relationships, which means they must be healed through them as well.**

Access to these supports typically consists of connecting families to resources outside of Mainspring, including WIC, TANF, SNAP, subsidized housing, financial counseling, and therapeutic support. Three partner organizations in process include People's Community Clinic, JUST INC (for low-interest small business loans), and the ACC/United Way/Foundation

Communities programs for paraprofessionals and HVAC training. We may send a parent an email with a link to a provider's website, or we may accompany a family at meetings with provider in order to make sure they are treated fairly and that information is understood and retained.

Mainspring provides a limited amount of direct support, including bus passes (as part of our Early Head Start program) and occasional grocery gift cards that have been donated for this purpose. We can help with direct cash assistance if all other options have been explored. We act out of recognition that:

- Sometimes people just need a hand.

- Having the security to know that somebody has your back helps a caregiver with peace of mind.
- Peace of mind can lower cortisol levels, turn off fear responses, and provide bandwidth for personal growth.
- For some families, no one has a caregiver's back except Mainspring.

The Director of Family Services provides individual therapy as needed to caregivers. This typically doesn't mean long-term, weekly sessions, although it can if that feels necessary and depending on the Director's bandwidth. More frequently, therapy is offered as parents seek it, and can be for individuals or for parents and children together. TheraPlay techniques are sometimes used here.

Topics that arise include managing anxiety, goal-setting and setbacks, relationships, managing crisis, processing trauma, and generally feeling overwhelmed with balancing the needs of parenting with school, life, work, racism, and poverty.

We have also used play therapy for individual kids as the need arises, including Theraplay, TBRI, or Circle of Security-based practices, because they continue to reinforce the work and language we implement in classrooms and with parents. Sometimes it's useful to use an intentional game or activity to build capacity around a specific area of executive functioning like impulse control, sustained attention, or emotional regulation.

**Humans are wired to connect.**

## Classroom Time & Developmental Concerns



The Director of Family Services spends time in each classroom, getting to know kids and teachers, and creating relationships with both. This is used to inform the work with caregivers and to ensure a trauma-informed program. The Director may be called into classrooms to help regulate or soothe difficult behaviors, facilitate transitions between activities, provide a break for a child, or check in with kids who need a little extra one-to-one attention or affection. The Director may also help get kids to sleep at rest time, when a lot of children from hard places struggle.

The Director of Family Services works with the education team and our teaching staff to monitor the development and behavioral progress of all our children. Should developmental concerns arise, the Director is responsible for communicating concerns to parents and providing an appropriate referral to any services that Mainspring cannot provide internally.

Most of our kids are covered through Medicaid, which requires a referral from their pediatrician for outside therapies. This frequently causes delays, due to lack of follow through from providers and difficulties navigating the intricacies of insurance. We have investigated the possibility of hiring providers to be on staff, but for now we rely on providers like SOAL, who seem to be good at helping parents facilitate the referral process.

We typically make referrals to external providers that do “in-home” speech, occupational, or physical therapies. These providers then see our kids at Mainspring, so we can create a strong treatment team between parents, provider, and the school. We also make referrals to the Early Childhood Intervention provider in Travis County, Any Baby Can (ABC), but they tend to be overbooked and will only work with children who have a 30-40% delay in one or more areas.

We tend to manage pure developmental delays in house. We can support catch-up for children who are *delayed* in reaching milestones. However, we are not well-equipped to serve children with developmental disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders, or mid- to low-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder. We can usually support children with high-functioning autism. A number of our children do have sensory processing concerns, typically related to trauma. We do our best to make inclusive accommodations and also to connect them with an occupational therapist who can work with sensory concerns. Unfortunately, children with sensory issues tend to be labeled as “behavioral” when they leave us, because sensory processing, social delays, and emotional dysregulation are often missed when not connected to language delays. We make an effort to ensure that these children have a diagnosis and plan in place before kindergarten.

## Child Protective Services



Between 20-25% of our kids are in foster care, or have been adopted out of foster care. The Director of Family Services is the primary point of contact for CPS case workers, foster care agencies, Guardians ad Litem, and CASA volunteers. They make regular visits to the school to see the children on their caseloads, and will ask for updates from teachers or the Director.

At any given time, bio families may be navigating their way through open CPS cases. Situations vary, but these cases are frequently opened because of domestic violence or general instability within the family. If our kids move into or out of foster care, our primary goal is to keep them enrolled at Mainspring. We have the ability to be the one, full-time, consistent locus of certainty and familiarity for kids whose lives are being completely turned upside down. We have facilitated many reunifications to bio systems for kids who have to come to us through foster care, and have had the opportunity to then work with bio parents.

**We do what we can to support bio families in making any changes needed to safely close their case.**

In order to successfully support these transitions, our relationship with the child welfare system is important. We have a solid reputation as a trauma-informed center, and tend to be able to support behavior concerns that other centers can't or won't. We also work to bolster and sustain positive relationships with all of the stakeholders in the welfare system, to keep Mainspring's perspective and recommendations valued and considered.

At times, we advocate on behalf of families who are struggling with the child welfare system. We use our best judgement when relating their strengths or shortcomings, keeping in mind the historic inequities faced by low-income families and families of color in these systems. We are cognizant of and may choose to use any privileges we have, including the ability to be listened to more frequently, to ask hard questions of case workers, and to hold decision-makers accountable to the rights of families.

**Be aware of behaviors related to bodies, relationships, and genitals that are developmentally appropriate (or not) in early childhood.**

At other times, we need to honor our designation as a mandated reporter and bring CPS into the lives of one of our families. It is *very* important to be aware of our own biases in these circumstances, and to educate ourselves around mandated reporter guidelines in Texas. Should the need arise to make a report, our policy is to keep families informed of that decision, unless there is an immediate safety concern. We

do this out of respect, and to try and maintain a trusting, working relationship with parents and caregivers, and to keep our kids enrolled in a place where they are safe, attached, and learning.

# Parent Programming

*How can we set up caregivers to be their best selves?*

**E**mpowerment has become a popular buzzword. At Mainspring, empowerment means working alongside each family to find healing, with the intention of supporting goals they set for themselves. This space, where caregivers are connected to a real community, in charge of their own lives, experiencing felt safety, and know they have backup when things get hard, is empowerment. Empowerment does not seek to lead or lecture to families, or add another thing to their to-do list. Rather, it encourages conditions that are conducive to caregivers finding and trusting their own voice, envisioning their own journey, and knowing their own strength to persevere.

Caregivers at Mainspring are asked to commit to attending eight hours of parenting events per year. Most enjoy this programming, and do well above this requirement. The events are intended to provide educational opportunities, as well as opportunities to build friendships, informal networks, social capital, and a wider sense of community.

Parents “sign in” to our attendance application (currently Brightwheel), the way that they do at drop-off each morning, to track parent involvement for each event as well as create reports for programmatic and funder purposes. Attendance tracking at these events is a way to see trends in family involvement. Reports can show caregivers who have never attended, or who have begun to lag in attendance, which is an opportunity to provide extra encouragement, make sure that the content of parent programming is applicable to the whole community, and personally connect or build relationships.

By the end of the workday and school day, everyone is tired, so when we ask caregivers to stay for an event at Mainspring after the end of the school day, we make sure to provide support. For instance:

- Childcare is provided by Mainspring teachers. This staff commitment fortifies the already strong bond between staff and family members
- Teachers are paid \$75 per session (however, only if they provide child care, not solely for attending an event).
- Teachers sign up for sessions in a google drive document labeled “Child Care Schedule for Parenting Events.”
- Sometimes volunteers may attend to provide additional child care or connection, in particular for older siblings of Mainspring students. Please review rules around using volunteers in our programs.

- Every caregiver and child who attends an after-school program at Mainspring is served a nutritious meal that is provided by a volunteer group like National Service League, a local business, or the school Kitchen Manager.
- Sometimes a caregiver will choose to continue to attend after their kid(s) graduate, or are no longer enrolled at Mainspring. This is fantastic, because:

**Once you're one of ours, you're always one of ours.**

## Parent Support Group



The Director of Family Services organizes a 12-week Parent Support Group, three times per year. In Parent Support Group, parents learn further about parent-child attachment and how this attachment impacts a child's relationships, mental health, and overall well-being for the rest of their life. These sessions include peer-to-peer facilitated discussions about topics that families are facing beyond parenting. This, in turn, helps all participants build supportive relationships with each other and learn how to make good decisions about personal situations.

Using the bandwidth theory, Parent Support Group is set up as the follow through to other services. Once a caregiver's basic needs are met – once they are connected to their community, feel like they belong, and are able to look at their own past and do some of their own healing – then healthier parenting becomes available. We don't pretend to teach them to be parents; instead, we create a space in which they could be their best parent. And that's something *all of us* could benefit from. We create all-around healthy adults so that we can be at our best.

**In previous years, there were only spring & fall sessions, but a summer session was added in 201X to keep the momentum and connection strong.**

Parent Support Group operates on a cohort model, which means that, once the group starts, it involves the same people at each meeting until the session is complete. Together, the cohort establishes a baseline of expectations, with a clear beginning and end of session. This serves the need for accountability and also gives the group a needed break.

Parent Support Group uses Circle of Security, an evidence-based attachment center intervention for groups, and arguably the best for a trauma-informed practice. Circle of Security includes videos and handouts to break down attachment into a "map," and allows families to explore how they themselves were parented, in order to discover obstacles to meeting the attachment needs of their children. It focuses on behavior as a message, and recognizes the need to organize children's hard emotions.

Alternately, or as a break from COS, Parent Support Group can include family-led topics, working through issues that caregivers bring to the table. Issues may include domestic violence & relationships, motivation, empowerment, self-esteem, conflict resolution and communication.

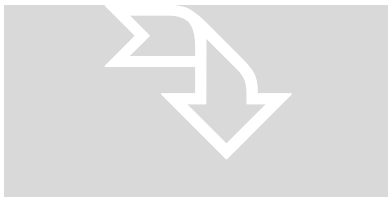
- Groups are open to the whole community, but caregivers who choose to join need to attend the first session and commit to the whole 12 weeks.

- Group cadence, guidelines, and introductions happen on the first day.

We have in the past offered \$100 to each caregiver participant who completes the 12 week session. In previous years, caregivers were offered gift cards. More recently, the incentives have been direct cash, because the caregivers know how to spend their cash better than we do. However we have found that money is not required.

**Caregivers *want* to attend support group.**

## Monthly Parent Suppers



Parent Suppers are a monthly hour-long seminar and dinner that happen on the fourth Wednesday of the month. This is scheduled purposefully for the point in the month when food resources at home may be limited or have run out. All community members (grandparents, extended family members, friends, siblings) are invited to attend.

The Director of Family Services plans and sets the topic for each supper, invites the speaker, and coordinates logistics. For the last few years, the April Supper has been reserved for an Art Gallery exhibit and reception, which is open to the public; the September Supper has been a Back to School theme, so that we can introduce new families to our community; and the October Supper has been reserved as a Fall Festival, which is primarily for the Mainspring community.

**For reference, please see the “Parent Supper” folder on the google drive, which contains the schedule of topics going back to 2014.**

## Parent Council



Parent Council was originally established as a formal “board” with a defined meeting and leadership structure, through which caregivers could effectively advocate for themselves and their families. In previous years there has been an elected Parent Council president, and a small budget for events or initiatives.

The Council focuses on these primary areas:

- Bringing the ideas, concerns, and talents of Mainspring caregivers and families to the attention of leadership.
- Showing hardworking Mainspring teachers appreciation and support.
- Building community and social capital, particularly across socioeconomic lines.
- Establishing relationships between families, including at opportunities like regular Family Fun Nights and the Fall Festival.



It is important to note that Parent Council is intended to be an entity that speaks for the families, and should have substantial leadership by and for subsidized families. However, for a long period of time the families represented on the Council had the time and resources to be doing extra activities, and thus were primarily full fee families. The challenge with Parent Council is in making sure that the community is well-represented, and that involvement is accessible without relying on families to contribute resources.

For instance, families can sign up once a month to show appreciation to teachers. Sometimes this involves bringing food, snacks, or coffee, but we make an effort to encourage home-made cards, videos, or other creative projects. The Council designates a month for “Mainspring Teaching Appreciation” and posts a calendar for families to sign up to bring daily tokens of appreciation.

The most successful Family Fun Nights have been casual gatherings at Ricky Guerrero Park and splash pad, just across the street. Because Family Fun Nights are not officially organized by the school, full meals are not provided. However, families can bring snacks for their own kids or to share without pressure, and the events usually wrap up in time to get home for dinner.

Parent Council has also been motivated around an effort to problem-solve within the community. A few topics that have come up frequently include the perpetual parking issues and late pick-ups. We have done some brainstorming around using the Council as a way to facilitate sharing services between families. For instance, one caregiver might offer to watch another caregiver’s kids on a Saturday morning in exchange for pick-up a couple of days a week. This is the social capital effort, which could also be encouraged via the Mainspring Parents Facebook page.

## **Food Pantry, Free Area, Community Needs**



We operate with the theory that a community takes care of basic needs. So if a caregiver needs a crib, or clothes, or some other basic item, we put out a call to our community. Usually there is a response.

Mainspring also operates a food pantry, housed in the infant building. It includes shelf-stable products like canned and packaged foods, boxed milk, gluten-free and dairy-free products, self-care products, over the counter medicines that may be too expensive for families to afford (and that are not covered by WIC or Medicare), diapers, wipes, baby food, toilet paper, toothbrushes, and cleaning supplies. The food pantry is frequently restocked by the generosity of donors and supporters. We gladly accept products that are high quality and organic, with the theory that families in poverty or in crisis get to have nice things and delicious food. Poverty is not a punishment.

## Advocacy & Leadership

*We believe it is important to support those working to advance research and knowledge in our field.*

**A**s a strong and respected organization, Mainspring can voice awareness of the issues around equity, early childhood, and systemic biases against families living in poverty. We take the time to meet with other organizations looking for guidance, especially grassroots entities and organizations that are in the communities we serve, working alongside families like we are. We also make a point to support students, writers, journalists, and those seeking a deeper understanding of early childhood education, trauma, our Mainspring philosophy, and our equitable/inclusive model.

Mainspring is a member of the United Way's Success by 6 and Family Pathways Initiative, the network of 2Gen providers. We attend meetings, explore partnerships, express ideas and concerns, attend policy forums, speak at events, and continue to search for trainings/conferences relevant to our work.

## Volunteers and Sponsorships

We have developed strong relationships with volunteers, partnership organizations, and donors who are expressly interested in supporting our families. These include:

- The National Charity League (NCL) – provide meals for both adults and children at most of our monthly Parent Suppers.
- School in the Hills – a preschool that primarily services affluent families in West Austin. They take an interest in supporting Mainspring in a variety of ways. They contribute to our program financially, do food drives within their community, and regularly bring us donations of clothing, toys, shoes, and equipment. At Thanksgiving each year they bring bags full of holiday groceries for each of our families.
- Austin Contractors and Engineers Association (ACEA) – Although we generally refrain from holiday celebrations, religious or otherwise, we make an exception for ACEA's "Santa," who visits every year to hand out gifts. ACEA contacts us in November to ask for classroom rosters and wishlists. Gifts are wrapped and labeled for each child. Santa brings one gift to be opened in the classroom and one that families take home.
- Good Shepherd Episcopalian Church – sponsors up to 20 Mainspring families at Christmas. They drop off wishlists in November, and Family Services help facilitate the completion of the lists by families that could use the most support. The admin team schedule pickup of the gifts – it takes several vehicles, because the packages can be quite large. Each package of gifts is labeled for specific families.

The church youth group also likes to sponsor Mainspring, and usually asks for a wishlist from teachers.

## **Connecting with Partner Organizations**

We are constantly surveying outside programs and services that may benefit Mainspring families and that are looking for ways to forge partnerships. We are currently in the process of creating three such partnerships.

- People's Community Clinic – Born from frustration around limited access to high-quality pediatricians who accept Medicaid, this connection was made by a Mainspring board member. The clinic, based in north central Austin, has an incredible, respectful vision for working with families. Both organizations have agreed that our missions align well and there may be a way to partner.
- JUST INC – This organization provides low- and no-interest small business loans on the basis of trust. They require no credit check, no collateral, and no reporting to credit, for the purpose of growing small businesses and entrepreneurship in Austin's low-income communities.
- ACC-United Way-Foundation Communities – This partnership is intent on providing a 12-week paraprofessional training program, in the evenings, a few blocks from Mainspring, with child care provided, and fully funded by the Texas Workforce Commission. Other potential training programs may include one of the trades fields (welding, pipefitting, HVAC, or electrical), however they are longer programs with more requirements and logistics. We remain committed to being transparent about income and opportunity for jobs related to the current training programs. Please review the documents on the google drive.
- Skillpoint Alliance – This comes out of a push to raise awareness around the trades as a career option especially for Mainspring moms. Despite the fact that these roles are not traditionally sought after by women, they are relatively quick training programs, most do NOT require a high school diploma, and they provide a good salary with room to grow. The Mainspring YouTube channel includes videos about our moms who have found careers in the trades.
- Family Independence Initiative – FII does direct investment for families, which means cash deposits with no strings attached, and community building through their online platform. The work is intended to empower families based on the idea that families living in poverty are frequently discouraged from improving or forced to jump through hoops that are based on mistrust. We currently have three cohorts of Mainspring families involved with FII.