

Partner Spotlight > This School District Uses More Than Donuts to Engage Dads



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Donuts for Dads.

Whenever I talk with someone in a school about how they engage dads—and they actually seek to engage dads—I inevitably hear that they have a Donuts for Dads event that they hold once a month or quarter. Check the box...we engage dads!

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against Donuts for Dads, especially when it's used as a gateway in a more robust effort to engage dads in schools, children's education, and to help them become better dads. Unfortunately, too many schools and school districts stop there, perhaps using it only to introduce dads to their PTA or PTO.

At the [Texas Fatherhood Summit](#) this past June, I had the pleasure to meet Albert Brown. Albert had recently been hired by the Arlington Independent School District (AISD) in Texas to guide a district-wide effort to engage dads. As we got to know each other, I was pleased to learn that Albert was involved with the [Fatherhood Coalition of Tarrant County](#), one of the oldest, most successful fatherhood initiatives in the country. (In November, NFI will co-sponsor a regional fatherhood conference with the coalition. Click [here](#) for more information.)

What I was most pleased to learn from Albert, however, was how ambitious an effort AISD has mounted to engage dads and how many of NFI's resources they used and planned to use. **Called “Dads Engaged for Excellence,” I had never heard of such an ambitious effort by any ISD in the country.** So, I followed up after the summit and scheduled a time to interview Albert and his supervisor Eric Phillips, an AISD Family Engagement Specialist, to learn more about their effort, what they had accomplished so far, and plans for the future.

AISD Landscape

Sandwiched between Dallas and Fort Worth, AISD is one of the largest school districts in Texas. It serves more than 61,000 students across 77 campuses, more than half of which (48) are Title 1 schools*. Albert's role—which he stepped into in July 2017—is funded by Title 1. (His official title is Title 1 Parent Facilitator [Dads Outreach].)

I spoke with Albert and Eric on July 31st, just two weeks before the start of this AISD school year. The first thought that popped into my head as I spoke with them was: Wow! The second thought was how well they had planned **Dads Engaged for Excellence** and how clear a direction they had for its future.

Because of the Title 1 funding, Dads Engaged for Excellence started in Title 1 schools. But their effort to engage dads predates Albert's hire. They had a father engagement position that was part time. Unfortunately, the effort wasn't as robust as they wanted it to be, so they brought Albert on board in a new full-time role, as Eric put it, to “ramp it up.”

The first step Albert took to create what would eventually become Dads Engaged for Excellence was to get feedback from the Family Engagement Liaison—an AISD staff position also funded by Title 1—and Principal on Title 1 campuses to identify what they most needed to engage dads. This feedback led to the identification of the four objectives of Dads Engaged for Excellence:

1. An increase in the presence of males on campus.
2. An increase in the number of dads and father figures who volunteer on campus.
3. Recruiting male leaders to facilitate campus activities.
4. Increased attendance of dads and father figures at non-sport events.

To accomplish those objectives, Albert and Eric created the three legs that have, until this school year, served as the base for the effort's stool. They recently attached a fourth leg.

AISD Dad Club

The “AISD Dad Club” is the first leg of the stool. The dads of children enrolled in a school run that school's Dad Club. The first step to establish a club is for Albert to train the school's Family Engagement Liaison on how to engage dads to take on a leadership role on that

campus. The Family Engagement Liaison then recruits dads to run and participate in Dad Club programs and activities.

Dad Challenge

The second leg is the “Dad Challenge.” It serves as AISD’s primary tactic to recruit dads and father figures as volunteers. It also helps the district reach dads and father figures who don’t participate in a Dad Club. When a dad or father figure completes the challenge, he’s recognized as an AISD “Dad Champion.”

To become a champion, a dad or father figure must complete these seven tasks:

1. Fill out an online application to enroll in the challenge.
2. Become an approved volunteer, which triggers a background check by AISD.
3. Each semester, eat lunch on campus with their child.
4. Attend an “Empowerment Workshop.” (These workshops enhance parenting knowledge in efforts to support student achievement.)
5. Complete one hour of service that meets a campus-identified need (e.g. chaperone a field trip or serve as a crosswalk guard).
6. Each semester, meet with their child’s teacher to discuss their child’s academic performance.
7. Each semester, attend one “Academic Night.” (These events involve fun activities that focus on an educational objective, such as reading or math.)

AISD holds an event at the end of each school year to recognize and celebrate the dads and father figures who complete the challenge.

Ambassador Program

The third leg is the “Ambassador Program.” This program connects Dads Engaged for Excellence to the neighborhood that surrounds each school. Schools seek out organizations, such as those in the nonprofit and faith-based sectors, to become an Ambassador. These Ambassadors help identify dads who can become part of Dads Engaged for Excellence and that can bring additional resources to that effort. Albert and Eric shared an example that involved a Baptist church that identified a parishioner who led a school’s Dad Club and that provided some funds for the club’s programs and activities.

Fathering in 15™ and Other NFI Resources

The fourth leg, which AISD attached to the base of the stool during this school year, is a collection of National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) resources led by [Fathering in 15™](#), NFI’s

online program that organizations use to address some of the most perplexing challenges in serving dads.

Albert and Eric emphasized that the overall objective of the Family Engagement program is not simply to get parents involved in on-campus activities. **It's also to help parents become the best parents they can be.** When it comes to dads, they said, it's not enough to get them on campuses as volunteers. **It's imperative to help them become great dads at home.**

That's why they turned to NFI and, specifically, Fathering in 15™. While the Dad Club and other legs of the Dads for Excellence stool are vital and communicate the importance of father involvement in school and children's lives, until now they lacked the in-depth educational component necessary to accomplish Family Engagement's overall objective.

Within the past month, AISD deployed a customized Fathering in 15™ website across all of its 77 campuses. It will provide fathering education to dads engaged and not engaged by the other three legs. Albert and Eric recognized that use of only three legs would limit the reach and impact of Dads Engaged for Excellence. They also recognized that they needed a cost-effective resource that could greatly expand the effort's reach and impact given current funding the district has for Family Engagement. **The pricing structure of Fathering in 15™ provides an extremely cost-effective platform for them to reach dads across the entire AISD.** It also helps each campus expand the reach of its own family engagement effort as the liaison can only do so much to educate dads.

Dads Engaged for Excellence also acquired two other NFI resources that they distributed to dads (and to moms to give to dads) during the open house at each campus: [The Importance of an Involved Father](#) brochure and [10 Ways to be a Better Dad](#) tip card. Albert and Eric said that distributing the brochures at this event was a great way to introduce dads to Dads Engaged for Excellence, specifically, and communicate the importance of the role in their children's lives, generally.

Current Status, Success, and Plans for the Future

Dads Engaged for Excellence has accomplished much in a short time. Its plan for the future is robust.

The Family Engagement program provided the following data to AISD administration about its reach and impact during the 2017-2018 school year:

- Established Dad Club on 33 Title 1 campuses
- 1,636 dads attended an on-campus event
- Established the Ambassador Program on 3 Title 1 campuses

Plans for this year includes the following goals:

- Expand Dad Club to all 48 Title 1 campuses

- Have 3,200 dads attend an on-campus event
- Recruit 1,000 male volunteers
- Establish the Ambassador Program on another 7 Title 1 campuses

Challenges

Dads for Excellence is a fantastic example of what an entire school district can accomplish in a short time to engage dads, but it certainly has come with challenges. I asked Albert and Eric to share their biggest challenges.

Our biggest challenge has been re-educating campus-level staff—and influencing the culture on campuses—about the importance of father engagement and the dad’s role in education and child well-being. Most dads want to be engaged, but the messaging isn’t always clear to get fathers engaged. Traditionally, the focus of staff is primarily on moms—even when communicating to ‘parents’. It can be uncomfortable moving beyond what has always been done and for staff to overcome their own barriers to engage dads. But once they’re educated and start to proactively engage dads, dads overwhelmingly respond to invitation. The culture has been it’s “mom’s job” to keep students engaged academically. We’re attempting to create a culture where dads feel comfortable coming onto campuses to engage their student and support faculty. We train staff on best practices for engaging men in student achievement. Moms and dads both want to engage in campus life but respond differently to communication.”

I also asked them for the three pieces of advice they’d give to someone from another school district who wants to start an effort to engage dads. They said to be clear about the following three things:

- 1) The “Why”: Create a clear mission and vision for the effort. You must engage district administration and staff and faculty across the school district to buy into that mission and vision. (AISD Superintendent [Dr. Marcelo Cavazos](#) fully supports Dads Engaged for Excellence and recently called for its expansion beyond Title 1 schools.)
- 2) The “What”: Identify and leverage the resources currently available to implement the effort on each campus.
- 3) The “How”: Create an effective strategy to make it happen. Identify what you can do across campuses and allow for some individual variation. Each campus environment is likely to be somewhat different, so each campus might have to engage dads a little differently, but you can still identify ways to engage dads on all campuses.

If I hadn’t limited them to three pieces of advice, I’m confident they would have also said to use technology effectively. (After all, they just acquire Fathering in 15™!)

Dads Engaged for Excellence uses “Remind,” a free mass-message texting app created for schools and school districts. They use [Remind](#) to communicate with dads. At the time of my

talk with Albert and Eric, more than 1,300 dads had signed up to receive messages about upcoming parent and dad-specific events at school and in their community. AISD also has a Facebook page for parents, and they just launched one for dads connected to Dads Engaged for Excellence. A team of 12 staff in AISD’s Parent and Community Engagement department provide input into what posts appear on the page for dads. They use that page to get more dads to sign up for Remind.

I can’t wait to hear about the continued success of Dads Engaged for Excellence. If you work in a school district, I encourage you to implement a similar effort to engage dads. And if you work in an organization that could partner with a school district to implement such an effort, I encourage you to not waste time and schedule a meeting with the department responsible for family engagement to get one rolling.

How does your local school district engage parents, generally?

Does your local school district use anything—other than donuts—to engage dads, specifically?

*Title 1 is a program of the federal government that seeks to raise the academic performance of students in schools that have at least a 40 percent enrollment of students from low-income families.