



IMPACT AREA:
EDUCATION
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HOMework DINER

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

Homework Diner is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office leverages resources and mobilizes volunteers to increase family engagement by bringing parents and caregivers into their children's elementary schools to help with tutoring and enrichment activities, thereby helping to address low student achievement.

HOMEWORK DINER

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HOMEWORK DINER

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Homework Diner tests the adage, "If you feed them, they will come." By leveraging the offer of a healthy meal to families living in communities where food insecurity is prevalent and who may not have time to prepare a family meal, Homework Diner brings parents and caregivers into their children's elementary schools and connects them with their children's teachers and the larger school community. One evening a week, the students receive tutoring and homework help and their parents and caregivers receive the support they need to help the children succeed in school. After the tutoring sessions conclude, the families enjoy a nutritious meal prepared by volunteers.





BACKGROUND

Family engagement is a critical ingredient for a child's school success, regardless of the age of the child or the family's ethnicity, income, or education level. Research suggests that family engagement promotes a range of benefits for students including improved school readiness, higher school attendance, better social skills, advanced language and math skills, higher grades and test scores, and an increased likelihood that students will graduate from high school and continue on to higher education.¹ However, many families face difficulties or barriers that prevent them from becoming engaged in their child's education, while teachers and administrators report that getting families involved can be difficult.

By bringing parents and caregivers into their children's elementary school at least one evening a week, and sharing a community meal, Homework Diner fosters easier and more productive communication between home and school; gives parents the support they need to help their kids with schoolwork; encourages family bonding; and improves students' academic achievement, in-school behavior, and confidence in their own success.

¹ Family Engagement as a Systemic, Sustained, and Integrated Strategy to Promote Student Achievement (Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2010)





REQUIRED ELEMENTS

- 1** The mayor's office convenes an advisory group of school partners, community organizations, and city agency leads involved in K-12 education, food security and nutrition, food service, family social services, and volunteer management to:
 - Develop the Homework Diner initiative;
 - Establish responsibility for the recruitment, training, and management of all volunteers;
 - Guarantee support from relevant city departments; and
 - Engage partners to help design and gather impact metrics.
- 2** A minimum of one teacher per academic grade and members of the school staff must be present during Homework Diner to ensure that tutoring and homework help align with the curriculum and to meet, interact, and provide support to parents/caregivers and volunteer tutors.
- 3** Volunteers, including retired teachers, parents, community members, social service providers, and high school and college students, support the teachers and school staff in providing tutoring and other enrichment activities.
- 4** Volunteers prepare and serve nutritious meals to the families.
- 5** Each Homework Diner site must have an on-site coordinator who recruits and supports volunteers, leverages community resources, and makes sure that Homework Diner activities are aligned with the core instructional day.
- 6** The mayor's office secures donations and grant funding to enhance the implementation of Homework Diner.





REQUIRED METRICS INCLUDE:

- Increase in student homework completion
- Improvement in student academic performance
 - Increase in reading/writing test scores
 - Increase in math test scores
- Improvement in student academic behavior
 - Improvement in sustained classroom attention
 - Confidence in participation in the classroom
- Number of parents/caregivers involved in the initiative as volunteers (food prep, set up, and clean up) over the course of the program year/period
- Number of parents/caregivers who regularly attend Homework Dinners during the program year/period
- Improvement in parental/caregiver relationship with child's school

OPTIONAL METRICS MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Increase in participating student attendance at school
- Increase in parental/caregiver involvement with child's school
 - Number of parents/caregivers who serve on school committees after participation in Homework Diner
 - Number of parents/caregiver who volunteer at their child's school after participation in Homework Diner





EXECUTING THE PLAN

DEVELOPING THE INITIATIVE

Conduct an initial planning meeting with all initiative partners. Most likely, partners will include the local school superintendent, local food banks, culinary schools or volunteers with experience in food service and nutrition, social service providers, and organizations with experience in volunteer recruitment and management. Relevant partnerships with city agencies should be discussed early in the process. The planning meeting is an opportunity to:

- Introduce partners and clearly define roles and expectations.
- Determine the initiative's scope and scale, including how often the Homework Diner will operate (recommend at least once a week during the school year) and how many families will be served.
- Identify the elementary school(s) to pilot the initiative and articulate what will be asked of those schools, including of their teachers and school staff. Ensure that sufficient space (in the school's cafeteria or gymnasium, for example) will be available for each Homework Diner session.
- Discuss the city services and supports that will be made available to the schools, the volunteers, and participating students and families.
- Based on the above, determine the number and type of volunteers needed for this initiative and identify potential sources of volunteers. Homework Diner can be positioned as a volunteer opportunity for both individuals and groups (e.g., corporate groups, veterans groups, neighborhood associations, faith-based groups, and culinary schools).
- Identify the training that volunteers will receive as part of the initiative (tutoring, homework assistance, etc.), and the person/group responsible for delivering the training.





Identify a dedicated on-site coordinator who recruits volunteers, provides training and technical assistance to the volunteers, leverages community resources, and makes sure that Homework Diner activities are aligned with the core instructional day. The coordinator can be a volunteer, AmeriCorps member, member of the school staff (such as a parent/family coordinator), or community schools coordinator who cultivates partnerships between the school and community stakeholders.

Develop a pipeline for the food supplies. This could involve a partnership with a local food bank, a corporate partnership, or a local nonprofit that redistributes food. Ensure that sufficient food supplies will be available for each planned Homework Diner session. Additionally, determine who will prepare the meals, such as volunteers, students from a local culinary school, a local restaurant, etc.

Develop a budget to cover materials and supplies. (See the Resource section for a sample budget.)

Create a project timeline, taking into consideration the following:

- School calendars
- PTA meetings
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Other potential after-school space usage conflicts
- Religious holidays and school breaks
- Develop a communications plan to mobilize, connect and update the volunteers.





ENGAGING TEACHERS AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS

Engaging teachers in the programming is a critical component of this blueprint; a minimum of one teacher per academic grade should be present at each Homework Diner session. However, the on-site coordinator should first consult the school's principal on any union issues that should be addressed with regard to the teachers' involvement in Homework Diner. The school may consider providing stipends to teachers for their time, or the principal may organize a rotating schedule for teachers' participation in Homework Diner. Additionally, the principal may elect to offer teachers comp time for participating in Homework Diner (e.g. "Volunteer at Homework Diner and leave 15 minutes after the students the following Friday!").

Teachers are the experts in the academic strategies and standards that the students are trying to master; they are the most effective resource for guiding the work of volunteers who provide the tutoring, homework help, and other academic supports to the students. During Homework Diner, teachers lead students and parents/caregivers through particular skills, such as division or reading comprehension. Teacher involvement may also include providing the "homework to-do list" and visuals and/or manipulatives to use during the session. Teachers can loan wall charts, posters, and other materials to be copied by volunteers and kept for weekly Homework Dinners, and parents/caregivers and volunteers can assist in providing manipulatives for math (bottle caps/straws, etc.). Particularly in grades K-3, teachers may send out weekly homework assignments on Monday, with all work due on Thursday or Friday. If Homework Diner tutors focus on the weekly homework assignments, then the curriculum is set and the activities will be certain to benefit each student.

In addition to the teachers, other volunteers should be recruited to help, keeping in mind the wide-range of activities needed for Homework Diner, including:

- Setting up school facilities prior to start of each session
- Preparing meals
- Serving meals
- Providing homework assistance to students
- Serving as a "reading buddy" to students
- Providing childcare and enrichment activities for siblings too young to attend school (e.g., songs, rhymes, reading, sorting)
- Providing enrichment activities and support services for parents, caregivers, and entire families
- Cleaning school facilities after each session concludes





SECURING RESOURCES FOR HOMEWORK DINER

To successfully execute Homework Diner, the on-site coordinator should make a plan to secure all materials in coordination with identified partners as part of the initial planning meeting. As suggested below, many of the resources can be secured in-kind or at a discounted rate. Consider costs for the following:

- Food for meal preparation. Some food may be donated by the local food bank or a local grocery store, or purchased at a substantial discount through a local food service provider. Private donations might also help cover the food costs.
- Basic equipment such as a refrigerator, plates, tables, chairs, tablecloths, kitchenware, cutlery, and storage units. Using the school's cafeteria may reduce many of these equipment costs.
- Volunteer background screening fees.
- Food permit.
- Funding for an on-site coordinator's time (unless this person is a volunteer).
- Portion of the cafeteria manager's time.
- Homework materials.

OPTIONAL RESOURCES:

- Small stipends for the volunteer educators.

RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

There are numerous ways to recognize volunteer participants who contribute to making Homework Diner a success. The on-site coordinator should be welcoming and energized during training and throughout the course of the programming. Following the conclusion of volunteers' participation in programming, the on-site coordinator can have students write and send thank you notes to volunteers. Once the metrics have been fully collected, the on-site coordinator should share the impact with the volunteers. Additional quarterly or semi-annual progress reports are also encouraged and will help volunteers understand how their efforts contributed to the initiative's overall and long-term success on academic performance and family engagement. Other sources of volunteer recognition may include the local school board and news media or a joint thank-you letter from the mayor and school superintendent.





OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

A mayor's office may consider taking the following additional steps to expand and deepen the impact of the initiative:

- Provide GED and ESL services for parents/caregivers;
- Actively create a “family dinner experience” at each Homework Diner session where each family has its own table – complete with tablecloth and reusable dishware and cutlery – to share a meal together and engage in conversation and reflection on the evening’s activities;
- Engage parents and families in the programming (e.g., help with meal prep, set-up, and cleaning);
- Host quarterly dinners when report cards are distributed, enabling teachers and volunteers to review student performance and progress with parents/caregivers; and
- Offer a menu of support services to parents/caregivers including job skills, clothing bank, food bank, health screenings and Q&A sessions, local youth sports opportunities, and time for families to discuss challenges their children might be having, such as with behavior, attitude, and peer pressure with staff and volunteers.

A community school “is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources... Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving.”² Schools implementing a community schools strategy may be best suited to implement Homework Diner because they:

- Have a dedicated community schools coordinator that can align resources on site;
- Generally have established parental involvement initiatives on campus; and
- Typically have other wraparound support services to support children and families.

² Coalition for Community Schools, “What is a Community School?”
http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx





Alternatively, instead of a school setting, the mayor's office may pursue implementing Homework Diner in collaboration with a local nonprofit that has afterschool programming. Ideally, the nonprofit partner would play the on-site coordinator role and provide programming facilities and participants. When identifying a nonprofit partner, the mayor's office should consider:

- Population the nonprofit serves;
- Volunteer management capacity;
- Access to facilities for programming, including a kitchen or space for food prep;
- Availability of resources, both cash and in-kind, to support programming; and
- Hours of operation.

In this scenario, the school system can collaborate with the mayor's office and the nonprofit to ensure that program activities align with core academic curriculum by sharing weekly homework assignments and instructional materials. Additionally, the school system will relay data on Homework Diner students' performance with regards to the program's impact metrics. However, this option will eliminate one of Homework Diner's key objectives, parental engagement in the school life. While metrics like academic performance and school attendance can still be measured, the mayor's office and nonprofit will need to revise other metrics to align with the program model.





MEASURING IMPACT

Tracking and reporting outcomes to key stakeholders is critical to Homework Diner's success. In addition, formative data collection creates a feedback loop necessary to adjust programming to improve outcomes as necessary. The following outcome metrics must be collected:

- Increase in student homework completion
- Improvement in student academic performance
 - Increase in reading/writing test scores
 - Increase in math test scores
- Improvement in student academic behavior
 - Improvement in sustained classroom attention
 - Confidence in participation in the classroom
- Number of parents/caregivers involved in the initiative as volunteers (food prep, set up, and clean up) over the course of the program year/period
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- Improvement in parental/caregiver relationship with child's school

Optional metrics might include:

- Increase in participating student attendance at school
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The following tools can be utilized to assess the initiative's impact:

- Participant sign-in sheets
- Parent/caregiver pre- and post-program surveys
- Interviews with parents/caregivers
- Focus groups
- Teacher surveys
- Student pre- and post-program surveys
- Student report cards
- Student school attendance and tardiness records





THE PLAN IN ACTION

 In **Albuquerque, New Mexico**, the Manzano Mesa Elementary School, in collaboration with ABC (Albuquerque/Bernalillo County) Community School Partnership, launched Homework Diner in the spring of 2012 as a six-week pilot program. Today, students, accompanied by their parents/caregivers, gather at Manzano Mesa Elementary School one evening a week (immediately following the conclusion of afterschool programming) for 20 weeks during the school year to receive tutoring and homework assistance. Upon completion of the homework session, volunteers serve a meal to participants, prepared by culinary students from Central New Mexico Community College. The food is donated to the school through a partnership with the Roadrunner Food Bank, which minimizes program costs.

Albuquerque Mayor Richard J. Berry has played an active role in Homework Diner's implementation. In particular, the Mayor's Office assists with partner engagement, procurement of permits and other city services/resources, volunteer recruitment, advocacy, and resource development.

A 2014 survey of Manzano Mesa Elementary School teachers and Homework Diner parents/caregivers revealed key successes of the initiative:

- 100% of teachers reported an increase in participating students' homework completion.
- 95% of teachers reported an increase in participating students' academic performance in the classroom.
- 90% of teachers reported an increase in participating students' academic performance on standardized tests.
- 90% of teachers reported an increase in participating parents' involvement in school activities.
- 90% of teachers reported a decrease in of participating students' absences from school.
- 90% of teachers reported a decrease in participating students' school tardiness.
- 91% of surveyed parents/caregivers reported that Homework Diner made homework a more positive family experience.
- 91% of surveyed parents/caregivers felt more comfortable asking teachers for help.





One parent/caregiver reports: “I believe that Homework Diner is a great program both for me as a parent and my children. Some of the new ways of doing some of the lessons can be very confusing, and being able to come and sit with the teachers and my kids to do the homework is a big help. I find that my children are getting most of their work done in one day, as well as having fun doing it.”

The success of Homework Diner has resulted in the City of Albuquerque, through the Mayor’s Office, appropriating \$100,000 in the city’s FY15 budget to fund the initiative’s implementation in eight additional elementary schools.





RESOURCES

HOMEWORK DINER BUDGET

The following represents an estimated cost-structure for Homework Diner site implementation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Estimated total expenditures per year are \$11,000. Costs will vary by state and city.

- Full-time Community Schools Coordinator: \$3,300 (prorated salary estimated at 5 hours weekly)
- Cafeteria Manager: \$3,200 annually (prorated salary estimated at 4 hours weekly). Supervises use of school cafeteria for food prep and service.
- 3 Teachers and Instructional Coach: \$2,000 annually (\$20/hour plus taxes)
- Food: \$2,600 annually (most food is donated)
- Food Permit: \$50 annually
- Napkins and cleaning supplies: \$200 (\$10/week)
- Startup equipment (e.g., refrigerator, plates, tablecloths, tables and chairs, kitchenware, cutlery, storage units)

ALBUQUERQUE'S HOMEWORK DINER

To learn more about Albuquerque's Homework Diner programming, please refer to the following resources:

- Manzano Mesa Elementary School: <http://manzanomesa.aps.edu/homeworkdiner>
- Central New Mexico Community College: <https://www.cnm.edu/news/homework-diner-brings-together-nutritious-food-and-homework-help>
- NBC News, "Homework Diner Serves up Education with a Side of Food," June 21, 2014: <http://www.nbcnews.com/watch/nightly-news/homework-diner-serves-up-education-with-a-side-of-food-286149187704>





BACKGROUND ON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

For additional information on the community schools model, please refer to the following websites:

- Coalition for Community Schools: <http://www.communityschools.org/>
- National Center for Community Schools: <http://nationalcenterforcommunityschools.childrensaidsociety.org/>

RESEARCH ON IMPACT OF FAMILY DINNERS

Jarrett, Robin L., Ozge Sensoy Bahar, and Renique T. Kersh. ““When We Do Sit Down Together” Family Meal Times in Low-Income African American Families with Preschoolers.” *Journal of Family Issues* (2014).

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. “The Importance of Family Dinners VIII.” September 2012; <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012>





SPECIAL THANKS

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Cities of Service is a national nonprofit that supports mayors to design and implement high-impact service strategies that can be replicated in cities worldwide. We provide technical assistance, programmatic support, planning resources, and funding opportunities. Founded by Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of approximately 200 cities whose mayors are committed to engaging citizen volunteers to solve local pressing challenges, from increasing high school graduation rates to improving energy efficiency in buildings. We help coalition cities share solutions, best practices, and lessons learned, as well as spread awareness about their great work.

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