

TWIGS Family Engagement Program

Animas High School

Durango, CO



COLORADO
Department of Education

As a small charter school with about 200 students, Animas High School (AHS) relies upon families to ensure their success. Animas High School uses project-based learning to prepare students for college, career, and life. Parents and caregivers are actively involved in selecting AHS for their students from many options in the community. Families participate in school events regularly, including attending exhibitions of learning, chaperoning field trips and outdoor activities, helping serve lunch, and sharing expertise in classrooms. In the 22/23 school year, Animas High School designed a new family engagement program, TWIGS. TWIGS stands for Together We Inspire Great Students, and is metaphorically connected to the AHS school mascot, the Osprey. TWIGS' mission is to create meaningful connections among AHS families to collectively provide social, educational, and financial support for the school. Just as an intricately woven nest of twigs creates a safe and secure environment for the bird, AHS TWIGS supports and nurtures the school's students and staff.

TWIGS grew organically from a parent committee that participated in a recent AHS capital campaign that resulted in the construction of a brand new sustainably designed building on the Fort Lewis College campus. AHS families donated over \$159,000 to the campaign and those who served on the committee were interested in continuing to serve in a meaningful way. They met with the head of school and dean of community outreach to brainstorm a new vision for family engagement; one that would be inclusive, fun, and creative. A steering committee of TWIGS members met monthly to develop and implement plans. They named themselves the TWIGS Buds, playing off the metaphor further. The dean of community outreach served as the staff liaison for the group and coordinated their efforts.



TWIGS hosted a full calendar of initiatives and activities in the 22/23 school year, including welcome calls to new families; monthly coffees and happy hours; an AHS history hike with school founders; a nature photography hike; conversations about the shared book read, *Stolen Focus*; and events with the school counselor addressing teen mental health. They also initiated a gratitude campaign and teacher appreciation events to encourage families to acknowledge the extraordinary educators serving in the school. Having these events be driven by parents rather than staff modeled active engagement and encouraged others to get involved. This increased investment in the school among families, which opened communication pathways and strengthened the overall AHS school community.

The TWIGS Buds debriefed at the end of the year and reflected upon successes and areas for improvement. While TWIGS events were intentionally planned to take place at a variety of times and locations and to appeal to a variety of interests, it was still challenging for working families to carve out time to attend.

Those who wish to replicate this practice should know that parents and caregivers are your best resource when it comes to designing programs to engage families! Create a steering committee of parents who you know want to get more involved and pull upon the talents of your parent body. Ask families about their interests and skills to help you discover new ways you can connect parents to the classroom, inviting them in as experts. It also helps to forge authentic relationships that open communication between home and school, ultimately in support of the student.

Standard 5 — Sharing Power
Essential Element 2 — Build Trusting Relationships