



CASE FOR KIDS 2026 CONFERENCE: POWERED BY P.L.A.Y.



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INTRODUCTION

The Powered by P.L.A.Y.: Houston Out-of-School Time Conference, hosted by CASE for Kids of Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), brought together out-of-school time professionals, educators, community leaders, researchers, and youth development practitioners from across Texas. Held on August 3–4, 2026, the conference focused on the importance of play in supporting creativity, learning, relationships, and positive youth development. Through keynote presentations, panel discussions, workshops, and collaborative activities, participants explored the challenges facing young people and discussed strategies for creating supportive environments that promote their growth and well-being.

In addition to providing professional learning opportunities, the conference was intentionally designed to foster meaningful dialogue, strengthen relationships, and encourage collective problem-solving across the out-of-school time (OST) ecosystem. Against the backdrop of a challenging funding year that significantly affected youth-serving organizations, facilitated dialogues and panel discussions provided a space for practitioners, organizational leaders, and community partners to reflect on shared challenges, exchange perspectives, identify emerging needs, and explore opportunities for collaboration.

This white paper examines six key takeaways, insights, and recommendations that emerged from these dialogues. Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships, social-emotional learning, youth voice, family engagement, and community partnerships in supporting young people. These discussions also highlighted the role of out-of-school time programs in providing opportunities for youth to develop important life skills, build positive relationships, and engage in activities that support their personal and social development.

Many of the key takeaways discussed during the conference align with existing research on positive youth development and out-of-school time programming. Research has emphasized the importance of supportive relationships, safe and engaging environments, mentorship, and opportunities for meaningful participation in promoting positive outcomes among children and adolescents. Similarly, conference participants shared their experiences and perspectives on how these practices can be incorporated into youth-serving programs to address the needs of young people. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the connection between existing research and the experiences of professionals working directly with youth.

The purpose of this white paper is to examine the relationship between the themes identified during these dialogues and the scholarly literature supporting them. By bringing together conference discussions and relevant research, this paper highlights the importance of play, relationships, prevention, and community involvement in promoting positive youth development. The findings also provide insights and recommendations for educators, out-of-school time professionals, program leaders, and community stakeholders seeking to strengthen youth-serving programs and create meaningful opportunities for young people to thrive.

Takeaway 1: Play Builds Skills for life

The concept of “play” is crucial for children’s social and emotional development, with research finding that play can be a massive influence on their communication and social knowledge, especially since their social interactions center on play, “establish[ing] contact and relationships with other children” (Garaigordobil et al., 2022, p. 2). For many children, play is more than an activity—it is how they connect with their peers and learn socialization norms aimed at their stage of development, as well as key lessons that are useful for their future lives. **One participant** corroborated this, stating that to them a playground is a scenario in which “children are having to learn and survive and navigate” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These survival skills are socialization skills that are being taught and demonstrated via play, highlighting the effectiveness of playful, peer socialization at young ages. Moreover, communication is a massive factor of play, with **one participant** tying in play skills outside of peer socialization, “I’d just learned to communicate really well... You’re always having discussions, whether it’s over family dinner parties or whatever it may be” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These types of communication demonstrate how play can influence the discussion, from talking about childhood experiences and moments to even recounting their day.

Play also demonstrates adaptability, a massive tenet of creativity and curiosity, and an important skill to have for life. In play, creativity is demonstrated in creative thinking, where children “put things together in new ways, form new associations and connections, and come to new understandings” (Ernst and Burcak, 2019, p. 6). Skills like creativity, creative thinking, and curiosity are banded together in adaptability, teaching children how to adapt to situations and change rules or other factors to accommodate a given environment, peer group, or other relevant factors. Moreover, these skills are crucial for life, teaching them how to adapt to change and adjust, with **one participant** noting how these “durable skills” like creativity and curiosity are critical skills for adults entering the workforce. Combining these skills can help develop effective communication and responses to situational change, preparing them for life after childhood. Altogether, play is crucial for a child’s social and emotional development, teaching them the relevant skills in peer socialization (e.g., communication) and adaptability (e.g., creative thinking, curiosity).

Lastly, play can also be helpful in developing youth, especially regarding mental health. Participants noted how play can be a productive tool in managing stress, expressing emotions, and building meaningful relationships, with **Dominika Stanivich, Elite Brain Coach and Dual Elite Neuro-encoding Specialist**, stating how through play, it “allows us to self-regulate” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her remarks highlight how play can allow children to develop effective coping skills, healthily exploring emotions, and building confidence. This conversation, overall, highlights how the skills learned in play can be applied in other contexts, especially relationships, which will be covered in the next section.

TAKEAWAY 2: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

A key part of children's development is social and emotional learning (SEL), strengthened by having positive relationships that are influential to their long-term development. In after-school programs, relationships are significant, especially in organized activities among students and staff members. Enrollment in after-school programs can foster relationship-building among staff, students, and their peers, resulting in "healthy social/emotional outcomes" (Fischer et al., 2022, p. 2). For a child's SEL, exposure to peer socialization within grouped activities can teach teamwork and collaborative skills that will be beneficial later as adults. Moreover, other findings entail having better socialization skills as well as higher academic performance, better study habits, less aggressiveness towards peers, and a better sense of collaboration (Vandell et al., 2020). These findings demonstrate the benefits of after-school programs by providing additional opportunities for students to develop social and academic skills outside of a traditional classroom setting. For some students, these programs can be an essential "gap-filler" for their academics, with some after-school programs focusing on subject areas (e.g., English and Math), allowing students to learn more hands-on subject knowledge (Shernoff, 2010). Alongside academic support, these programs are aimed at addressing educational disparities by providing students with educational opportunities to succeed via additional resources and structured learning environments. In low-income areas, these types of after-school programs can be beneficial for students, potentially reducing problematic behaviors, with some aimed at "breaking the cycle of poverty" by providing learning programs and services that will provide low-income students with the same learning opportunities as their peers (Vandell et al., 2020). Addressing these educational disparities entails collaborative efforts between schools, educators, and community organizations to ensure that these communities best serve students' needs, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

When it comes to these types of relationships, it's not just student effort, it also entails adult responsibilities and collaboration to launch after-school programs. As stated by **Amanda Fisher, Executive Director of American Festival for the Arts**, "At the end of the day, it's about relationships. There's someone on the other side of the relationship, and understanding their goals helps create partnerships that work for everyone involved" (Amanda Fisher, Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her quote highlights that creating these types of "partnerships" entails a massive communicative and collaborative effort between schools, school districts, and community organizations, achieving their mission's goals while keeping student success and academic achievement as their main focus. Moreover, when collaborating with school districts, it is important to consider the purpose and importance of the program and its pertinence, as stated by **Dr. Edna Johnson, Director of Procurement Services at Harris County Department of Education**, "What's more important is to understand the story of the school district, the purpose of the program, or in our case, why we exist. Aligning the services that you offer to the mission and the vision of the entity helps us provide for the needs of the students" (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Dr. Johnson's quote highlights the importance of having successful partnerships that align with a school or organization's mission, as well as anticipated measures (e.g.,

student needs, institutional priorities, district goals) that focus on promoting student success. Moreover, for these programs to be successful, community outreach and input are crucial, especially while developing and planning after-school programs and activities. Hurd and Billingsley (2023) argue that creating these programs should entail parental, educator, and community perspectives using an iterative planning approach, allowing individuals to see how these programs are planned, designed, and implemented for students, with feedback for further improvements. This type of collaborative approach builds off the key tenet of relationship-building, crucial for students' young minds, as well as program development and community involvement; all together, these aspects demonstrate how after-school programs can be beneficial for students' learning and, with further input and shared goals, can benefit schools, school districts, and communities.

TAKEAWAY 3: YOUTH NEED BELONGING AND PURPOSE

For some students, after-school programs can serve as a place of belonging and purpose, especially with their activities and bonding moments, with some finding ways to connect students to their future, with panelist, **Walter J Hull II, Co-National Program Director for the U.S. Dream Academy**, mentioning the concept of future letters: “the letters... [is] about them writing letters to us and us writing letters to them after ten years together” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These types of meaningful moments connect students to their goals, especially in a safe environment where they are safe to be themselves and discover their future purposes. Moreover, some of these programs can lead to future change, with some after-school programs being centered on young students “gain[ing] confidence in themselves, think[ing] critically about their community, and work[ing] with adults to create positive community change” (Zimmerman et al., 2018, p.1). After-school programs like these can make a significant impact on the student community, especially with initiatives that promote self-growth, self-learning, and confidence building. Moreover, after-school programs can also contribute to improvements in student attitudes, as well as less aggressive and antisocial behaviors, demonstrating their benefits for the student population and even the community (Zimmerman et al., 2018). The benefits and positive outcomes of after-school programs can help in students' academics, socialization, and discovering themselves, as well as finding ways to contribute to their communities.

However, for these benefits to occur, parents need to bridge the gap between student involvement and participation by learning about these programs, with **Connie Kwan-Wong, publisher of CKW LUXE Magazine**, arguing that some parents and families “do not really understand the long-term value of the programs... they are creating and changing children's lives” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her point highlights how some families are unaware in learning about these types of after-school programs, believing that they are comprised of simple activities, yet may not be aware of how these activities can be beneficial for academics and students' self-discovery. It also reflects on the promotion of after-school programs, with some needing to provide better information and resources in one place, and also provide

useful information that answers a lot of parental questions, like program information, enrollment, fees, and other aspects. Additionally, another panelist, **Leisa Holland-Nelson, Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for ASTOUNDZ** mentions how programs need to be a one-click solution: “One search, one click. They need to find what they are searching for the minute they land on your website” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Holland-Nelson’s point highlights how these programs can improve accessibility within their promotional content yet also highlights the benefits and background of the after-school program. Altogether, it is important for after-school programs to create initiatives and activities aimed at uplifting students and engaging in meaningful activities that inspire success in their future academics and social skills. After-school programs need to be better at promoting themselves to parental and guardian figures, making their program known for more than just watching their children after school. Lastly, program content should be readily accessible and answerable within “one click” or a few scrolls. Combining these aspects can help create after-school programs that are beneficial for both students and the community.

TAKEAWAY 4: TECHNOLOGY IS BOTH HELPFUL AND HARMFUL

In today’s age, technology has become more widespread, especially in younger generations. For some, technology can be beneficial, ranging from promoting digital learning concepts to learning new ideas and knowledge and providing more opportunities for social and supportive contact (Reid-Chassiakos et al., 2016). Technology and digital devices at a young age can have their benefits in learning childhood concepts (e.g., alphabet, numbers), yet they can also pose a massive harm to children’s development. Screen time, especially in excessive amounts (>4 hours), can be associated with negative health outcomes, ranging from behavioral issues (e.g., hyperactivity, inattention, anxiety) to health issues (e.g., high BMI, weight gain) (Stiglic and Viner, 2019). As a result, excessive screen time, if left unmonitored and unrestricted, may be associated with developmental disorders in children, potentially affecting their peer socialization and academics. Some researchers argue for a balanced perspective with technology, asking families to be more vigilant and monitor their child’s digital device usage and determine what boundaries or changes are needed when negative academic or behavioral outcomes appear (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2019). Although these solutions may seem simple, the impacts of screen time, if left unmonitored, can affect other parts of their lives. Some participants mentioned how the rise of technology has impacted children’s concept of play, as stated by **Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Senior Director of CASE for Kids at Harris County Department of Education**, “Our kids do not know how to play anymore... if I had built a culture of active involvement in after-school activities, it would not feel so foreign” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Dr. Caruthers’ point highlights the importance of creating environments that encourage children to participate in active play and structured activities, especially as digital entertainment becomes increasingly prevalent in their daily lives.

Conference participants how raising the younger generations can “take a village,” and it may entail having coordinated support from schools, families, community, organizations, and public systems, especially by creating and developing after-school programs and curricula aimed at reforming and helping disenfranchised or at-risk youth members, even before engaging in harmful behaviors, as stated by Panelist Jeff Alexander, Deputy Executive Director for Harris County Resources for Children and Adults, “We have programs that span the life of a person... most of our programs are leaning towards prevention and early intervention” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Alexander’s point highlights how these programs’ main focus is prevention and creating a safe environment for younger individuals, potentially mitigating their engagement in dark and destructive behaviors. Participants also emphasized the concept of familial involvement, with **one participant stating** how family engagement in after-school programs effectively promotes socialization, “I overload him sometimes with so much to do... baseball, basketball, music... because he keeps active and makes friends within those groups” (Unnamed Participant, Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These types of approaches to activities demonstrate how family engagement is central to youth outcomes, whether it be in after-school program enrollment, community involvement, or being active within school settings; moreover, it also demonstrates that the tenets of family (e.g., structure, positive relationships) can be attributed to peer socialization and activities, helping students hone these skills and become better versions of themselves.

TAKEAWAY 5: FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE ESSENTIAL

As covered in the previous section, family engagement is vital for youth development, especially during ages when young people may be susceptible to risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, weapon possession) in social settings. According to La Charite et al. (2025), caregivers viewed recreational activities as “facilitators of lifelong healthy living and wellbeing for children, families, and communities” (p. 1), highlighting the role of family in children’s development by reinforcing positive communication and social skills. Moreover, it also demonstrates how relationships and communication are impactful on young children, demonstrated primarily at home. One article finds that “family support and positive role modeling” were significant factors in children’s socialization and development, noting that caretaking family members, especially those deemed as positive influences and role models, were influential in getting children to enroll and participate in after-school programs (Johnson et al., 2026, p. 10). Johnson’s article highlights the importance of family support, demonstrating how its impacts can positively influence children to pursue enrollment and participation in after-school programs. For some children, however, after-school programs can be the most effective way to cultivate positive roles and safe spaces, especially in home environments that do not have the healthiest dynamics, as stated by **Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Senior Director of CASE for Kids at Harris County Department of Education:** “...kids are seeking these roles. And if we're not providing them [positive role models] in their whole home or if..Dad [or] Mom's boyfriend is stealing that away, like you're saying, I can provide it inside my

program” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Dr. Caruthers’ quote highlights how some family environments may not be a “safe space” for some children, demonstrating how after-school programs can potentially fill the void by promoting healthy and positive role-modeling skills, appropriate for each stage of a child’s development.

Additionally, after-school programs need to also address barriers to participation and enrollment, especially among low-income and at-risk youth, by making adjustments to their enrollment process. Some articles note how these barriers can be addressed by programs, ranging from having multiple registration methods (e.g., virtual, in person, phone) to having multilingual registration forms, food and travel accommodations, and even financial assistance (e.g., reduced fees) (La Charite et al., 2025). Addressing these barriers can make after-school program enrollment and participation more accessible for more students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, after-school programs need to understand their role in the community and how their services can benefit their intended population (e.g., school-aged children) (Levine & Viano, 2025). It is essential to collaborate with local and community-based partnerships, both to understand and address the community’s needs and create more opportunities for youth success. Examples of these include hiring effective staff and mentors who can guide students, while still promoting community-based initiatives and incentives, thus creating an effective and collaborative relationship between families and after-school staff members. In doing so, it can lead to students previously or currently enrolled in after-school programs positively contributing and advocating for their local communities, in tandem with after-school programs and familial support.

TAKEAWAY 6: PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN INTERVENTION

One of the key purposes of youth-serving systems (e.g., after-school programs) is promoting positive youth development, while preventing negative behaviors from emerging or escalating. Ciocanel et al. (2017) state that the purpose of these programs is “positive youth development,” aimed at promoting healthy and positive behaviors while also preventing adolescent risk behavior (p. 483). Ciocanel’s statement highlights the goals of many youth-serving systems, especially in risk-prone areas with at-risk youth, promoting positive and healthy behaviors as a counteraction to negative social and community influences. Frazier et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of “building resilience” during early adolescence, highlighting how youth-serving programs can promote positive social and emotional development (p. 3). For some at-risk youth, prevention can start at home, especially in environments that value positive communication and relationships, resulting in better social and academic outcomes compared to those who did not have a positive familial support system (Aazami et al., 2023). These factors can determine how an adolescent responds to stressors in their lives, as seen in their parental and familial “role-modeling” of good and bad behaviors.

Moreover, youth-serving programs like after-school activities can promote healthy environments and communication for at-risk youth, especially when incorporating the positive youth development

(PYD) framework, “provid[ing] support and opportunities to young people so they can realize their potential” (Donovan et al., 2025, p. 1028). PYD emphasizes understanding students’ individual backgrounds and strengths while providing supportive relationships, opportunities for skill development, and environments that encourage positive social, emotional, and cognitive growth. By combining these aspects, it can help teach them to make effective decisions and take accountability for their actions. The purpose of these programs is the overall prevention of negative behaviors by addressing these issues directly, as stated by panelist **Jeff Alexander, Deputy Executive Director for Harris County Resources for Children and Adults**, “The whole idea is to keep them from penetrating deeper into the system, whether it be child welfare or juvenile justice” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). His remarks highlight the importance of preventative approaches, demonstrating how early intervention, youth-serving programs, and community-based support can help address challenges before young people become more deeply involved in child welfare or juvenile justice systems. These strategies are aimed at providing youth support and resources to help them counteract negative behaviors but also assist those who are struggling with them.

CONCLUSION

The Powered by P.L.A.Y.: Houston Out-of-School Time Conference provided opportunities to discuss programs and initiatives that support children’s development by supporting play, relationships, belonging, and prevention in community settings. While much of the work of out-of-school time programs occurs through formal activities and use of technology, programs can also support children’s life skills through the provision of settings and experiences that allow for children’s play, communication, creativity, and development of resilience and adaptability.

The dialogues from the conference reflected many of the current themes found within positive youth development research, including supportive relationships and structures, social-emotional learning, mentorship, family involvement, and community-based programming. There were several dialogues where individuals described experiences and strategies that have been used in out-of-school time programs to support positive youth development, as well as ways that practitioners have used current research in order to strengthen their programs and practices. This white paper explored several of the major themes from the conference in relation to existing research about positive youth development and ways in which out-of-school time programs are able to support it.

Attendees came away with six key takeaways to consider in programming for school-age children. Play helps youth to develop important life skills that can be used in a variety of situations and circumstances. Positive relationships between children and youth and the people in their lives, including other children and youth, school-age program staff, children and youth’s families, and mentors from the community are essential to supporting children and youth in developing in positive ways. A sense of belonging and having a sense of purpose is important to supporting children and youth in developing in

positive ways. They discussed the importance of balancing screen time with interpersonal communication and other physical and hands-on activities, including play. Support from children and youth and their families, as well as from communities and from a variety of organizations and agencies, is needed to support school-age children. Prevention-oriented programs including early intervention, mentoring, and programs that are structured around activities of particular interest to children and youth can help to mitigate problems before they become even bigger concerns.

Collaboration within and between families, schools, community organizations, public agencies, and youth-serving organizations is critical in today's environment of evolving needs of children and adolescents. The insights garnered from this two-day conference and supporting literature can inform practices of quality out-of-school time programs in creating strong social, emotional, and developmental outcomes for children and adolescents. Findings from the conference will continue to guide inclusive practices for designing engaging and supportive environments and programs that help youth grow, learn, and succeed in life. The appendix provides an expanded overview of each conference session, including session descriptions and conversation goals.

APPENDIX

SESSION 1: (PANEL) BEYOND FUN-CAN PLAY DELIVER REAL INVESTMENT RETURNS? A PANEL DISCUSSION WITH COMMUNITY INVESTORS

FACILITATOR: TRINA SILVA, DIRECTOR OF THE HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOUNDATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

PANELISTS:

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- **DR LISA CARUTHERS, DIRECTOR OF CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
 - **CHARLES STEIN, DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS AT AT&T**
 - **LISA WILLIAMS, SENIOR DIRECTOR GLOBAL OPERATIONS, TALENT STRATEGY, AND EMPLOYEE MANUFACTURING AND ENGINEERING OPERATIONS AT DOW CHEMICAL**
 - **MARCUS VASQUEZ, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CRA AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AT STELLAR BANK**
 - **SUMMER REEVES, VICE PRESIDENT OF REGIONAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT WITH THE GREATER HOUSTON PARTNERSHIP**
 - **ALEXIS ELAFROS, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC EDUCATION AND NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE GREATER HOUSTON PARTNERSHIP**

CONVERSATION GOALS

-
- Examine the relationship between childhood play and workforce readiness
 - Identify malleable skills, developed in play, that can support long-term success in academics, career, and life situations
 - How resilience, grit, and adaptability are cultivated via challenges, risk-taking, and learning from past mistakes and failures
 - The impacts of technology and AI on learning and the need for promoting a duality of human connection and development while developing digital literacy skills
 - The importance of communication, collaboration, creativity, resilience, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving in professional settings
 - Encouraging families, educators, and youth-serving professionals to view play as an essential component of child development and future preparedness

SESSION ONE DESCRIPTION

SESSION ONE explored how “play” can serve as both lessons and as a foundation for workforce preparedness and lifelong success. Reflecting on their childhood experiences, panelists highlighted how play introduces them to skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, resilience, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving, which are crucial for children’s development and needed for adulthood,

especially in professional settings. Within the act of “playing,” these skills are cultivated and developed, helping them learn to navigate challenges independently and communicate efficiently. One panelist reflected on how childhood conversations and social interactions helped them “learn to communicate really well,” while another described how imaginative play with “sticks and rocks” fostered creativity and problem-solving (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026).

The conversation also covered topics of adversity and failure and its lessons in developing grit and resilience, with some panelists mentioning the importance of risk-taking and learning from mistakes as children and how those experiences help develop confidence through perseverance, hard work, and effort. As **one participant** noted, “If you start failing at an early age, you're going to be comfortable with the fact that this is just part of life,” emphasizing the value of learning to navigate setbacks. Another highlighted that “a key underpinning in innovation is having the skill of grit,” reinforcing the idea that resilience is developed through opportunities to struggle, adapt, and try again (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026).

Lastly, panelists examined the role of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), noting its opportunities for efficiency, yet emphasizing how future successes for younger generations center on encompassing both digital literacy and competence and human-centered skills, rather than solely one skill set. As **one participant** observed, “curiosity is probably the most critical skill for anyone entering the workforce in the future,” underscoring the importance of balancing technological advancement with the human qualities that drive learning, innovation, and collaboration (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Panelists emphasized that educational exposure to technology should enhance learning, yet preserve creativity, curiosity, relationship-building, and authentic human connection

SESSION 2: (PANEL) PLAYING WELL TOGETHER: NAVIGATING PARTNERSHIPS WITH SCHOOL DISTRICTS

FACILITATOR: ANN WESTBROOKS, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER OF HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PANELISTS:

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- **DR LISA CARUTHERS, DIRECTOR OF CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
 - **SARAH LANGOIS, HOUSTON-BASED PARTNER AT SPALDING, NICHOLS, AND LANGOIS LAW**
 - **DR. EDNA JOHNSON, DIRECTOR OF PROCUREMENT SERVICES FOR HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
 - **SHA'RELL WEBB, FOUNDER OF CODING WITH A TWIST**
 - **AMANDA FISHER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT THE AMERICAN FESTIVAL FOR THE ARTS**

CONVERSATION GOALS

- Understand how community organizations can build effective partnerships with school districts
- Emphasize the importance of mission and vision alignment with districts and communities when developing partnerships
- Understanding the purpose of regulatory and procurements requirements for organizations collaborating with school districts
- The role of data-driven planning (e.g., needs assessments, community data) and relationship-building during program design
- Strategies that measure impact and improve program effectiveness
- Best practices for fostering communication, relationship-building, and trust amongst partners

SESSION TWO DESCRIPTION

SESSION TWO focuses on strengthening partnerships between community organizations, vendors, and school districts to better serve students' and communities' needs. In order to have a successful partnership, panelists emphasized the importance of understanding a district's mission, vision, and priorities rather than offering pre-designed services. **Dr. Edna Johnson, Director of Procurement Services for Harris County Department of Education**, notes how it is important to understand "the story of the school district," and aligning services with its mission helps partners better meet the needs of students (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her quote emphasizes how meaningful, sustainable collaborations between organizations and school districts are created by having shared goals centered on students' best interests and needs.

Additionally, panelists discussed the importance of accountability and regulatory compliance in educational partnerships, highlighting how requirements such as background checks, fingerprinting, and vendor certifications serve as tools to protect students. As **Sarah Langlois, Houston-based partner at Spalding, Nichols, and Langois Law**, states "At its core, the goal is to protect kids. All of the rules...are designed around student safety" (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These measures, as tedious as they may be, are intended to protect students from harmful individuals and organizations.

Other themes, such as continuous improvement and data-driven planning, emerged throughout the discussion, with panelists emphasizing how analyzing community data and needs assessments, alongside cultivating relationships and partnerships, is crucial before designing and implementing programs. **Sha'Rell Webb, founder of Coding with a Twist**, notes how organizations need to begin by asking questions about community needs, including, "What are you trying to meet, and what do you want your students to be able to do after the engagement?" (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026) Her quote emphasizes how relationship-building, needs assessments, and data analysis should guide program design, while feedback, progress monitoring, and adaptation help ensure program effectiveness.

Lastly, the discussion also highlighted how strong partnerships are built on trust, communication, transparency, and mutual understanding. **Amanda Fisher, Executive Director at the American Festival of the Arts**, states how "at the end of the day, it's about relationships," highlighting the importance of aligning stakeholder goals with community and district needs (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). The session concluded by addressing the importance of maintaining strong community partnerships while also scaling services and making program adjustments to meet the evolving needs of school districts.

SESSION 3: (PANEL) MARKETING WITH A PURPOSE

FACILITATOR: DANIELLE CLARK, CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PANELISTS:

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- **LEISA HOLLAND-NELSON, VICE PRESIDENT CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER FOR ASTOUNDZ AND CO-FOUNDER OF CULTURE-CLUB MEDIA**
 - **SHAVONNA ROBERTS-SCHREIBER, FOUNDER OF SNR CREATIVE AND CO-FOUNDER OF CULTURE CLUB HTX**
 - **JUAN ORTIZ, OWNER OF JUAN EVENTS**
 - **CONNIE KWAN-WONG, PUBLISHER OF CKW LUXE MAGAZINE**
 - **WALTER J HULL, CO-NATIONAL PROGRAM DIRECTOR FOR THE US DREAM ACADEMY**

CONVERSATION GOALS

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- Highlighting the Value of After-School Programs
 - Improving Digital Accessibility and Engagement
 - Strengthening Storytelling and Communication
 - Enhancing Visual Storytelling and Outreach
 - Encouraging Collaboration with Youth-Serving Organizations
 - Integrating AI and Technology Responsibly

SESSION THREE DESCRIPTION

SESSION THREE highlighted the importance of effective communication when promoting after-school programs to families, communities, and other stakeholders. During the discussion, panelists emphasize that these programs provide opportunities for youth to develop resilience, confidence, leadership skills and social relationships, yet also encounter family and community members that do not understand these benefits, as noted by **Connie Kwan-Wong, publisher of CKW LUXE Magazine**, “A lot of people do not really understand the long-term value of the programs... they are creating and changing children's lives” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her statement highlights how effective communication and promotion of after-school programs can create positive and lasting opportunities for students.

A central theme that emerged was the importance of authentic storytelling when promoting and communicating program outcomes and strengthening community engagements. Panelists encouraged organizations to highlight alumni experiences, personal reflections, and student success stories over statistics and program activities, as these can attract more interested students and families, as stated by **Leisa Holland-Nelson, Vice President Chief Marketing Officer for ASTOUNDZ and co-founder of Culture-Club Media**, “lead with stories from the children and the outcomes because that is the heart of it all” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her comment highlights how after-school programs’ promotions should entail communicating benefits such as confidence, resilience, leadership and life outcomes within their programs, potentially leading to more future enrollments.

Finally, the discussion reiterates the importance of collaboration over competition, illustrated in **Holland Nelson's** quote of youth-serving organizations being “a rising tide [that] lifts all boats” emphasizing collaboration over competition. Panelists encourage organizations to establish beneficial partnerships, share resources, and work towards uplifting students via collective efforts and community support. Additionally, panelists mention multiple communication tactics for promoting their content, reaching diverse audiences, and increasing program awareness

Finally, panelists also explored how digital tools like AI and content-planning tools can emphasize program communication, yet also maintain human oversight and authenticity, noted by **Shavonna Roberts-Screiber, Founder of SNR Creative and co-founder of Culture Club HTX**, “Do not be lazy. You know the story. Tell it first and then use the tool to help you say it in different ways” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Her comment reiterates the importance of using AI and digital tools to enhance rather than replacing storytelling when promoting organizations and after-school programs. Overall, this session covers how collaboration, communication, and digital tools (used responsibly) can strengthen community engagement and its lasting impacts on students and after-school programs

SESSION 4: (DIALOGUE SESSION) WHAT GAME ARE THEY PLAYING? WHY YOUTH ACT OUT, TAKE RISKS, AND EMBRACE 'GANGSTER' IDENTITIES: A CROSS-SYSTEM DIALOGUE WITH YOUTH JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

PANELISTS:

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- **DR LISA CARUTHERS, DIRECTOR OF CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
 - **HENRY GONSALES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HARRIS COUNTY JUVENILE PREVENTION**
 - **JEFF ALEXANDER, DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT HARRIS COUNTY RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS**
 - **JOANN BURBRIDGE, COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER, BOARD MEMBER, CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONSULTANT**
 - **JACKIE AUTMAN, CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE PEOPLE'S LEGAL CLINIC**
 - **EARTHA JOHNSON, PUBLIC SERVANT, GAME DEVELOPER WITH LEGAL WATCH, INC**

CONVERSATION GOALS

-
- Strengthening Youth Engagement and Belonging
 - Promoting Youth-Led Voices and Leadership within Communities
 - Identifying Risk Factors impacting Student Populations

- Encouraging Family Togetherness and Engagement
- Emphasizing Prevention and Early Intervention Measures
- Strengthening Long-Term Community Partnerships

SESSION FOUR DESCRIPTION

SESSION FOUR covered the significance of community engagement, youth leadership, and preventative and interventive measures in developing and supporting positive youth development. Panelists highlight how meaningful dialogue within community partnerships can create opportunities for adolescents to develop key skills in leadership, relationship-building, and finding their sense of belonging.

A central theme that was emphasized was promoting youth engagement while simultaneously reducing risky behaviors. **Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Director of CASE for Kids at Harris County Department of Education**, states how “Our kids do not know how to play anymore... if I had built a culture of active involvement in after-school activities, it would not feel so foreign” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Dr. Caruthers comment highlights how the lack of supportive environments can lead to negative peer influences, mental health issues, and trauma, aspects that can impact a youth’s development and decision-making. Moreover, her statement also highlights the need for having programs and organized activities that promote positive socialization and interpersonal growth, especially with children who have working parents.

Panelists also discussed the significance of addressing youth challenges and issues before legal issues arise (e.g., juvenile justice system) via early preventative measures and approaches, as explained by **Jeff Alexander, Deputy Executive Director At Harris County Resources for Children and Adults**, “The whole idea is to keep them from penetrating deeper into the system, whether it be child welfare or juvenile justice” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). His statement reinforces the criticality of providing familial support, community resources, and diversion and intervention services before challenges escalate further.

Lastly, the discussion noted how positive youth outcomes can be achieved with positive family engagement and long-term community partnerships. Panelists asserted how parental involvement, consistent guidance, and encouragement in structured, organized activities can lead to positive peer socialization and relationships and strengthening family relationships, with **one audience member** stating how they preoccupy their children in many shared activities, “I overload him sometimes with so much to do... baseball, basketball, music... because he keeps active and makes friends within those groups” (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Their example illustrates how families support their children’s development by enrolling and encouraging participation in activities that can foster a sense of belonging and better peer relationships. Overall, this session focused on how community involvement, in tandem with sustained interpersonal support (e.g., family) and preventative measures, can uplift and strengthen youth development and create brighter futures.

SESSION 5: (DIALOGUE SESSION) PLAY, HEAL, THRIVE: EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PLAY AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

PANELISTS:

- **DR LISA CARUTHERS, DIRECTOR OF CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

- **MIKE WILSON, OUTREACH COORDINATOR FOR CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
- **RASHONDA HINES, DIRECTOR OF CRAYOLA LEARNING CENTER**
- **LAKIETHA MOORE, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT**
- **GWEN EAGLE, HR ADMINISTRATIVE RESEARCHER AT BE A CHAMPION**
- **MIMI GANS, PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER AT THE AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH**
- **RACHEL BROWNLEY, DIRECTOR OF GRANTS WITH HOUSTON REVISION**
- **DOMINIKA STANIEWICZ, ELITE BRAIN CORACH AND DUAL ELITE NEUROENCODING SPECIALIST**
- **EMMANUEL "MANNY" SALAS, PROGRAM MANAGER AT THE WOODS PROJECT**
- **BRIAN ELLIS, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS AT PROJECT ROW HOUSES**
- **ERNESTINE RAY, DIRECTOR OF A CHILD CARE CENTER**

CONVERSATION GOALS

- Exploring the Benefits of Unstructured and Structured Play
- Understanding Youth and The Role of Play in Their Mental Health Development
- Addressing Technology Use and Screen-Time Usage among Youth
- Balancing Parental Anxiety and Youth Independence
- Creating Safe Environments for Youth Social Connections and Creativity
- Promoting Youth Interpersonal Growth and Independence

SESSION FIVE DESCRIPTION

SESSION FIVE focused on the role of play and how it supports youth's mental health, emotional well-being, and overall development. Participants covered how play itself can give young people opportunities to grow beyond the classroom, whether it be in expressing themselves, developing new skills, to even building relationships. Moreover, the conversation ties in parental concerns technology and its influence on their children's opportunity to play and connect with other peers.

One of the main themes center play as being a tool for helping children develop emotional and social skills within their daily experiences. As **Mimi Gans, Principal Researcher at the American Institutes for Research** explains, "play is also an entry into their inner world," highlighting the role of play and its impacts on youth mental development in expressing emotions, strengthening relationships, and supporting their mental well-being (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). Play can be demonstrated in several ways, ranging from sports and activities to even spending time with peers, teaching lessons in communication, handling disagreements, and solving challenges.

Another major topic was technology, especially with the amount of screen time children spend on digital devices, with some participants raising concerns over screen use and limiting opportunities for creativity, face-to-face interaction, and physical activity. **Manny Salas, a Project Manager at the Woods project** note how children participating in his organization's outdoor activities affected their screen-time use, with one child not using their phone half the time (Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). These types of activities and approaches can reduce screen-time, teaching children how to engage with their environment and use their creativity as entertainment.

Finally, participants covered how parental anxiety and their protective instincts can be counterintuitive to developing independence. As explained by **Gans**, “Your anxiety isn't unfounded. There are reasons why you have anxiety,” recognizing how these concerns may not benefit young children’s mental development Powered by P.L.A.Y Conference, 2026). The session emphasized the importance of providing safe spaces for developing youth to play, explore interests, and develop confidence and resilience.

SESSION 6: (DIALOGUE SESSION) WHAT DOES PLAY EVEN LOOK LIKE IN 2026? DO KIDS EVEN WANT TO TOUCH GRASS?

PANELISTS:

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- **DR LISA CARUTHERS, DIRECTOR OF CASE FOR KIDS AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
 - **LAKIETHA MOORE, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT**
 - **CHARLOTTE WATTS, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT**
 - **JESSICA MANLEY, WOOD PROJECT**
 - **JILL WOOD, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT AND PLAYWORKER**
 - **JULIA, ATTACK POVERTY PROJECT**
 - **SEAN DEVON, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT**
 - **TERRENCE, CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT**

CONVERSATION GOALS

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- Understanding How Childhood Play has Evolved across Generations
 - Encouraging Unstructured and Creative Child-Directed Play
 - Addressing Digital Device Use and Impacts on Social Interactions
 - Identifying the Barriers to Play and Independence
 - Promoting Social and Emotional Development through Creativity
 - Strengthening Family and Community Traditions

SESSION SIX DESCRIPTION

SESSION SIX explored how childhood play has changed over time and the challenges young people face in an increasingly digital world. Participants reflected on their own childhood experiences, comparing outdoor activities, neighborhood friendships, and independent exploration with the more structured and technology-centered experiences of children today.

One central theme was the importance of unstructured play in developing independence, creativity, and social skills. **Jill Wood, a conference participant and playworker**, discussed how children benefit from opportunities to direct their own activities without constantly being evaluated or guided by adults. Participants also raised concerns about how limited outdoor spaces, safety considerations, and increased screen use can reduce opportunities for children to interact and explore independently.

Another discussion focused on how these changes can affect children's social development. **Lakietha Moore, a conference participant**, expressed concerns about young people's lack of social interaction,

while other participants described how organized schedules and digital devices can make spontaneous play less common. The conversation emphasized the importance of allowing children to develop friendships, navigate disagreements, and learn through their own experiences.

Finally, participants discussed how families and communities can help preserve opportunities for play across generations. **Sean Devon, a conference participant**, reflected on the importance of passing down family traditions, stating, “I think traditions have to be passed on for play.” Overall, the session reinforced the importance of giving children opportunities to play freely while encouraging families, educators, and youth-serving programs to support meaningful social connections.

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