



# ENGAGING FAMILIES IN REOPENING OUR SCHOOLS

## JUNE 1, 2020

During the period of temporary school building closures and implementation of distance learning, typical school and family interactions underwent a rapid and significant change. Schools and families were required to shift and reframe their connections. Educators reached into each family's home to help guide student learning through a variety of mediums. Building authentic partnerships, mutual trust and respect, and meaningful opportunities for two-way communication became even more essential to ensure learning continuity.

While we recognize that families and schools faced many barriers during this recent health crisis, moving forward it is important to acknowledge and build on the opportunities that distance learning provided to deepen relationships and engage families. The successful reopening of school buildings and planning for potential short-term disruptions to instruction due to COVID-19 will require a renewed effort by school leaders to plan and support family and community engagement.

What **key opportunities** for family engagement should school leaders focus on during this time to ensure success?

- **Strengthening Relationships:** Establish more personalized, two-way communication between schools and families, build mutual trust, and provide families an authentic sense of engagement in their child's learning.
- **Building Capacity:** Expand the capacity of all school staff to be able to engage in meaningful partnerships with families and build each family's skills, abilities, and confidence to support their child's learning.
- **Focusing on Learning:** Leverage available resources from school and home and seek opportunities to inquire about student and family interests to create meaningful learning.
- **Connecting Communities:** Engage with the greater community to help meet the basic needs of families through a response that is compassionate and culturally responsive.

This period of reopening our school buildings will not be – nor should be – “school as usual.” Instead, this time of reopening is **an opportunity to invite family members to actively partner with you in their child's education.**



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### ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

Supporting a child's learning and growth from birth through college and career is the shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. During this period of reopening school buildings, including planning for potential short-term disruptions to instruction, family engagement will be essential for a successful reopening plan.

#### Do First – ASSESS

- Does your district/school have a plan for family engagement? If so, how should this plan be adjusted during this period of transition? If not, how could this time of reopening be used to help your district/school build a plan?
- What are the core beliefs about the role of families in your district/school? How did the experience of distance learning influence those beliefs? Did it reveal strengths and weaknesses?
- Is the culture and climate of your district/school supportive of engaging every family?
- In what ways can your school/district give families an opportunity to share feedback from their experience with distance learning?
- Has your district/school identified families that were disengaged during distance learning? How will you reach out for follow-up with them during reopening?
- Who in your district/school would be best suited to lead family engagement efforts during this period of reopening? What support and resources would they need to be successful?

If your school/district has not yet gathered feedback from families about their experiences during COVID-19 school closures, the results of this [national parent survey](#) from Learning Heroes may inform your family engagement plan or provide potential questions to ask your families. An important finding to note in this survey, on page 31, is that families are more open to engagement and partnership and are ready to redefine the relationship between schools and homes.

The [Pew Research Center](#) and [Gallup](#) provide additional resources on what parents are saying about distance learning amid COVID-19 school closures.



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### Do Before School Opens – PLAN

- Based on your assessment, align your expectations around school reopening to prioritize support for the whole child including support for the family. Emphasize the importance of health, safety, and family engagement in learning.
- Support a conversation in your district/school focused on family engagement. Explore the core beliefs held about working with families. Remember to validate and celebrate existing ways families are supporting their child’s development.
- Invite families to participate in developing the plan for reopening. Engage them in conversations around district calendars, grading and attendance policies, building access by families, and other policy adjustments.

### When Schools Are Open and Operating - IMPROVE

- Implement your plan including professional development and technical assistance needs for both staff and families that is focused on building a shared responsibility among families, schools, and the community to support learning.
- Create a welcoming environment where all families feel connected to their child’s learning.
- Continue to provide opportunities for input from families and the community.
- Celebrate the contributions of families and the community, recognizing the important role they play in learning.
- Establish intentional opportunities for families and educators to **strengthen relationships**, **build capacity**, **focus on learning**, and **connect to the community**.

## ➤ STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

The physical and emotional well-being (health and healing) of students, educators, families, and communities will continue to be the priority during the reopening of our school buildings. It is normal that our reaction may be to “fill the day” with academic activities. However, school leaders and teachers should consider how they can ensure conversations and next steps focus on supporting meaningful and purposeful learning while prioritizing the social-emotional and health needs of students and their families.

### What We Learned

The [Learning Heroes parent survey](#) (page 9) found that 65% of parents felt anxious and worried. These feelings of uneasiness may continue as we welcome students back to school. As you prepare a plan for reopening, acknowledging these feelings and strengthening relationships with families is essential.

### Things to Consider

- What communication modes will best engage family members (which may include parents, grandparents, extended family members, caregivers, or other responsible individuals) in planning for reopening? In a summary of the Parents Survey 2020 by Learning Heroes, parents shared that they felt text messages and phone calls were most effective, but few say teachers were using those modes of contact (page 24). Additionally, parents (95%) say they heard from their child’s teacher(s) in some way (page 12). However, only 33% of parents say they had regular access to their child’s teacher(s).
- What tools could you put in place to listen to families’ hopes and concerns for their children’s learning as they return to school? What channels for communication are most accessible to your families?
- Are there ample opportunities for teachers and school leaders to “receive” communication as much as they “give” communication? Reciprocal communication is essential to building mutual trust with families.
- How will you focus on physical and emotional well-being of families and stress reduction? Is there a plan to continue to support families in meeting critical basic needs to ensure their children can effectively engage in learning?

### Resources

The Search Institute has identified key shifts to energize partnerships with families. This [self-reflection tool](#) can help your team examine default mindsets and practices and identify opportunities to explore and strengthen your work with families.

## ➤ BUILD CAPACITY

During distance learning many meaningful experiences connected students' home lives, interests, and identities with their learning. Reopening our schools provides a unique opportunity for families and schools to continue this work together as partners. We know all families have hopes and dreams for their children and want the best for them. We also know all families have the capacity to support their child's learning. As we prepare for various scenarios in our learning calendars, it will be increasingly important for teachers to recognize this and continue to model the learning process for families.

### What We Learned

[The Parents 2020 Survey by Learning Heroes](#) reports parents have shown a willingness to support learning at home spending approximately 2.5 hours per weekday supporting their child with schoolwork (page 27). For the upcoming school year, parents (73%) want to get a better understanding of what their child is expected to know at his/her new grade level (page 31) and around 47% of parents need help to support remote or at-home learning (page 17). As we reopen, how will our schools reach out to disengaged families, strengthen relationships, and build families' skills and confidence to partner in their child's learning?

### Things to Consider

- How will you support staff (e.g., professional development, scheduling, resources) in building their skills, abilities, and confidence to work with families to build trusting and meaningful relationships?
- How can your reopening plan encourage joint decision-making (e.g., student and family voice and choice) through this process?
- How can you help families expand their knowledge base, understand “the why” behind learning assignments, and build confidence as they partner in their child's learning?
- Beyond their technological capacity, how can you identify potential challenges families may face (e.g., supplies, time) and validate what each family has contributed or has to offer (e.g., interests, skills, strengths) in supporting their child's learning?
- What leadership opportunities exist for families within your district/school? What specific efforts have focused on building their leadership skills?

### Resources

[Dr. Steven Constantino offers us “The Five C’s – How Families Can Engage”](#) as a tool to help families engage in meaningful conversations with their child around school and learning. This tool could be used to help the family-to-child conversation around reopening our schools.

## ➤ FOCUS ON LEARNING

During distance learning, we were reminded that student learning can and does happen everywhere, all the time, with or without devices or internet access. We saw learning taking place at home, in our communities, online and with limited resources. The period of reopening our schools should continue to focus on learning experiences that connect to families' lives in homes and in the community, building on their interests and identities, and provide meaningful connections that build relationships.

### What We Learned

During school closures, [Learning Heroes](#) found that 90% of parents said their child used school-provided materials or resources to learn at home (page 19), emphasizing the importance of these at-home resources. It also reported parents' desire for personal guidance for how to best support their child (page 23). Families have been activated to support at-home learning through school closures. As schools reopen, families want and need an accurate picture of their child's grade level ability (page 6) and need continuous guidance on how they can support classroom learning at home.

### Things to Consider

- How will you give families an **active** role in learning? What will this look like?
- How will you use feedback collected from families about their experience with distance learning to inform planning for potential short-term disruptions in instruction?
- How will you use this opportunity to be responsive to student and family questions or concerns about learning? How will you celebrate and validate the contributions of families?
- What opportunities will you give students to share how they want teachers and families to continue to support their learning?
- Will activities with families be aligned with district goals for student outcomes?
- How will you build learning opportunities that are meaningful and relevant to students and families, inclusive of different cultures, traditions, and learning needs?
- How will you connect families and students to their peers to create interactive, collaborative learning communities or to provide continuous support, encouragement, and resources?

### Resources

The Search Institute has provided ideas to [challenge growth and provide support](#) for learning during the COVID-19 Crisis.

## ➤ CONNECT COMMUNITIES

Knowing that everyone is navigating this new reality with some level of uncertainty can build an even stronger sense of community. With the reopening of school buildings, and the continued potential for disruptions in instruction, families may still be struggling to meet basic needs. Each community has unique local needs as well as varying resources to support those needs. Working together, there is an opportunity for all to feel supported and valued.

### What We Learned

As you communicate with families, it may help to review Learning Heroes' [survey results](#) on page 9 to help prioritize health and healing. During COVID-19 school closures, families have experienced a myriad of emotions: overwhelmed, calm, frustrated, safe, optimistic, anxious, worried, grateful, and hopeful. Through the reopening plan, it is important to strengthen relationships with families, identify needs that exist, and connect families to school and community resources to support learning.

### Things to Consider

- How will you identify and connect with your most vulnerable students to recognize and prioritize their needs?
- What improvements could you make to build a stronger sense of community among students and families within your district, schools, and classrooms?
- How will you build on community strengths and resources to help the most vulnerable students and families meet their basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing, child supervision, medical services)?
- How will you work with the community to identify resources outside of the regular school day that can be leveraged to support students who need extra learning support (e.g., summer learning, afterschool programming, childcare)?
- How will you work with community partners to provide families access to essential resources (e.g., technology, Internet access, educational supplies) in the event of another disruption in instruction?
- Who at your school could be designated to lead the coordination of school-community partnerships to focus on building trust and transparency?

### Resources

In [Engage Every Family](#), Dr. Steven Constantino's Principle #5 examines how to engage the greater community. The [Coalition for Community Schools](#) offers active family and community engagement resources.

## ➤ HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOU?

The Oklahoma State Department of Education Office of Family and Community Engagement team is here to help.

### Questions?

Family and Community Engagement

Website: <https://sde.ok.gov/fce>

Phone: 405-522-6225

For specific questions about engaging families and communities, contact [Sonia Johnson](#), Executive Director Family and Community Engagement/21st CCLC.

## REFERENCES

Excerpts from these documents and resources were used and/or modified to create this guide.

Council of State Science Supervisors. (2020). How can families support student science learning at home?

Council of State Science Supervisors. (2020). Supporting Student's Learning During COVID-19 School Closures with Distance Learning.

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Pew Research Center. (2020). www.pewresearch.org. Resource link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/15/lower-income-parents-most-concerned-about-their-children-falling-behind-amid-covid-19-school-closures/>

This guide incorporates new research focused on how to best communicate about family engagement to receive maximum impact presented by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement and the FrameWorks Institute. To learn more about how to “reframe” your own communications, please visit [famengage.org](http://famengage.org).

