



# ENGAGING FAMILIES TO SUPPORT DISTANCE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

During this period of temporary school building closures and implementation of distance learning, typical school and family interactions are rapidly changing. We see our schools and families shifting and reframing their connections with educators now reaching into each family's home to help guide student learning through a variety of available mediums. Engaging all families will require true partnerships and the building of mutual trust and respect to ensure every student has the opportunity to participate in meaningful distance learning.

We recognize that you may be faced with a number of [barriers to this work](#), but we also want to acknowledge and build on opportunities the current health crisis brings us to deepen our relationships with families and engage them in their children's learning.

What family engagement opportunities exist through distance learning due to school closures?

- **Strengthening Relationships:** The opportunity to establish more personalized, two-way communication between schools and families, building mutual trust and providing families an authentic sense of engagement in their children's learning;
- **Building Capacity:** The opportunity to build each family's capacity and confidence in their ability to support their child's learning by modeling practices and sharing resources and tools;
- **Focusing on Learning:** The opportunity to leverage available resources from school and home, inquiring about student and family interests and creating meaningful distance learning experiences;
- **Connecting Communities:** The opportunity to engage the greater community to help meet the basic needs of families through a response that is compassionate and culturally responsive.

This guide recognizes that solutions will not be – nor should be – “school as usual,” simply delivered in a virtual environment at home. Distance learning is **an opportunity to invite family members to partner with us** in their child's learning.



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## ➤ STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

**The physical and emotional well-being of students, educators, families and communities are the priority at this time.** The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting our communities. Health and healing during this crisis should be prioritized. An initial reaction may be to “fill the day” with academic activities, but school leaders and teachers should consider how they can ensure conversations and next-steps focus on supporting meaningful, purposeful learning while prioritizing social-emotional and health needs.

### Things to Consider

- How will you best communicate with and engage the family members who will be supporting distance learning in the home, which may include parents, grandparents, extended family members, caregivers or other responsible individuals?
- Does the staff member who will be contacting the family have an established and positive relationship with the family? This may not be the primary teacher for the student, but could instead be a coach, specials teacher, counselor or mentor.
- How will you provide opportunities for two-way communication as you seek to build mutual trust with families during the distance learning process? What tools could you put in place to listen to families’ hopes and concerns for their children’s learning?
- How will you focus on physical and emotional well-being and stress reduction? Is the person contacting the family asking if the family has any current critical needs that may need to be met before their child could effectively engage in learning from home (e.g., food, clothing, housing, child supervision, medical services, medication, etc.)?

The Search Institute has identified key shifts we can make to energize our 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.



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## ► BUILD CAPACITY

**Distance learning can provide meaningful experiences that connect to students’ home lives, interests and identities, rather than trying to recreate school.** All families have hopes and dreams for their children and want the best for them, and we believe all families have the capacity to support their children’s learning. Distance learning provides an opportunity for families and school staff to work together as partners. Teachers can model the learning process for families, such as teaching how to think out loud or describing what you are doing as you do it. Families can be a thought partner by asking questions like “What did you notice? What do you wonder? Why do you think that’s happening? What can you teach me about this?” Asking questions, even when we do not know the answer, allows families and students to learn something new together and/or increases two-way communication with teachers. Distance learning is a chance to build families’ capacity to support learning now and in the future.

### Things to Consider

- How can your distance learning plan encourage joint decision-making (e.g., student and family voice and choice) through the process?
- How can you help families expand their knowledge-base, understand “the why” behind distance learning assignments and build confidence as they partner in their children’s learning?
- Beyond their technological capacity, how can you identify what each family has to offer (e.g., interests, skills, strengths) and potential challenges they may face (e.g. internet, supplies, time, etc.) in supporting their child’s learning?

[Dr. Steven Constantino offers us “The Five C’s – How Families Can Engage”](#) and [Edutopia](#) has created questions to help families engage in meaningful conversations with their child around school and learning. These could be used to help the family-to-child conversation around distance learning.



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## ➤ FOCUS ON LEARNING

**Distance learning is unique and not school as usual.** Trying to support school-like learning in a home setting may frustrate teachers, students and families without leading to real and lasting learning. Instead, focus on learning experiences that connect to families' home lives, interests, and identities. It is important for families to understand meaningful learning can happen with or without devices or access to the internet. In addition to school-provided learning resources, teachers can emphasize that meaningful learning occurs during everyday activities such as cooking, baking, reading together, building, painting and drawing or taking a walk outside by engaging students in relevant and real-time conversations.

### Things to Consider

- What opportunities will you give to students to share how they want teachers and families to support their learning?
- How can you use this opportunity to be responsive to student and family questions or concerns about learning?
- How can you build distance learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant to students and families and inclusive of different cultures, traditions and learning needs?
- How can you connect families and students to their peers to create interactive, collaborative learning communities or to provide continuous support, encouragement and resources through distance learning?

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



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## ➤ 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 closure of school buildings, families may be struggling to meet basic needs that are regularly met within the context of the school day. 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.

### Things to Consider

- How can you build on community strengths and resources to help students and families meet their basic needs during this time (e.g., food, clothing, housing, child supervision, medical services, medication, etc.)?
- How can you work with the community to provide families access to essential resources for distance learning (e.g., technology, internet access, educational supplies)?
- Who at your school could be designated to lead the coordination of school-community partnerships?
- How can you establish two-way communication to build trust and transparency with community partners?

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.



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## ➤ HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOU?

The Oklahoma State Department of Education Office of Family and Community Engagement team is here to help! Like many of you, our staff is working from home to remain safe. As a result, there will be a slight delay returning any voicemails left on our phones.

### Questions?

Family and Community Engagement

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

(405) 522-6225

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

For all other questions or to reach any staff member, contact [Hannah Smith](#), Family & Community Engagement/21st CCLC Coordinator

## 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.*
- Kansas State Department of Education. (2020). *Continuous Learning Task Force Guidance.*

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).

