Setting Up Individual Communication Systems with Students

As new routines begin, ensuring consistent, verifiable contact with every student is a foundational step in any community building or distance learning that comes after. Daily interaction between the student and their teachers is expected during COVID-19 distance learning. This can be done a variety of ways, but the aim should be to have at least two voice or video conversations each week. Also, ensure that every family has at least one check-in with a teacher or administrator in the first few weeks. The following list of strategies are from the School Resource Hub.

What information does a school need in order to set up strong communication routines?

In order to provide clear expectations on who is responsible for communicating with which students, especially during the early weeks of distance learning, schools will need to create lots of lists. These lists should include at least some of the following elements, and probably others as well depending on needs.

- Student name/address/phone numbers/email address
- Parent/guardian contact
- Emergency contact
- Language preference
- Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504, English Learner (EL) or other designations that may require making direct communication a top priority
- Grade
- Teacher or homeroom teacher
- Primary school point of contact—this will not be in a Student Information System (SIS) but should be identified to ensure clarity on who is responsible for communicating directly with the student
- Secondary school point of contact—this will not be in an SIS but should be identified to ensure clarity in the event the primary point of contact is unable to reach out to the student

This information should be accessible from the Student Information System. If it is not, this may require merging lists from multiple sources (if you need help merging lists try using VLOOKUP in Google Sheets or Excel). Ending up with an accurate master list of students, with crucial information associated with each student, is a must-have for the transition to distance learning.

Tip: Communicating first with students who need communication the most is a good strategy. This may include students who have an IEP, are most likely to have challenges communicating regularly with school, or who the school knows may need additional support.
What does a teacher or adult acting as a primary point of contact for students need in order to set up successful communication with students and families?

There are a number of ways to set up teachers for success as they start contacting students for whom they are responsible.

1. A clear list of the students they are responsible for contacting.
2. A place to put comments about their interactions—the attendance system may be helpful for this.
3. A way to update incorrect information on their lists—such as changed phone numbers or new email addresses.
4. Starting points and templates on what to communicate to students and families.
5. Guidance on how to communicate with their students. For example:
   a. Start with phone calls
   b. Then try text messages
   c. Deliver hand-written notes along with food deliveries
   d. If there is a Learning Management System (LMS) in place, or other learning platform, communicate via the LMS to see if students are receiving those messages
6. If contact isn’t made, escalate the issue to an administrator

Tip: Make effective use of all the adults in the building. Interventionists, special educators, and exceptional educators may be especially useful for making sure students with IEPs are getting sufficient contact from the beginning.

How can schools set up systems to track and communicate internally about which students have been contacted and which have not?

Setting expectations for communication with families and then starting the communication is important. However, knowing which families have not had verifiable contact with the school, and which families may need ongoing additional support to stay engaged, is crucial to not letting any families fall through the cracks.

Setting up internal systems to keep track of and prioritize families that have been hard to maintain communication with will help teachers and administrators prioritize their communication time.

As teachers and other adults communicate with families, they should log those interactions. This can be done in a variety of ways:

1. Use the attendance system to note interactions. For example, create a Google Sheets document where each grade can track their communication with students.
2. Set up routines for administrators and/or grade level teams to identify all students who have not been in contact with the school.
a. Daily—make a list of all students where there was a missed connection to make sure contacting those students is prioritized the following day.

b. Weekly—make a list of all students who have had insufficient contact that week and initiate an intervention plan.

3. Set up routines to keep student information up to date.

4. Identify a point person to make updates to the Student Information System as teachers identify errors in student contact information.

Allowing teachers visibility into seeing who has communicated with which students during the early phases of distance learning will allow for more consistent and coherent experiences for students and families. Allowing administrators to see which students have not had successful contact will allow them to intervene in an effort to prevent losing a student.