

Engaging with Families during COVID-19 Distance Learning

Start with your values and beliefs

Just as each school community is complex and unique, there is no single roadmap to guarantee success in engaging families while navigating through challenging times. Building relationships and trust through regular ongoing communications and meaningful interactions with families is critical to creating effective partnerships. These partnerships ensure your school community is ready to respond to any challenge, whether it's addressing bullying, increasing consistent attendance, shrinking achievement gaps, responding to a community tragedy, or ensuring the continuity of learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The struggle of adjusting to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic brings with it fresh opportunities to forge new relationships and build trust with families. We know through research that students whose parents are engaged and involved in their child's learning have better education outcomes, and that this remains true across racial and economic groups. This is the time to collaborate with the families most impacted by the inequities of the COVID crisis and co-create new resources, policies, learning innovations, relationships and traditions. Sadly, this pandemic also creates conditions that can exacerbate already tenuous relationships and amplify inequities and oppressive policies and beliefs.

In our work to engage families, we must isolate race. We have deep racial opportunity gaps in Minnesota. Black, brown, American Indian, and language-minority students and their families are not accessing the educational opportunities that have been promised to them by their local, state and federal governments. These same families are also more likely to be impacted by situational risk factors such as learning and behavioral disabilities, poverty, and food and housing insecurity. These are the marginalized families that the dominant culture has called the "hardest to reach" families or worse yet the families that "just don't care."

It's critical that we reflect on our beliefs and consider how they may be getting in the way of working together with all families. Family engagement researcher Professor Karen L. Mapp has discovered through many conversations with district leaders, principals, teachers and others that there are specific mindsets educators need in order to effectively engage families. In [Beyond the Bake Sale: the Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships](#), Mapp calls these the "**four essential core beliefs.**"

1. **All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them** – Many teachers are used to asking new families each fall about their daily routines, values, hopes and dreams for their child. These valuable insights families share with teachers have been coined their [Funds of Knowledge](#) by Professor Luis Moll. What new funds of knowledge do you need to help you facilitate continuity of learning and engagement now? How have families' daily routines, struggles, and goals change now that so much has changed?
2. **All families have the capacity to support their children's learning** – Families have traditionally supported their child's learning through playing, doing chores, and exploring their communities together. They grow used to establishing daily reading routines, setting healthy bedtime and morning schedules, and communicating regularly with teachers. This crisis has radically increased the demands

on families. No one ever expected them to take on the formal responsibility of facilitating their children's learning. What new capacities are families needing now? How will we ensure access to the supplies, devices, broadband, and coaching they need?

3. **Families and school staff are equal partners** – This has become more obvious and important during distance learning. It is important for schools to recognize what parents bring to their children's education, particularly in times of fear and uncertainty, when a positive and resilient home environment is key to ensuring children's emotional health. How will schools and teachers use this opportunity to deepen relational trust and connections with families? Can the relationships and innovations nurtured throughout this crisis create the future of learning for the whole school, whole child, and whole community?
4. **The responsibility for cultivating and sustaining partnerships among school, home, and community rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders** – Because schools hold the upper hand in this partnership, marginalized families need first to know that the school cares about and understands them, and values their collaboration. It's tempting to believe that as the experts in learning we know best how to [create equitable distance learning plans](#). The policies and solutions we design are rarely created with the families most impacted by inequities in mind (let alone in equal partnership). When we notice families disengaging in distance learning, will we respond, "Well, they're a hard-to-reach family?" Dr. Rosemarie Allen would remind us that we need to flip the narrative and believe that, "There are no hard-to-reach families, there are only hard-to-reach services." ... or hard-to-reach schools, and hard-to-reach instruction. How will we ensure that every child receives the equitable distance education opportunities that we're bound to deliver to them?

Considerations for School Leaders

School leaders play a critical role in guiding their school community through this challenging time of distance learning. Strategies for school leaders include:

- **Target specific families** – Personalized invitations to specific family groups, (for example black, brown, American Indian, immigrant and refugee, low-income, and language-minority families as well as families with students in special education, the afterschool program, the 2020 graduating class). How will you engage with unique family groups in ways that demonstrate you understand their needs, and are genuinely interested in addressing their concerns and hearing their ideas, hopes and dreams? Our Native American students experience some of the largest gaps in opportunity, learning, attendance, and discipline in Minnesota. Reaching and building trusting relationships is crucial. Your Indian Education staff is able to help you in your endeavors to connect with American Indian families. Who are your staff members who have the strongest relationships with the [families and student groups most impacted by any inequities](#) presented in your distance learning plan? Collaborate with this staff and connect them with teachers to build their capacities to stay connected and be responsive to their students and families.
- **Communicate regularly** — [Use a variety of methods to reach all families and demonstrate consistency and flexibility](#). Consider emails, text messages, robocalls, video messages, newsletters, social media posts and groups, letters and postcards sent to home addresses, articles in local newspapers, and regular check-ins with parent, community, and cultural and religious leaders.

- In accordance with Title IV of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and Executive Order 13166, as a recipient and conductor of federal funds, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and all public school districts must ensure that everyone has consistent and effective access to programs, services, and information. In this case, Covid-19 information, resources, and community-based supportive services. If language assistance services are not readily available, individuals who communicate in languages other than English may not be able to access critical information related to what schools, government, and communities are doing in response to Covid-19. Language barriers may also prevent bilingual parents from adequately engaging in distance learning with their children and teachers. As a result, certain individuals' or communities' concerns and needs will go unnoticed and support will be limited or completely absent. MDE recommends that all public school districts work toward eliminating language proficiency as an impediment to accessing any information related to Covid-19 and distance learning for their students and families, to the fullest extent required by law. Most language access plans typically encompass effective guidelines, procedures, and a timeline to frequently training staff on policy best practices and implementation.
- **Be authentic** – You are used to leading the school community from within the walls of your building. Be open about how you are adjusting to this new reality. What have been the most challenging aspects? What are your goals and inspirations for leading the community through this challenge? What is your daily life like now? Do you have children at home attending to their own learning? Are you lonely, anxious, or overwhelmed? What losses have come with this crisis and how are you grieving them? What do you imagine families and students are grieving in this moment? What's helping you cope on a daily basis? What do you look forward to doing or seeing when the school community can be together again? Share your thoughts and experiences with your staff, families, and students and invite them to share theirs with you and their teachers. As you do this, you are modeling the care and concern that your teachers, families, and students need from each other and you are demonstrating that social emotional skills are essential for resiliency when faced with adversity and uncertainty.
- **Be available** – Go to where your students and families are. Ride along with food and material distributions, show up at drop-off sites, and include hand-written personal notes and invitations to families to reconnect with you or their teachers in their food and materials packages. Set up regular virtual office hours and advertise to families that you want to hear from them about how distance learning is going for them. How else might you intentionally gather feedback, concerns, and ideas for improving the learning experience from families?
- **Demonstrate commitment** — Establish a working group to provide leadership around strategies to build relationships and connect with families. Ensure that the working group is linked to the school leadership team and includes a person with decision making authority. Include a diverse representation of classroom, specialist, and special education teachers, family and cultural liaisons, and parents/caretakers. Make sure that the staff with the strongest relationships and social capital with American Indian, black, brown, immigrant, low-income, and language-minority communities are included on the team and empowered to advocate for these communities and share strategies with teachers. Communicate in the languages used in your community. How will you ensure there is buy-in for school-wide and classroom specific strategies to engage families?
- **Prioritize engagement** – Be clear about your definition of family engagement and establish expectations to ensure that teachers build relationships and connect with all families regularly. How will teachers track their interactions with families? How will specialists track and share their connection data with

students' classroom or advisory teachers? What should teachers do when they are consistently unable to connect with a family and student? Who else is available to support them in connecting with families?

- **Reach out to cultural leaders, community partners, and care providers** — Reconnect with childcare, preschool, and Head Start providers to discover how their needs and services have changed. You likely share many of the same families. An important consideration is tribal consultations and partnerships on behalf of equitably meeting the needs of our Native American students. Who are the racial, ethnic, and cultural leaders in your community that families and students are connected with? Building relationships with these leaders will increase your ability to understand and connect with your families and students. How can you align your strategies to best support families and prepare them for their new role of supporting their child's distance learning? Many refugee families left their home countries to ensure that their children had access to a high-quality public education, and are now uncertain that they can facilitate their child's learning. Minnesota has one of the highest racial achievement gaps in the country, many of our black, brown and American Indian families are also worried that they don't have the capacity to support their child's learning. What do these families need during distance learning that they may not have thought to ask for in the past?
- **Advocate for your school community and families** – The new challenges your families are experiencing might not be “in your lane,” however you're in a position of power to raise awareness of their community-based needs. In [Understand and advocate for communities first](#), University of Minnesota professor, Muhammad Khalifa, explains “One of the oft-cited points about teaching is that students won't care about learning until they know that teachers care about them. The same idea translates into relationships between schools and parents. Parents won't care about what schools want them to do until they know that educators care about them and the concerns of their communities.” Khalifa stresses that this is especially true for black, brown, American Indian, and immigrant families who may have had negative, and possibly traumatic, experiences in their formal education. What are the services and the resources that your students and families are accessing and needing during COVID-19? Can you partner with food shelves, libraries, or homeless shelters to ensure they have access the internet? How else can you demonstrate your understanding of and concern for their needs at this time?
- **Ask for help** — if you are in a larger district, partner with your district's Family Engagement office, Title 1 Coordinator, and utilize existing resources and expertise like communications and cultural liaisons. Your district Indian Education staff knows the American Indian students and families. They are able to assist you in reaching out to families. The American Indian Parent Advisory Committee is another avenue of reaching more American Indian students and families.

Considerations for Teachers and Staff

Teachers and staff who work with children of all ages play critical roles in ensuring every family engages with the school during this challenging time of distance learning. Teachers should not assume that parents know how to use a computer or iPad, are proficient in English or their home language, or even feel comfortable speaking with their children about school work. Teachers should not assume that all students have adequate space, designated quiet time, schedules, or parental guidance and support at home. These are assumptions that, as a society, we impose on others based on our own socioeconomic status and resources, culture, and lived experiences. On the contrary, teachers should expect that time management, navigating personal/familial/school expectations, proper nutrition and sleep will be difficult to achieve for many of their students. Leverage staff who are closest to the most vulnerable families including Indian Education, Achievement and Integration, Full-service

Community School Coordinators, Special Education, English Learner, family and cultural liaisons, social workers and counselors, or even coaches. Strategies for teachers and staff include:

- **Get reacquainted** – Teachers likely have the closest relationship with students and families. Leverage these relationships to connect with each family to find out what they need during distance learning. Does your student need to care for others while also attending school each day? Does your student have access to a reliable internet connection and learning devices? Will your student have an adult available during the day to help them with questions or challenges? Would a flexible learning schedule give your student access to more support in the evenings or over the weekend? What non-academic concerns does the family have? Has the family noticed any new or challenging behaviors? This [checklist](#) can help with questions to ask students to support building developmental relationships (Search Institute).
- **Be authentic** – You're used to facilitating your students' learning inside of your thoughtfully organized classroom. Be open with families about how you are adjusting to this new reality. What have been the most challenging aspects? What are your goals and inspirations for ensuring continued learning throughout the pandemic? What is your daily life like now? Do you have children at home attending to their own learning? Are you lonely, anxious, or overwhelmed? What's helping you cope on a daily basis? What do you look forward to doing or seeing when the school community can be together again? Share your thoughts and experiences with your families and students and invite them to share theirs with you.
- **Prioritize engagement** – Prioritize learners and families who are not engaging in learning. Set time aside and develop a systematic way to ensure that you're interacting with every learner. How will you identify students who aren't engaging or succeeding in the learning? How will you reach out to the families of these students? Listen to the student and the way they are responding. Be attuned to signs of distress, depression and anxiety then act on those signs to find out more, and connect them with support. Engage with families both together with their child and separately. Be flexible with the times and content when you're engaging with families. How can you work collaboratively with these families? What flexibility and accommodations do you have to offer these families? What supports do you need from your school leaders and cultural and family liaisons to give you the tools and confidence you need to interact with and be responsive to each family's needs?
- **Follow up** – Family engagement isn't a one-time event that you can complete and be done with. A family might express a need to you and you might connect them with the resource. Remember that even with a referral to resources, some families will not be able to access the services because of eligibility criteria, transportation, or scheduling issues. Follow up in a couple days to ask if they were able to get what they needed. Also, this is a rapidly changing situation. A family that had housing and food security the first week, may be experiencing challenges now. Keep asking about what the family might need throughout this pandemic. Demonstrating that you care about them will build relational-trust and make it easier for them to reconnect with you the next time they have an important concern.
- **Make positive connections** – The best time to connect with families and build relationships and trust are when things are going well. Take this time and opportunity to share more about yourself and how you are managing and adapting to distance learning. Share what you are still unsure about and ask for suggestions for improving the learning experiences. How can you reassure parents that you are in this together with them? How are you showing your appreciation for their daily contributions and commitments to working together to support their child's learning? Acknowledge that this isn't easy and it's okay to feel overwhelmed. What might you say or do to remind parents to take care of themselves and to give everyone in their home a little extra grace and space to struggle and grow during this

challenging time? If you need help reaching out and making positive connections with American Indian families, please contact your Indian Education staff to assist you.

- **Help families and students connect with each other** – Students will be missing their friends and parents will appreciate opportunities to commiserate and share strategies with other families experiencing similar challenges. Consider creating a virtual contact list that families can opt into so that they can connect with each other and help their child connect with classmates as well.
- **Ask for help** – Invite parent volunteers to help out in your new virtual classroom. Create a list of tasks that you could use help with. What interests or talents do parents have that they might like to share with learners? How might parent volunteers connect with other parents to learn more about the needs of the community? If you have an American Indian Parent Advisory Committee, reach out to see if they are available to assist you. Parents will feel honored and proud to contribute, and you may be surprised at their dedication, skills, and generosity!

Considerations for Families and Caregivers

The Minnesota Department of Education recognizes that distance learning will create various opportunities and challenges for families. This document is designed to support families balancing work, child care, self-care and other concerns by sharing considerations and available resources. Families should be familiar with their school's websites, family engagement plan, language access policy, and other channels of communication including their school's distance learning plan. Families are encouraged to communicate regularly with teachers, cultural liaisons, family advocates, school leaders, and other families so that challenges can be identified and addressed collaboratively.

Families can expect from their child's teachers and school:

- Regular communications about attendance, learning expectations and your child's progress in your home language(s).
- Opportunities for one to one support for your child if they are struggling to learn a concept. This includes Special Education services, English Learner support, and additional services your child would normally receive in school.
- Support to help you and your family get the devices and Internet connectivity you need to access distance learning as required in the school or District's plan.
- Access to an interpreter and translated materials in primary home language to support communication with teachers and the school.
- Connections to services if you are experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, food insecurity, job loss and financial hardships, or needing mental health supports, etc. Access to child care if you are an essential worker.
- Referrals to community-based supportive services providers for culturally specific needs and issues.
- Flexibility and understanding of your family's strengths and needs.

Families can support learning

A parent or guardian is their child's most important teacher and advocate. A child is likely to succeed and thrive in school and in every other aspect of life when he or she is unconditionally loved and supported by adults who are there consistently. A parent also knows their child best which is why it is important that parents intentionally

engage with children to build on strengths and nurture challenges. Whether you're singing lullabies in your home language, playing together, making a meal, taking care of a sibling or pet, telling family histories, reliving treasured memories, sharing memes, and learning your child's favorite new dance, your child is learning.

Now that you're being asked to take a formal role in their academic learning you may be feeling overwhelmed. Be open and honest with your child's teachers and school about the challenges of distance learning you may be facing so that you can work together on flexible solutions. You don't need to be an expert in the content your child is learning. Below are some things you can do to partner with them in their learning.

- Ask questions to help them think through their work:
 - Getting started: Where can you begin? What do you know? What do you need to find out? How can you get the information?
 - While working: How can you organize the information? What do you need to do next?
 - Reflecting: What did you try that didn't work? Has the question (if there is one) been answered? How do you know?
 - Extending: Can you explain it differently? Tell me more.
- When content is difficult or unfamiliar focus on the students' efforts to learn rather than sharing your own difficulties or frustrations with subject matter.
- When students are stuck, provide feedback on the strategies they can use to solve problems. [Video: Three ways parents can instill a growth mindset.](#)
 - Recognize your own mindset: Be mindful of your own thinking and of the messages you send with your words and actions.
 - Praise the process: Praising kids for being smart suggests that innate talent is the reason for success, while focusing on the process helps them see how their effort leads to success.
 - Model learning from failure: When parents talk positively about making mistakes, kids start to think of mistakes as a natural part of the learning process.

For more information about your child's school's family engagement plan, language access policy, and parent and community engagement opportunities, please contact: MDE.el@state.mn.us.

Additional Resources

- [Talking to Children about COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#) from the National Association of School Psychologists
- [Special Education COVID-19 Resources](#) posted at the Minnesota Department of Education
- [COVID-19 Resources](#) from the National PTA
- [Social Emotional Learning Resources during COVID-19](#) from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- [Caring for Children during COVID-19](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Family Activity Guide for families with babies, toddlers and preschoolers](#)

Child Care

[COVID-19 Child Care Information for Families and Providers](#), State of Minnesota

Income, employment

[Minnesota Unemployment Insurance \(UI\) Program](#)

[Economic Assistance](#), MN Department of Human Services (DHS)

Food and nutrition

[Feeding America](#)

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As with most of the guidance from the State of Minnesota during the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation is fluid and evolving, and this guidance may be updated to reflect new developments and strategies.

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