



A Principal's Guide to Leading in the Time of a Pandemic: Effective Family Engagement Strategies and Resources

WHY NOW?

As schools are consumed with operational changes related to school closures—online learning options and hybrid models of learning—educators need support to effectively partner with families and embrace parents as critical allies.

Given the many remote learning and hybrid learning models that will be used this year, parent-teacher partnerships are more important than ever to ensure student success. A [national parent survey conducted by Learning Heroes¹](#) during the spring school closures revealed actionable insights:

- A majority of parents felt more connected to their child's daily education and, as a result, want to be more engaged moving forward. Parents want a better understanding of what their child is expected to learn and how they are achieving academically.
- At the same time 92% of parents, regardless of race, education, or income level, believe their child is performing at or above grade level. This is in stark contrast to the National Assessment of Educational Progress data, which show that just over a third of students nationally perform grade level work in reading and math.² As noted in NWEA's [The COVID-19 slide³](#) report, the impact on academic achievement given school closures may be significant. In fact, 64% of principals indicated they were "very concerned" about student learning loss in a recent [NAESP survey⁴](#).
- The disconnect between how parents perceive their child's performance and the reality must be addressed for parents to most effectively support learning at home.

As a result of school closures last spring, many students may not be fully prepared for grade level work as they begin a new school year. Teachers and parents need a shared understanding of where students are academically at the start of the year so they can work together to ensure students stay on track. This Principal Guide was created to help school leaders support their teachers as they work toward effective two-way communication and share information about student learning with families.

1 Learning Heroes, [Parents 2020: COVID-19 Closures, A Redefining Moment for Students, Parents & Schools](#)

2 National Assessment of Educational Progress, [The Nation's Report Card](#)

3 NWEA, [The Covid-19 slide](#)

4 National Association for Elementary School Principals, [National Principal Survey](#)

Schools in the U.S. are navigating uncharted territory. Depending on the school, students may attend in-person, participate in a hybrid model, or begin the year in a completely virtual learning environment. One thing that is true for all schools is that strong partnerships with families are more important than ever. Regardless of the model your school has adopted, the following ideas can help you share critical information about what is happening, strengthen relationships with families, provide student data in a parent-friendly way, and help all parents know how to use the resources you provide.

- As much as possible, help your team select as **few platforms** for students/families to reduce access barriers and confusion. Encourage your teachers to use the same apps whenever possible and ensure it is easy for parents to monitor their children's school experience.
- Provide key information in multimedia formats and translated into family native languages. Post **brief videos** that share important updates and reassures parents that children are safe (in the case of in-person models).
- Develop a short and easy-to-use curated **list of helpful links** to navigate this new reality. Include school-based and community-based resources and sort them by topic.
- Post an **FAQ** about returning to school and share with parents via email, texts, social media posts, school website, and apps (e.g., Remind, Class Dojo, Kinvolved). Co-host a [community conversation](#) in partnership your school's parent group, such as a PTA, on the concerns and questions parents have about their child's education during the pandemic.
- Consider having grade level teams post **video tutorials** showing families how to use your learning platform and any apps. Urge teachers to encourage parents to ask questions and provide feedback. Provide links to the tutorials via email, texts, social media, etc.
- Use social media and teacher apps to **ask families** what they need most from you and your school right now. Consider also having a designated phone number and email address for parent questions and a staff member assigned to fielding the questions.
- Use this [PTA resource](#) for additional ideas on transformative family engagement, and click [here](#) for more on building a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive PTA.



TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO SUPPORT TEACHERS

Strengthen Relationships — Encourage and help teachers make a positive, personal connection with every parent/guardian—especially during the uncertainty surrounding the changes this school year. The following actions can help strengthen the trust between home and school:

- Urge teachers to engage with every parent through a **welcoming phone call or virtual session** during the first week(s) of school. Don't rely on an email or a robocall. Help classroom teachers use a “get to know you” call to:
 - » *Welcome the child and the parent to their class and ask each parent what their hopes and dreams are for their child.*
 - » *Ask parents for their expertise on their child (e.g. share their child's interests, hobbies, etc.)*
 - » *Acknowledge that families are balancing a lot between work and new school models and let them know the school is here to help. For example, be mindful that parents might be relying on older children or extended family to help younger children with virtual learning.*
 - » *Ask parents what's the best way to be in touch with them and confirm when/how the parent and teacher will stay in regular communication. Discuss any concrete expectations related to this.*
- In addition to individual sessions with parents, encourage teachers to meet with families in groups through a biweekly (or monthly) **virtual town hall**. Help teachers know how to use these online sessions to welcome families, share information updates, and help families to connect with one another.

Share Information About Learning — Reducing parent anxiety and creating a welcoming environment is the first step on the path to strong school-home partnerships. Once families feel comfortable with the school and their child's teachers, it is important to share information about how students are performing. Making this information available as early in the year as possible gives families more time to support their child's learning at home. The following ideas and hyperlinked resources can help your staff share student performance data with families:

- Have individual **virtual meetings or phone calls to create a learning plan** with each family during the first month(s) of school. For example, use this [Parent-Teacher Planning Tool](#) to co-create a learning plan based on a shared understanding of student achievement. This [‘how to’ resource](#) shows how to integrate the planning tool into existing parent outreach.
- Address **parent questions—even the tough ones**. Provide teachers with this [Discussion Guide](#) that includes sample talking points on how to handle parent questions. Encourage your faculty to help each other learn. Provide time for teachers to **role play** sharing student benchmark data within their grade level teams.

- Connect **parents to outside resources** (e.g. community organizations that offer tutoring, social/emotional support or basic resources like food banks, etc.) so they are aware of the help available and can leverage it.
- Create **video tutorials** that show parents how to monitor their child’s progress—how to login to the parent portal, what data to look for, and how to recognize issues of concern.
- Avoid using “**education jargon**” in parent communications. For example, instead of “student growth” say “student progress.” Try using this [Developing Life Skills: Communication Roadmap](#) to help break down social-emotional/life skills for parents.

Help parents use learning resources — We know student academic performance improves when parents take action at home to aid their child’s learning. To support parent action, teachers can suggest which resources to use at home and help them know how to use the resources effectively. Think about what it takes to move students to master a new skill. Teachers first demonstrate the new concept and then provide multiple opportunities for students to practice the skill, first in groups with other students and then individually, all the while monitoring and supporting the learning process. Adult learners need the same learning experience to master new concepts. Consider using following ideas to make sure all staff help parents know what to do and how to do it:

- **Connect with parents one-on-one**, doing demonstrations. If parents struggle with technology, assist teachers in finding ways to safely meet with parents in-person to demonstrate the new skill (e.g. hosting a technology session outdoors in the school parking lot).
- Clearly communicate **the 1 to 3 things you want families to do**. For example, “help your child be logged in on time, ready for the planned lessons, and follow up to make sure they are doing the assignments after the lesson.”
- Host “**Parent Academy**” **virtual sessions** 1-2 times each month to teach families how to use the resources you provide. Help staff to use these sessions to provide families with multiple opportunities to practice and receive feedback about the new skill.
- Invite **families to post videos** of them successfully practicing skills at home with their child. Consider a celebratory ‘badging’ or recognition for those that share videos.
- Establish **virtual family support groups** so families can share ideas, questions, and celebrate when they are being successful at home supporting student learning.



ENSURING YOUR TEACHERS SUCCEED

The new school year with all of its COVID-related changes is not just a challenge for families. Ensuring students learn during the time of a pandemic is also stressful for teachers. As an administrator, reduce the anxiety your teachers feel about home-school partnerships by preparing them for success and by supporting them throughout the year with coaching and additional professional learning. Consider using the following ideas to help your faculty:

- Spotlight, celebrate, or even incentivize the sharing of **successful practices** or new ideas on how teachers can connect with families.
- As the building leader, model the way by practicing student **data chats** with your teachers.
- **Connect teachers** who are more tech savvy with novice teachers to help them build confidence for communicating with and training families.
- Provide **professional learning for teachers** on adult learning strategies.
- Incentivize teachers or PLC teams to **leverage free webinars** about family engagement best practice. Here are webinars from [PTA](#) and [Harvard](#).

As the “lead learner” in the building, help create the conditions that allow your teachers to be successful in their efforts to partner with parents. Think about using the following ideas to provide ongoing support throughout the year:

- Make **time** for teachers to connect with parents. Dedicate explicit time at all staff meetings for teachers to call families.
- During **individual check-ins** with teachers, ask...
 - » *What is going well as you reach out to families?*
 - » *What differences are you seeing with your students as a result of these partnerships?*
 - » *What challenges are you encountering?*
 - » *What do you need most from me to help you partner with all parents?*
- Create **school-wide “challenges”** to incentivize teachers to be successful. Have a contest to see which grade level is able to reach the most families during a 2-week time period.
- Use staff meeting time to **acknowledge teachers who have made strong connections** with parents and allow these staff to share their successes with the entire faculty.

Here is another principal resource developed by NAESP: [Leveraging Principals to Ensure Safe and Successful School Reopenings](#)

ABOUT LEARNING HEROES

Learning Heroes supports parents and guardians as their child’s most effective education advocate. Using key insights from five years of qualitative and quantitative parent research, we work with state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), education nonprofits, parent organizations, civil rights groups, faith based organizations, businesses, and many others, to reach and engage parents with free, research based tools, resources and communications in English and Spanish. Through these organizations, in 2019, Learning Heroes reached more than 27 million parents, and engaged nearly 4 million with our content. Learning Heroes is a project of the New Venture Fund. For more information, visit belearninghero.org.

ABOUT NAESP

Principals are the primary catalysts for creating lasting foundations for learning. Since 1921, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has been the leading advocate for elementary and middle-level principals in the United States and worldwide. NAESP advances the profession by developing policy, advancing advocacy, and providing professional learning and resources for instructional leadership, including specialized support and mentoring for early career principals. Key focus areas include pre-K–3 education, school safety, technology and digital learning, and effective educator evaluation. NAESP administers the National Principals Resource Center, the American Student Council Association, and the President’s Education Awards & American Citizenship Awards Programs. For more information about NAESP, please visit: naesp.org

ABOUT NATIONAL PTA

National PTA® comprises millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of family engagement in schools. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit association that prides itself on being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. Membership in PTA is open to anyone who wants to be involved and make a difference for the education, health, and welfare of children and youth. For more information, visit PTA.org.