



The Family Insights ToolKit

Strategies for Effectively **Developing
Family-School Partnerships** in the
COVID-19 Era and Beyond

Effectively
Engaging Families
Changes Student
Outcomes



Partnering with Families to Change Student Outcomes

Decades of research have shown the importance of engaging families as partners in students' learning. But, in recent years, with many schools and districts tasked with meeting the growing demands of standards and assessments, operationalizing family engagement seemed peripheral rather than essential.

Currently, learning environments are migrating from the classroom to the home in response to the global pandemic. And, around the country, communities are working to shift educational institutions to be more inclusive and representative as they openly grapple with the long history of systemic racial inequality. Given this context, the role of families has become increasingly more critical both to encourage student achievement and growth and to ensure that a broader set of perspectives is included in district and school decision-making. Therefore, moving forward with an asset-based view of families is fundamental.

This ToolKit is designed to provide educators with insights, research, and strategies on how to effectively partner with families so that every student has an equitable opportunity to learn.

The ToolKit is divided into three sections:

Effectively Communicating with Families

Family Agency and Attendance

Families as Assets to Learning

Each section builds upon the last to provide a framework for effectively leveraging families as a support system for learning this fall and beyond.

Families' Concerns About the Return to School

We conducted a nationally representative survey to see what families are considering as they think about returning to school. Our responses show that families are clearly conflicted over the best path forward for learning this fall and whether schooling should be in-person, remote, or a combination of the two. Their responses reflect the very complicated and high-stakes nature of these decisions, with concerns over health, safety, and social connectedness at the forefront of their thinking. **Here is what we found:**

Health and Safety were families' top concerns:

65% were concerned about students returning to **in-person classes**



51% were concerned about students participating in **hybrid learning**

For hybrid learning, families were also concerned about:

Lack of social opportunities

48%

Inconsistency in schedules

41%

Learning loss

34%

Lack of extracurricular activities

33%

Lack of access to resources and services

24%

Classroom Learning vs. Distance Learning

Overall:



55% said it's very important for their student to get back in the classroom



48% said it's very important for their child to participate in distance learning

(88% said it's somewhat or very important to participate in distance learning)

By Income:

68% of those in public schools who are high-income said classroom attendance is very important



vs. **55%** of low-income public-school respondents

Effectively Communicating with Families

Within our current context, families are facing a myriad of challenging circumstances, often limiting their time, energy, and ability to keep up with the constantly-evolving updates from districts, schools, and teachers. At the same time, more and more students are learning remotely making families a critical component of student growth, development, and achievement.

Being able to reach families is a requisite for any effective school to family communication. With employment instability on the rise, families are at risk for losing phone service and are more likely to be changing email addresses. Therefore, it is fundamental for schools and districts to regularly ask families to update their contact information, preferably by mail if possible, as that is the most stable source for contact.

We know from years of research that effective communication is the foundation of productive family-school partnerships. With clear, ongoing, and meaningful dialogue, schools can invite families in as valued partners in the learning process. **When communicating with families, keep the following strategies and tips in mind:**

Keep it Simple

To be respectful of families' time, keep messages simple. Based on our research, writing at a fourth-grade level is most effective. It is also important for messages to be sent in the families' home language so the information can be easily understood. Relying on students to translate information can be uncomfortable for families, overly burdensome on students, and unreliable in conveying nuanced messaging.

Make it Skimmable

The format of the communication is important. Most readers naturally skim text rather than doing a close read. Avoid dense text blocks. Use bold, actionable headers (e.g., "Your Student is Expected to", "Do This", "Then This", or "Important Dates") followed by short bullets to help make information more accessible.

Share Timely Information

As plans, calendars, and structures for schools continue to change on a seemingly daily basis, many families are struggling to stay up to date. Therefore, it is important to focus communications on pertinent information or requirements that families need to know in the near-term.

Ensure the Message is Meaningful

Robocalls, mass emails, and one-size-fits-all letters are easier to operationalize, but they are not effective family engagement tools. Families' main priority is their own child's experience. Sharing information with families that is personalized to their particular student, including the student name and student data when possible, maximizes the impact of the message.

Only **11% of families** reported receiving access to a hotline to call, email, or chat for questions about supporting home learning.¹

Use Multiple Channels for Communication

Multi-channel communication is equitable communication as not all families can consistently access information in the same way. Utilizing print-based mailing, text messaging, and phone calls broadens the reach and impact of district and school communication.

Research suggests print communication is more effective for getting families to take action in the medium to long-term. Mailed letters go on fridges and are discussed with students and spouses—they are social artifacts that stay in the home over time. Research also shows that mail is a reliable way to reach over 90% of families. Text messages are great for getting families to take immediate actions like “Login now” or sharing breaking information like “Classroom learning resumes tomorrow”. And sometimes the best way to connect with a particular family is one-on-one phone call conversation.

Create a Communication Calendar

In order to be thoughtful and intentional about communication with families, create a calendar taking into consideration the content, sequence, modality, and timing of messages throughout a school year.

As you create your calendar, think about breaking up your messages into a pre-planned series of what families need to know right away, and then build on that message with regularly scheduled communications. Consistently sending messages on a regular day of the week or time of day helps families to establish a routine of looking for information and creates positive habits for family engagement.

Automatically Enroll Families

Requiring families to opt-in to district or school communications creates a barrier for family engagement. An opt-out approach can increase family enrollment rates from 8%, or less, to 96%.² Automatically enroll all families into district communications at the beginning of the year and give families the opportunity to opt-out.

What Families Want to Know More About

79% want to know how their student’s distance learning attendance compares to peers’

73% want to get a better understanding of what their student is learning in their new grade level

47% want personalized guidance for how to best support their child

88% want clear expectations about how many hours a day their student should be participating in distance learning

88% want more information on services available to support their student and family

Todd Rogers, our Chief Scientist, spent his career as a behavioral scientist studying how to get people to engage in positive behavior across industries. As Director of the Harvard Student Social Support R&D Lab, he puts that expertise to work operationalizing interventions that mobilize families to support student outcomes. Based on his research, we have pulled together a checklist that reflects the tips above to help educators more effectively communicate with families.



As you plan for the fall, remember to survey your families to ensure their voices are heard.

¹ “Parents 2020: COVID-19 Closures – A Redefining Moment for Students, Parents, and Schools.” Be A Learning Hero, Learning Heroes, May 2020, bealearninghero.org/research/.
² Bergman, P. (2015). Parent-child information frictions and human capital investment: Evidence from a field experiment; Bergman, P., & Chan, E. W. (2017). Economics of Education; Bergman, P., Lasky-Fink, J., & Rogers, T. (2017).

When communicating expectations around attendance, engagement, or homework—whether students are participating in distance learning or in-person classroom learning—keep this checklist in mind.

Family Communication Checklist

- ✓ **Simple:** Write concisely at a fourth-grade level in the family's home language.
- ✓ **Skimmable:** Write using headings and bullets so it is easily skimmed.
- ✓ **Timely:** Share actionable and relevant information.
- ✓ **Meaningful:** Provide information that is meaningful and personalized to each student.
- ✓ **Multi-channel:** Use mail, email, phone calls, and text messages to equitably communicate.
- ✓ **Calendar:** Send communications on a regular schedule to establish a routine.
- ✓ **Automatic:** Automatically enroll families in communications with the option for them to opt out.



Dear Parent/Guardian of Casey Lee,

We are excited to welcome Casey to the start of 8th Grade! We have a lot to look forward to this year!

To help our community stay healthy, we will begin the year with remote learning. Here are a few things to help you get ready:

First Day: Casey's first day will start at **8 am on Tuesday, August 18**. Log in with Casey at [login-link] using the instructions on the back of this letter. Casey's teachers look forward to seeing Casey online!

Contact Info: Do we have the correct phone number, email, and mailing address on file for you? Update your contact info at [contact-info-update-link].

Attendance: Connecting to remote learning every day is required and will help stay connected to teachers and on track in 8th grade. If Casey ever needs to please call 987-654-3210 to let us know.

help: If we can help with things like login, internet, device, or mental health, or anything else, call 987-654-3210.

**Download
Sample Back to
School Letter**



Family Agency and Attendance

Partnering with Families to Increase Attendance and Engagement

Chronic absence is an issue of equity that disproportionately impacts under-resourced families and communities. Chronic absence is also a leading indicator for risk of academic trouble. The students likely to be chronically absent or disengaged are also those most likely to be negatively impacted by the disruptions caused by COVID-19. That is why it is more important than ever that schools and districts empower families to help them understand that attendance and engagement are critical to learning and to connect them to district and community resources that help mitigate barriers to attendance.

Families are the most critical support system for attendance and engagement because they have more agency over it than anyone else in a student's learning community. However, research shows that families have some common misbeliefs about attendance:

- ✓ Families underestimate their student's total absences by a factor of two
- ✓ Families believe their student's attendance is average or better than average
- ✓ Families think that missing just a few days of school per month does not impact learning

Starting with the Research

One powerful strategy for addressing absenteeism at scale is effectively communicating with families about attendance in a way that helps to clarify these misconceptions. In their seminal study of 28,000 households in Philadelphia, Rogers and policy analyst Avi Feller used attendance nudges in the form of mailed reports to help families do just that.³

Throughout the year, six mailings were sent to the families of students in every grade. Within this sample, 73 percent of students were Black or Latino and 74 percent qualified for free or reduced lunch.

The mailings:

- ✓ Effectively communicated the importance of attendance
- ✓ Illustrated how the students' attendance compared to their classmates
- ✓ Helped families keep track of total absences

The result:

- ✓ There was a ten percent reduction in absences for chronically absent students.
- ✓ The findings were consistent across K-12 grade levels and demographics.
- ✓ The result was increased attendance at a fraction of the cost of other interventions.

EveryDay Labs was founded on this research and the understanding that effective family-school partnerships can improve student outcomes. In response to COVID-19, we developed Evident—our attendance and family communication program—designed to empower families with information to encourage participation in distance learning and improve overall attendance rates. The program strategically utilizes both research-based print communications via mail and two-way text messages to connect with families and promote positive changes in learning engagement. To learn more, visit everydaylabs.com/evident.

³ Rogers, Todd & Feller, A. Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour* 2(5), 335-342 (2018)

Families as Assets to Learning

Families are essential to student learning and growth. And in this current context, families have an increased role in student attendance and engagement. With the locus of learning shifting to remote environments, teachers must collaborate with parents to facilitate learning.

Because of this, districts need to expand the breadth and depth of their family engagement strategies. This includes empowering families as partners and providing teachers with effective supports to connect with families.

To accomplish this, schools and districts must equip teachers with the time and tools they need to effectively support families. Teachers need explicit time within their schedule to dedicate to family engagement. They also need readily accessible information on resources to help families address many of the non-academic barriers they may face including:

- **Food insecurity**
- **Digital access and support**
- **Housing insecurity**
- **Transportation**
- **Translation services**

Families are a tremendous resource for student success. They provide a unique perspective and understanding of their own children. In order to truly partner with families, schools and districts must use the ongoing broader dialogue around racial inequities to shape their practices. It is important for educators to examine their own biases, both at individual and institutional levels, and reflect on ways traditional family engagement excludes far too many families.⁴

In order to engage with families and include their important voices, districts and schools must respect the cultural backgrounds of students and families. This kind of authentic engagement that helps educators to understand their students' cultures allows them to create a learning path for students that honors their students'

experiences and backgrounds. Research shows that students are more successful and have higher attendance when learning is culturally relevant. Therefore, districts and schools must actively work to break down barriers and expand their practices in order to connect with all families.

Virtual Home Visits

The home visit is one powerful strategy for developing effective family-school partnerships that increase attendance. COVID-19 made home visits more difficult, but the same technologies that can help facilitate learning during school closures can help facilitate home visits. Educators can engage in virtual home visits with families all year long.

Starting with the Research

A study out of the Johns Hopkins University conducted in Washington, D.C. focused on the impact of The Family Engagement Partnership (FEP), a capacity-building intervention designed to develop meaningful family-school partnerships. Home visits were an integral part of the intervention. The research included 4,000 students across 12 public elementary schools. The results of the study added to a growing body of research showing the positive impact of home visits on student success.⁵

Participating teachers focused on three core strategies:

- ✓ The first home visits focused on building connectedness and getting to know families. Specifically, teachers asked families about their hopes for their students and helped them to set expectations for the coming year.
- ✓ Follow up visits focused on academic collaboration with teachers sharing student progress updates, engaging in capacity-building activities, and setting goals with families.

- ✓ Throughout the year, there were consistent, on-going communications between teachers and families.

The results:

- ✓ Students from families who received a home visit from their teacher had 24% fewer absences.
- ✓ Students from families who received a home visit were also more likely to be reading at or above grade level.

Shifting to Virtual Family Engagement

When engaging families through virtual home visits and outreach, it is important for educators to have a collaborative, empathetic, and open approach. Some considerations to keep in mind as you connect with families:⁶

Be mindful of scheduling: Just like in-person home visits, virtual home visits might not be feasible for some families during school hours.

Focus on building trust: In order to build trust, it is important to establish a strong relationship that includes an open dialogue. To do this, it is important for educators to get to know families. At the beginning of the year, ask families about their goals for their students and insights about their students and the way they learn.

Collaborate: In instances of distance or hybrid learning, educators must support families as they help to facilitate learning. While it is always important for families to know about what their students are learning, it is even more critical now for families to be engaged in that learning. And teachers must respect families' questions, challenges, and feedback on the remote learning process.

Be consistent: Ongoing and regular communication is essential to a strong family-school partnership. By creating channels for communication early in the year, and following up with consistent messaging through those channels, families and teachers can productively engage in open, two-way conversations about learning.

Utilize the school support system: Educators are usually a family's main point of contact; but teachers may not always have the resources to address underlying challenges to student engagement such as health, housing, and unemployment. Utilize school counselors and other support staff to connect families to district supports and community-based resources.

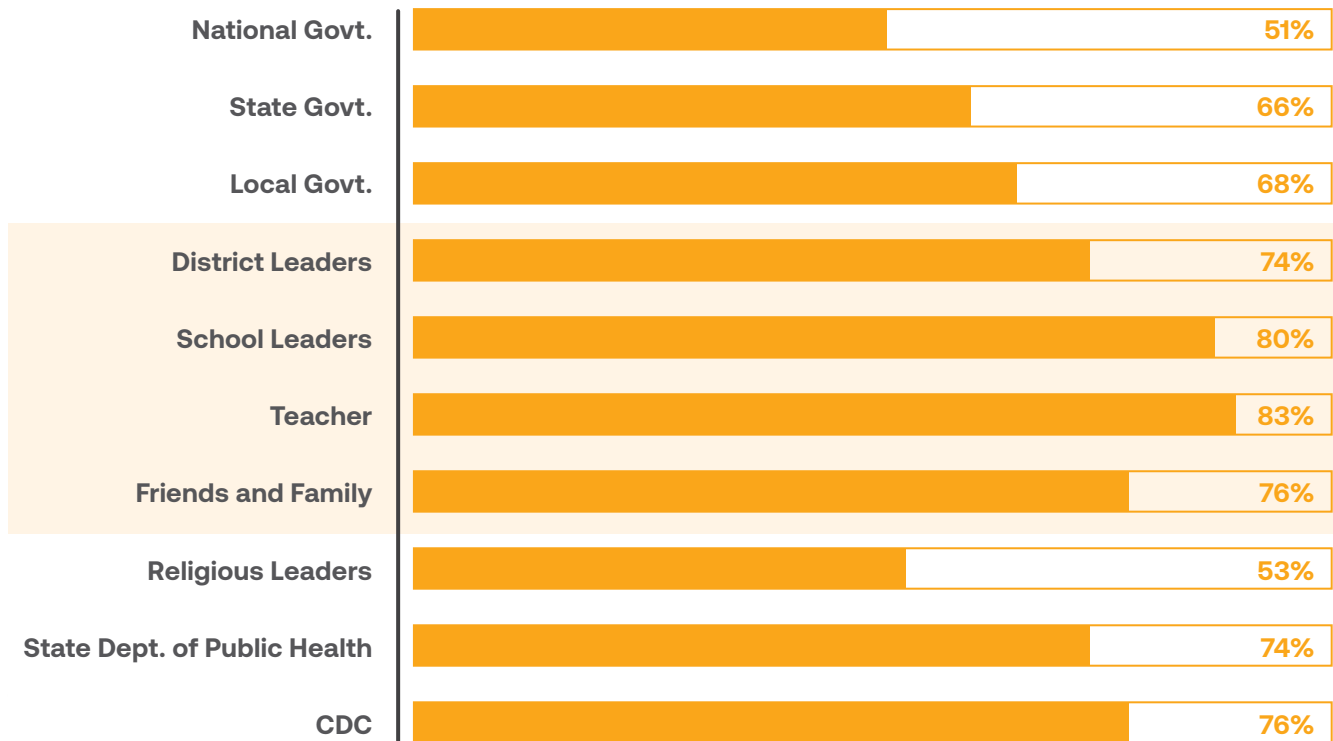


Some teachers and families may be uncomfortable sharing a live background of their home on video conferencing. Zoom and other conferencing platforms often offer virtual backgrounds. You might suggest using these backgrounds or simply connect via phone to alleviate any discomfort.

Moving Family-School Partnerships Forward

The current environment presents unprecedented challenges to student learning and wellbeing. Our national survey indicates that even in a climate of national uncertainty, families look to school leaders and teachers more than any other source of information as an authority on school safety.

Who Families Trust for Information



This school year presents a powerful opportunity to build on the trust that families have with school leaders and teachers and redefine how family-school partnerships can contribute to learning and student success. We can take significant strides to move learning forward by meaningfully engaging families as equal partners in the education of their children.



To learn more about how we can help you effectively
partner with families to increase K-12 attendance,
visit everydaylabs.com,
or email us at info@everydaylabs.com.



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