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Focus: Family Engagement

Effective Family Outreach in the Pandemic Era

by Karmen Rouland, Ph.D., and Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many issues at the intersection of teaching, learning and family engagement with schools. Whichever model school districts adopt for teaching this year, educators will have to ensure that they create meaningful collaborations with families and engage in consistent, personal communication.

Families and students need school districts to use culturally responsive family engagement practices and foster strong relationships with families as this strange school year evolves. Following are strategies for educators in the age of COVID-19.

Challenge negative assumptions about families and stop family engagement activities that are based on those

assumptions. (They didn’t work anyway.) Few people question the value of parents being involved in schools, but many educators labor with traditional strategies that have little meaning or success.

In a recent IDRA webinar, Lourdes Flores, executive director of ARISE in South Texas, described the struggle families in colonias face daily with long work hours, lack of internet access, and health concerns: “It’s not easy for families in colonias, and parents can be interpreted as not being involved enough or as not caring.” But they are still working to be able to “ensure children succeed and are able to move onto college and achieve success.” (IDRAa, 2020)

With all its complications, this school year provides an opportunity for teachers and school staff to build stronger relationships with families. It will be even more vital than before that educators communicate *authentically* with families, particularly with underserved families of students of color, English learners and students from families with limited economic means.

At its most basic level, when school leaders announce major decisions, they should include their rationale and how family input contributed to the decisions. Schools can set up regular opportunities for listening and dialogue with families – in their language(s). And successful teachers seek to understand what their students’ families are experiencing.

Set up supports for student mental health and well-being

Teaching and learning falter when students struggle with mental health and well-being (Bartlett, et al., 2020). Aicha Davis, member of the Texas State Board of Education, stated in an IDRA webinar about reopening schools: “Mental health support will have to be a priority. We don’t know what type of trauma our students have suffered... The idea of students going through this current pandemic demands that schools proactively address students’ mental well-being to serve the whole child” (IDRAb, 2020).

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With all its complications, this school year provides an opportunity for teachers and school staff to build stronger relationships with families.

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School district officials and educators should focus early efforts for reengaging with families on providing opportunities for families to receive socio-emotional support. Students must have clear access to trained counselors as well as resources made available through school partnerships with community organizations.

Teachers may need added support and skill-building this year to actively look for opportunities to provide positive re-enforcement to students, while monitoring the healthy pressure of course rigor without piling on unnecessary stressors, such as technology complications and unclear timelines.

Co-construct this school year's plans for teaching and learning with families and community stakeholders

Approximately 51% of students in the United States are from racially and linguistically diverse backgrounds (NCES, 2018). Because COVID-19 disproportionately affects communities of color, it is critical that districts and educators employ equitable and culturally sustaining family engagement strategies that include various means of communication in connecting with families in their homes (Seale, 2020). Co-construction requires equitable collaboration.

School leaders must do more than disseminate information. Authentic engagement can best occur in an environment that embraces IDRA's six principles of family leadership (Montemayor 2007):

- Families can be their children's strongest advocates.
- Families of different races, ethnicity, language and class are equally valuable.
- Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect and dignity and valued.

- Within families, many individuals play a role in children's education.
- Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good.
- Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all students.

IDRA helps schools integrate these principles into day-to-day operations reflected in policies and practices that benefit families and students in partnership with school leadership.

Use multimodal and consistent communication methods that reach all families

About 80% of parents surveyed recently by Learning Heroes say that texting and phone calls are most effective forms of communication for them (2020). Yet many teachers and schools rely on websites and email to communicate. Families appreciate phone communication when it is two-way and understanding of the stresses of the current crisis. When educators listen to parents describe their home situation, how their children are responding to distance learning approaches and what helps their children learn, it has powerful positive effects on the parent-teacher relationship and on the learning progress of the children.

School districts must use multiple methods to establish stronger connections with the home. For example, educators can periodically hold selective, properly distanced, front-door conversations, which give powerful signals about the school's interest in the children's education.

Community resources also can support school-family connections. For example, IDRA launched a partnership with two community-based organizations – CSLAP (the College

Scholarship Leadership Access Program) and ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality) – in the Texas Rio Grande Valley that helped Spanish-speaking families navigate virtual classrooms when schools closed due to COVID-19 in the spring. The young adults and teenagers serve as technology mentors through telephone support or online communication while earning community service hours. (IDRA, 2020)

Provide systems for family input

Phone, through voice and text communication, along with email communication can provide means of hearing families' goals for their children's education and challenges they face at any point in time. For example, if families come to school to pick up print assignments and materials, staff can conduct brief interviews as they distribute materials.

Throughout the year, school leaders can conduct surveys and two-way conversations with parents and caretakers about parents' sense of efficacy for helping children and what type of instruction families consider works best for their children. The information educators receive from families can alert them to trouble spots on the horizon or strategies that are not working. And families and students can bring new and powerful ideas to the conversation.

This pandemic requires special efforts from teachers and school administrators. New or rarely used means of communication become central. The beneficial results of authentic communication re-builds a learning community that now involves families in new ways.

We all must come together to ensure that learning continues. Schools need clearer and empathetic connections with families. As schools increase (cont. on Page 4)

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Publication offices:
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714
www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

Celina Moreno, J.D.
IDRA President and CEO
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR
IDRA Director of Communications
Newsletter Production Editor

Engaging Families in STEM Conversations with Students

by Stephanie Garcia, Ph.D.

Children have personal experiences with STEM because it is all around them. Families can help students make connections to STEM with their culture, interests, language, home knowledge and community concerns (García, 2019). Educators also can reinforce these connections in ways that expand opportunities for students in STEM and build their STEM identities.

The international Chief Science Officer program launched by the Arizona-based SciTech Institute fosters such opportunities. As IDRA began to lead the program's expansion in Texas last year and then made adaptations for COVID-19 realities, we ensured the model was radically inclusive of families.

The Chief Science Officer program works by enriching STEM culture and career awareness in schools and by increasing student voice in STEM conversations in the community. These conversations naturally also take place in students' homes. Building relationships with families and providing resources as they support their children in STEM is one of the greatest strengths of IDRA's Texas Chief Science Officer program.

For example, our events include sessions designed specifically for families to create a space for critical discussions on topics like students' STEM identities, career pathways, and coursework that prepares students for college, particularly in STEM fields.

While the Chief Science Officer program provides an inviting structure for participating schools, educators everywhere can create opportunities to engage in STEM conversations with students and families.

STEM Conversation Strategies for Educators

IDRA's six principles of family leadership support our Education CAFE model for building strong parent-educator partnerships to improve

schools and raise students' academic achievement (Montemayor, 2007; Also see article on Page 1). Educators can consider this model within STEM courses, programs, district initiatives, and more.

For example, the first principle states: "Families can be their children's strongest advocates." What does that look like in STEM spaces? Families and role models serve as a support system that can help recognize students' curiosity toward STEM and help them persist through STEM coursework (Johnson & Vega, 2019; Arreguín-Anderson, et al., 2018).

The sixth principle states, "Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children." This proves to be true when families encourage, nurture and enhance children's STEM identity (Arreguín-Anderson, et al., 2018). This also means ensuring children have access to high-quality STEM learning experiences and coursework.

According to the STEM Next Opportunity Fund, "Family engagement can be a game-changer for expanding and diversifying the world of STEM

(cont. on Page 4)



Participants in an IDRA Texas Chief Science Officer community event with CSO students, their advisor and the program director, district champion, mentor, future high school principal and family members.

Bring the Texas Chief Science Officer Program to Your School!

The Chief Science Officer program empowers middle and high school students to enrich school STEM culture and career awareness by bringing STEM-related opportunities to their schools and local communities.



Chief Science Officers in Texas

Elevating the voices of students in STEM

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Hear from CSO students themselves!

"Chief Science Officer Students Determined to Promote STEM Despite School Closures."

<https://idra.news/CSOwbr1>

Watch our Q&A webinar for details.

<https://idra.news/CSOqaWebinar>

<https://www.idra.org/texas-chief-science-officers-program>

(Engaging Families in STEM Conversations with Students, continued from Page 3)

and expanding the options for all youth” (2009).

The STEM Next Opportunity Fund offers six promising practices to support families as they encourage their children in STEM:

- Put parents at the center; listen and learn from families.
- Make equity and inclusion primary considerations in family engagement.
- Support a STEM ecosystem that begins and ends with the needs of families.
- Commit resources to support staff, particularly those working in under-resourced communities.
- Evaluate impact on youth and parents to advance #STEM4All.
- Scale programs that have successful track records in supporting innovative approaches, particularly with families who have been underrepresented in STEM.

Ideas for Families and Caretakers

Family engagement and leadership should be centered within STEM activities and programs. Below are tangible ways to support family engagement in STEM.

At a park or while on a walk, children can point out plants, wildlife and changes due to weathering. A quick drive around the community can reveal many real-world STEM connections to local resources, businesses and the environment (Garcia, 2019). A birthday party can even include fun STEM activities with balloons or slime.

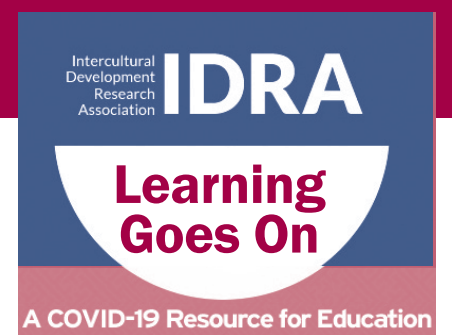
Here are a few questions to consider to kickstart more conversations.

- STEM is a broad field. What topics does your child tend to talk about the most? What kinds of toys and play activities did your child engage with the most?
- What STEM connections and concepts can you identify and explore within your home?

See IDRA's Learning Goes On resource!

- ✓ Weekly policy updates
- ✓ Free webinar series on equitable practices for online learning
- ✓ COVID-19 Education News Dashboard
- ✓ Data Map – Texas College Responses to COVID-19
- ✓ Equity Connection – IDRA's free online community of practice
- ✓ Online technical assistance academies for school districts

The eNews and policy updates are available in English and Spanish.



<https://idra.news/LearningGoesOn>

Some examples including cooking, driving, using home appliances and lawn machines, building projects, and gardening.

- In middle school and high school, is your child taking STEM-related courses, including higher level math and science and STEM electives? Are there any special programs offered at your local public school that are tailored toward STEM?
- What clubs, internships, out-of-school organizations and volunteer opportunities can support your child's curiosity and STEM passion?
- Who are three people the student and family can chat with to ask questions about STEM degrees and career opportunities? Are there teachers or family friends who can share their own experiences or resources with you?

These questions can open the door to more discussions that will strengthen children's STEM identities. Family members do not need to consider themselves STEM experts. The goal for these conversations is to listen and learn from each other. Together, families, students and

educators can foster student conversations about the dynamic world of STEM.

Resources

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Stephanie Garcia, Ph.D., is an IDRA education associate and directs the IDRA Texas Chief Science Officer program. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at stephanie.garcia@idra.org.

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authentic communication with families, we increase the chances that students will be happy and learning.

Resources

- Bartlett, J.D., Griffin, J., & Thomson, D. (2020). Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Child Trends*.
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Karmen Rouland, Ph.D., is associate director of the Center for Education Equity, Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium. Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is IDRA's family engagement coordinator and directs IDRA's Education CAFE work. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at aurelio.montemayor@idra.org.

Effective Education Reform During COVID-19 Requires Authentic Family Engagement

by Terrence Wilson, J.D.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to close in early 2020, families took on a new role in the educational activities of their children. Many, though, experienced a lack of authentic engagement with teachers and school administrators that left some parents with mixed feelings about their students' educations.

IDRA surveyed educators, families and students as the 2019-20 school year closed. Parents reported fear that their children would fall behind and anxiety related to their ability to help their students with coursework and instruction. One parent, echoing many others, stated: "I am not a teacher. I don't know how to effectively present the lessons and necessarily make them engaging for my child. I am also working from home full time!"

Key themes in parents' responses to IDRA's survey were:

- Difficulty helping students with instruction;
- Fears of students falling behind;
- Lack of access to materials either virtually or physically;
- Lots of communication from schools that can be overwhelming;
- Fears around students missing out on social-emotional activities with peers; and
- At-home stress ("Having problems feeding my family").

These sentiments encapsulate the environment in homes across the country. According to the Parents 2020: COVID-19 Closures survey, administered by Learning Heroes, parents and guardians of students in K-12 students reported that parents feel more appreciation for teachers, but most do not have regular access to them: "While parents felt more connected to their children's day-to-day learning (67%), only about 33% of them reported having regular access to teachers." (2020)

Ironically, in the spring, many schools had to pause their planned family engagement activities despite their heightened need to connect with families to support student learning.

At the same time, teachers expressed their concerns with teaching virtually with little training and little opportunities to engage with families. One respondent stated: "Everything has shifted to online resources with little teacher input. At the same time, teachers are expected to figure things out on their own in terms of continuing to teach lessons and preparing the students for exams."

Educators responding to IDRA's survey called for better connectivity for teachers and students since, during virtual learning due to COVID-19, students interact better online than with paper materials. One teacher stated: "My students need access to computers at a 1-to-1 ratio. Currently, families with even three or four students are expected to share a single device while receiving instruction 100% online."

As this school year begins, educators and families will both benefit from authentic engagement to support student learning and well-being. Engagement with low-income and non-English speaking families is especially important given the significant barriers that these students and families already must overcome to engage with schools (Montemayor, 2019).

In late May, the IDRA EAC-South held a virtual meeting with education agency leaders representing five states – Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, South Carolina and Tennessee – about family engagement strategies during the pandemic. The leaders discussed the difficulty agencies have in reaching parents who are dealing with the real health and financial ramifications of the pandemic. Nevertheless, agency staff across the country

(cont. on Page 6)

Ironically, in the spring, many schools had to pause their planned family engagement activities despite their heightened need to connect with families to support student learning.

(Effective Education Reform During COVID-19 Requires Authentic Family Engagement, continued from Page 5)

continue to innovate and invest in family engagement efforts to ensure school leaders understand students' needs as they reopen schools.

Given the importance of family engagement to the crucial decisions facing education leaders, several states have begun to focus on engaging with families to plan for the future. For example, the Virginia Department of Education will use \$300,000 of the \$23.9 million that it will receive from the federal pandemic relief package (CARES Act) to support state-coordinated family engagement and family literacy activities during the closure and phased reopening of schools to strengthen the remote-learning environment and support the transition of students back to the classroom. (2020)

Other examples include the Alabama Department of Education, which launched a survey for parents and educators to determine how the state should spend CARES Act funding (2020), and the Florida Department of Education, which launched a survey to collect opinions from families and students to understand their experiences and future needs to deal with COVID-19. (FLDOE, 2019).

These are but a few of the numerous examples of state and local education leaders using what they learn from families to enact meaningful reform to address inequities in the education system highlighted by the pandemic. Leaders can use authentic family engagement to transform the insights gained from surveys and increased family engagement efforts into specific school reform (Montemayor 2019). When schools and families work together, they are powerful forces for policy reform.

Recent successful efforts to remove police from schools in Minneapolis, Portland, Denver and several other locales exemplify the ability to reform educational institutions when students and communities are meaningfully engaged by education leaders.

IDRA's Education CAFE (Community Action Forums for Excellence) network supports students and families with the knowledge and tools necessary to help schools address inequities in education through authentic engagement with the families they serve. Given the importance of family engagement to the crucial decisions facing education leaders, they will need to increas-

“

“IDRA developed a family-leadership-in-education model that brings parents together to focus on how to improve the school. Instead of promoting a deficit view of families, this approach is participatory and honors the culture and language of the parent.”

- Caralee J. Adams, Education Week

IDRA Education CAFE

Community Action Forums for Excellence

Innovative Approach to School-Family-Community Collaboration

An Education CAFE is a family group rooted in a community-based organization, rather than in a single school. Its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community.

Networks of family leaders transforming their public schools

Community-based, Distributive Leadership

Meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, students' older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children's academic success and future. By rotating leadership roles, the Education CAFE is based on input and action from all.

School Partnerships

Education CAFE members come together and partner with schools in their neighborhood to ensure student success. Collaboration includes co-planning and sharing responsibility for outreach and ongoing activities that improve education in their neighborhood public schools.

Education Projects

Education CAFEs partner with neighborhood public schools on identifying education needs and gaps, and improving educational quality, equity and outcomes. Families carry out meaningful projects, like promoting the accessibility of advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses.

See how to start an Education CAFE in your area!

<https://idra.news/EdCAFew>

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ingly rely on family leaders to ensure all students have equitable access to education in the fall and beyond.

Resources

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Terrence Wilson, J.D., is IDRA's regional policy and community engagement director. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at terrence.wilson@idra.org.

Immigrant Students' Rights to Attend Public Schools

As schools kick off this school year, IDRA is releasing this new infographic as a reminder that public schools, by law, must serve all children.

Schools should not discourage students without certain documents from attending school. In fact, students are *required* to attend school under the state's compulsory education laws.

And schools should assure parents that the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* restricts schools from sharing information with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).

IDRA's focus is to strengthen schools to work for all children, families and communities. Help us make this goal a reality for every child; we simply cannot afford the alternatives.


Denying undocumented students or children of undocumented parents access to an education is unconstitutional and against the law.

This infographic in full color and bilingual is available on IDRA's website along with many other resources for schools and advocates. We encourage you to share them across your networks.

<https://idra.news/ImmigEd>

Other Tools...

 eBook in English and Spanish

 One-page bilingual flier to copy and share

Welcoming Immigrant Students in School

Immigrant students are guaranteed access to free public education by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Certain procedures must be followed when registering undocumented immigrant children (and those whose parents are undocumented) in school to avoid violation of their civil rights as outlined in the Plyler vs. Doe decision.



Public schools cannot deny admission to a student on the basis of undocumented status.



Public schools cannot require students or parents to disclose their immigration status.



Public schools cannot ask students or parents questions intended to expose their undocumented status.



Public schools cannot require social security numbers from students or parents.



Public schools cannot demand that parents produce driver's licenses or other identification documents that are not required.



Public schools cannot engage in any practices that "chill" or hinder the right of access to school.

All children are required under state laws to attend school until they reach a mandated age.

School personnel have no legal obligation to enforce U.S. immigration laws.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are to refrain from enforcement actions at certain sensitive locations, which include schools, as detailed in ICE's own policies.

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act prohibits schools from providing any outside agency (including ICE) with any information from a child's school file that would expose the student's undocumented status.

The only exception is if an agency gets a court order (subpoena) that parents can then challenge.

What schools can do...



Focus on teaching all students.



Pro-actively show parents that their children are welcome.



Ensure teachers and staff are properly trained about protecting the rights of children and on culturally competency.



Communicate with parents in their language.



Share information about resources for students, families and educators (in English and other languages at the school).



Review all of your enrollment and registration documents (including forms, websites, and communications with parents) to be clear that the provision of the child's social security number, birth certificate, etc., is voluntary, and that not providing such information will not bar a child's enrollment.



Adults without social security numbers who are applying for a free lunch and/or breakfast program for a student need only state on the application that they do not have a social security number.

Get more info and resources, including IDRA's School Opening Alert Flier & eBook. <https://idra.news/IDRAigwWelcome>

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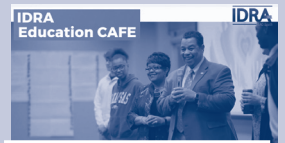
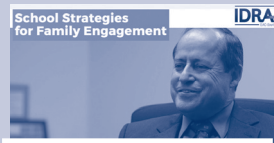
Focus: Family Engagement

Family Engagement Online Technical Assistance

Available free!

The IDRA EAC-South's Family Engagement Web-based Technical Assistance Package is designed to provide educators tools for embracing what, for many, is a new vision for engaging with families and community members.

This web-based package includes literature reviews, articles, podcasts, and five learning chapters, each with a video and supporting resources.



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