EdResearch
For Recovery

ENGAGING PARENTS AND FAMILIES TO SUPPORT THE RECOVERY OF DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

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This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. Click here to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can schools and districts support families in their diverse contexts and build practical trust to support student learning?

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- Schools are demanding more than ever from parents even as parents lack specific guidance and supports from schools to meet many of the demands.

- The disruption of ongoing school routines is already having detrimental effects on families while limiting access to mental health and wellness services.

- Legacies of discrimination and marginalization in schools and inequities in access to high-quality education undermine trust in ways that shape the possibilities for family engagement.

Strategies to Consider

- Communications with families are most effective when they are regular, well-timed, and include actionable support strategies.

- Schools will be more successful involving parents in academics when the asks focus on helping students establish good work habits and time management rather than supplementing instruction or academic content.

- Schools must ensure genuine representation across parental communities to promote authentic engagement.

- Schools can reduce family anxiety by providing a sense of routine for students and families. Older students benefit from a role in shaping these routines.

Strategies to Avoid

- Lowering academic standards and workload with the goal of helping families balance students' broader socioemotional needs is unlikely to reduce parental anxiety.

- Communication strategies that wait until the end of the quarter or semester are unlikely to shift parent or student behavior.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Schools are demanding more than ever from parents even as parents lack specific guidance and supports from schools to meet many of the demands.

- **Many families are navigating insufficient access to computers, internet access, and technical assistance, which can prevent or delay students from accessing instruction.**

  - A recent Pew study found that more than 40% of low-income children access the internet for school on a cell phone or in a public place.
  - 40% of students lacked regular access to their teachers after schools closed across the nation in March and April.
  - 51% of families of higher-income background expressed that their children were receiving high levels of remote instruction, compared to 29% of families from lower income backgrounds.

- **Despite their best efforts, parents often struggle to provide the at-home academic support that has become an increasing feature of pandemic schooling.**

  - Parental help with homework is often contentious. Active involvement in homework, including providing instruction, is associated with increased conflict and diminished school performance.
  - Families and students are feeling intense pressure for students to catch up on academic work and are worried about doing so without the necessary supports.

- **Parents have received little guidance for managing the increased online activity that is required for their children in remote school settings.**

  - Most families are unclear about how to manage the risks associated with access to the internet against the benefits of use for academic work, based on a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of more than 1,000 low- to moderate-income families with children between the ages of 6 and 13.

The disruption of ongoing school routines is already having detrimental effects on families while limiting access to mental health and wellness services.

- **The decrease in routine and structure has resulted in increased anxiety and uncertainty across family members.**

  - A study of 1,000 families, before and during pandemic lockdowns, found that disruptions to parents' well-being and social disruptions, including social distancing and confinement, are negatively associated with children and youth emotional and behavioral well-being.

- **Students and families often access mental health services through school-based options that have been limited by the move to remote schooling.**

  - In a study of more than 2,000 youth, 81% said the pandemic made their mental health problems worse and 41% no longer had access to mental health services they were receiving prior to the pandemic.

Legacies of discrimination and marginalization in schools and inequities in access to high-quality education undermine trust in ways that shape the possibilities for family engagement.

- **Legacies of discrimination and ongoing bias are rightly associated with parents' concern that school personnel will judge or criticize their parenting practices and this undermines parents' sense of agency and efficacy in supporting their children.**

- A recent study of a larger, urban district found that Black and Latino youth were more likely to be assumed truant, with negative repercussions, when they missed remote learning sessions.
- Another ethnographic and qualitative study of a midwestern school district that focused on parent and teacher perspectives found that both parents and teachers reported that school personnel often hold stereotypes and deficit perspectives about families' willingness and ability to help their children succeed academically.
- Multiple studies show that the level of trust between families and schools is an underlying predictor of outcomes ranging from the efficiency of communication to resource access and student performance. Trust that underlies school-family relationships exists on a spectrum, ranging from simple predictability around required actions to the faith among both parties that each has the others best interests in mind.

■ **Lower-income families express particular concern that their students are likely to be left behind by their schools during this period.**

- Multiple surveys, both at the national level and in specific states, have found that most parents are worried about their children's progress during the shutdown, but families from lower-income backgrounds consistently express more concern than families from higher-income backgrounds about academic progress.

■ **Models for school-family partnerships that do not affirm parents' experience or do not actively work toward building trust often break down when confronted with the substantial racial and cultural diversity of many school communities.**

- Experiences with family-school partnerships often differ considerably across communities and cultures, creating confusion around expectations and leaving students struggling to navigate home and school cultures.
- Decades of research have found that higher-income families tend to feel more welcomed in school than do other families.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Communications with families are most effective when they are regular, well-timed, and include actionable support strategies.

■ **Studies show that the most effective communications for eliciting parental engagement are those that offer parents actionable information or specific guidance for supporting their child's education.**

- An intervention provided parents whose students were in a credit recovery program with one-sentence, individualized support messages that emphasized areas where their students could improve increased the percentage of students who earned course credit by nine percentage points.
- Another texting study asked parents to set weekly goals for reading with their children, and then sent weekly text message reminders and provided feedback on the amount of time parents actually spent reading to their child. Parents in the treatment group spent over twice as much time reading to their children as parents in the control group, and these effects persisted after the end of the intervention.

■ **Simple text message alerts to parents with timely information about their children's academic progress may increase students' success in a low-cost way.**

- In two separate studies, sending parents weekly alerts informing them of their child's missing assignments, low average class grades, and recent class absences reduced absenteeism, increased grade point average and decreased course failures.
- Additionally, researchers have found that it is more effective to text families of low-performing students (who may face more challenges) on the weekends, whereas texting families of high-performing students is more effective on weekdays.

- Automatically enrolling parents in updates rather than asking parents to actively opt in alone significantly increased the effects of progress updates on student course success, according to a study of middle and high schools in Washington, D.C.

- **Notifications to families about student progress are more likely to achieve success when they avoid a punitive tone and align with effective communication guidelines around simplicity and direction.**

  - A new study conducted during the pandemic revealed the value of offering personalized attendance data, log-in information, and support during distance learning, and found greater effects from alerts sent in simple language that informed rather than called out particular concerns.

- **Quality of interactions has been shown to more positively affect outcomes than frequency of interactions. Fewer communications that provide more detail are likely to more effective than frequent communications that raise additional questions for parents.**

  - Communications are frequently handled individually by teachers and other support staff. School leaders play an important role in system-wide norming to ensure that all school staff are aligned on practices and expectations.

Schools will be more successful involving parents in academics when the asks focus on helping students establish good work habits and time management rather than supplementing instruction or academic content.

- **Helping parents remain in the role of supporting academic work rather than providing instruction can reduce family stress and conflict over schoolwork at home.**

  - A series of studies, including a recent qualitative study that asked parents, teens, and teachers what works best during adolescence, highlight strategies to generate supportive parental engagement. One theme that emerges from these studies is that parents who provide structure and independence are seen as being supportive and those who help their students with schoolwork are viewed as undermining achievement.

- **For such strategies to succeed, schools must provide sufficient instruction so that parents do not need to teach content.**

  - Parents right now must often serve as substitute teachers. Greater access to tutors or "homework hotlines" to provide support for students as they complete assignments independently could help parents detach in healthy ways from academic support roles.
  - When possible, schools should increase investment in dedicated staff who can be "on call" for families to provide help, particularly with technology issues.
  - Promising and feasible practices for taking on needs around both technology and teacher access are emerging in district pandemic learning plans.

Schools must ensure genuine representation across parental communities to promote authentic engagement.

- **School populations are comprised of subgroups, subcultures, and mini-communities based on racial/ethnic groups, neighborhoods, bus routes, and other groupings.**

  - It is important for schools to figure out the social mapping of their school and then strategically invite parents who may represent the perspectives of these diverse groups to join in decision-making.
  - The EdResearch for Recovery brief on serving immigrant-origin students offers additional insights into structures that bring parent voices directly into school processes.

- For example, a study of a Mexican immigrant parent empowerment effort in a California school district found that creating opportunities in which immigrant families defined meeting agendas and helped determine resource allocations allowed parents to feel a part of their children's schools and schooling and take more active roles.

■ **Authentic communication is essential for building trust and buy-in. There are several strategies that have been successful, including the following:**

- Invite teachers and school personnel to focus on shared experiences with families. All families are struggling to support their children and fulfill work obligations, often with different resources and challenges. Sharing challenges and insights as people first and schools and families second will help build trust.
- As policies and practices are decided upon and implemented, focus on "reflection stems." These reflection stems include systematically asking whose voice is missing, what would families/students say about the issue, how true would a conclusion be through particular families' eyes, and who is the issue/conclusion actually true for and how do I know.

■ **Bringing more diverse perspectives into school decisions also increases the likelihood that families from different backgrounds gain access to unshared tacit knowledge that lets them effectively advocate for their youth.**

- Knowledge gaps can emerge across a range of issues. For example, families might know that their high schooler needs to take four math classes to graduate but not know the differences among classes and which lead to college readiness. Families might understand that school nurses and counselors can provide referrals and support for families but not know that they should and can ask for such help and support.

Schools can reduce family anxiety by providing a sense of routine for students and families. Older students benefit from a role in shaping school routines.

■ **Routines provide a sense of security and predictability amid trauma and uncertainty, which can reduce anxiety and stress on children and families.**

- For younger students, schools must provide a consistent and predictable daily schedule. Having a set time each day for focusing on specific academic subjects, physical activities, and leisure time has been shown to reduce anxiety. For example, younger children find comfort in knowing that they will see their teacher at the same time each day and know that it is followed by playtime, quiet reading, and writing.
- Posting the schedule and routines where they are easy to see and follow helps children see and anticipate, which bring a sense of security and calm.

■ **Routines are equally important for older children and adolescents. However, teens benefit when they have a role in shaping their schedule.**

- Providing guidance to youth about what needs to be completed each day and letting them set their own schedule not only provides the benefit of routines but the sense of autonomy, competence, and independence that youth crave.

■ **Schools can also step in to supplement inconsistent national guidance on screen use limits that can carry across remote learning periods.**

- Schools can provide parents with instruction on how to set privacy and safety settings on the platforms and software that children are expected to use to help parents feel comfortable about their children going online.
- School guidance can also communicate that substantial evidence demonstrates that exposure to blue light interferes with sleep.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Lowering academic standards and workload with the goal of helping families balance students' broader socioemotional needs is unlikely to reduce parental anxiety.

■ **Given the level of concern, <u>particularly among families from low-income backgrounds</u>, about student progress, lowering standards and expectations for student learning is likely to raise rather than alleviate parental anxiety.**

○ Schools can serve families better by providing clear guidance on how the curriculum will help students stay on track and providing parents with clear feedback on their child's progress against standards.

■ **Concerns and assumptions about families' willingness and capacity to help their kids are <u>often driven by deficit perceptions and stereotypes</u> about socioeconomic status and race rather than authentic understanding.**

○ Schools should not <u>assume students are truant when they fail to attend online courses</u>. Instead, they should assume best intentions and ask students and families why they are unable to attend. Then, schools should focus on addressing the underlying root cause and offering solutions that align with each student's particular circumstance.

Communication strategies that wait until the end of the quarter or semester are unlikely to shift parent or student behavior.

■ **Many schools primarily communicate with parents at key transition points throughout the year, such as end-of-quarter or end-of-semester report cards, but effective communications offer action steps during times when the action is likely to matter most (see examples described in earlier sections).**

■ **Choosing the right communication strategy means limiting communications to focus on the highest-priority needs.**

○ Directing parents to focus on one thing means there is necessarily less time and energy to focus on other parenting behaviors. One <u>randomized experiment in the UK</u> found that requests to parents around certain types of engagement decreased engagement in other areas.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the EdResearch for Recovery website. To receive updates and the latest briefs, sign up here.

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

This EdResearch for Recovery Project brief is a collaboration among faculty and researchers from the following organizations and institutions:

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