

Distance Learning for All: Leveraging Family Engagement



Please note: further guidance around family engagement will be forthcoming that expands on resources, research, and recommendations.

Teachers and schools face new challenges to interact with students and their families in innovative and unprecedented ways during this COVID-19 crisis and extended school closure. Districts have a unique opportunity to meaningfully engage families in their students' education in ways that can have both an immediate and lasting positive impact on future education in Oregon. Our communities are working to extend trust and respect to teachers and educators as learning enters students' homes and daily lives in an entirely new way. [Distance Learning for All](#) will only be successful with active, authentic, and responsive participation between educators, students, families, and communities.

Our ability to honor the culture, language, ways of knowing, and perspectives of the families and students we serve will be key measures by which *Distance Learning for All* will actualize equity. To that end, the *Distance Learning for All* is rooted in an ethos of partnership with families, communities, and students. Family engagement during this time offers teachers and schools a chance to partner with families to not only maintain learning, but deepen connection and understanding to their child's learning, build mutual trust and respect between families and teachers, and allow students to see these powerful partnerships in action. Without engaging families by understanding their assets,

needs and challenges, schools cannot fully comprehend the learning environment students are navigating at home and thus, cannot fully understand students' capacity to learn.

Through all of this work, we must recognize the strengths and meet the needs of students experiencing houselessness, students of color (including but not limited to students who are African-American/Black, Alaska Native and American Indian, Asian Pacific Islander, Refugee, Latinx, COFA citizens), students who are multilingual learners and English Language Learners, students of migrant and farmworker families, students experiencing disability, students who are LGBTQIA+, students in foster care, students who have recently immigrated and may be undocumented, and students navigating poverty.

Many families are coping with trauma and grief related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in different ways, depending on their overall stability and resilience before the crisis, whether they have been directly touched by illness and to what extent the closures and changes have disrupted their daily lives. Students and their families are also dealing with a myriad of other issues including caring for loved ones or those who are ill, access to and comfort level with electronic resources, adequate food, juggling more than one child, income insecurities, and caregivers working outside of the home as well as those working from home. Magnified by the COVID-19 crisis, our students who have been pushed to the edge of our system carry the

Distance Learning for All: Leveraging Family Engagement

disproportionate weight of the challenges of *Distance Learning for All*.

For some educators, the challenge is rethinking family engagement to be more than informing families or pushing information out about what will be happening in the classroom. True engagement, and success both during *Distance Learning for All* and beyond, requires first and foremost an acknowledgement of family assets, needs and dynamics during this time. Ignoring or minimizing family dynamics will likely immediately jeopardize the possibilities for success during *Distance Learning for All*. In addition, we need to cultivate new levels of family understanding of curriculum and learn how to assist in encouraging and enriching student learning. This understanding can be developed by sharing content specific resources parents/guardians/caregivers can access when helping students learn material outside the parent's knowledge base (or material the parent is unfamiliar with). Especially during this time, families need to know the why behind what students are learning in order for *Distance Learning for All* to interact with the other important family priorities. Consider these starting points for engagement:

Strengthening Relationships

- Evaluate your relationship with the student and family before the crisis. What might be impacting them the same or differently now?
- Are you interacting with the family and students in the language they prefer?

- Have you reviewed any existing IEP or 504 plan to ensure you are leveraging the strengths and meeting the needs of the students in the way the school and family teams have previously agreed?
- How can you respectfully inquire about resilience and changes the family is coping with during this time?

Building Capacity

- Have you explained your teaching strategy regarding the rest of the year using vocabulary that is understandable for non-educators?
- Do families have the “Why” behind what you are teaching? Have you explained which learning standards you will focus on during Distance Learning for All?
- Have you considered the capacity of families to use your materials to help students participate?
- Are you prepared to proactively reach out to individual caregivers to see how things are going and adjust your strategies?

Focusing on Learning

- Have you evaluated how synchronous learning expectations or schedules will impact families?
- Have you provided students and families with the tools they need to access the learning without you being able to be with them in person?
- Are you comfortable with the platforms you are using and expecting families to use? If not,

Distance Learning for All: Leveraging Family Engagement

families and students likely won't be either. Simple is better.

- How can you minimize electronic complications by focusing on connection and relationships during synchronous or recorded time vs. replicating the classroom experience?
- Have you considered how your expectations for participation, synchronous learning and assignments fit in with those of colleagues also working with the same students?
- Have you and your colleagues considered connecting regularly as a group to share information on efforts to engage students (sometimes teachers with strong relationships can facilitate connection with other teachers)?
- Does your piece of learning time expectations fit well with the whole learning time expectations for the student?

Connecting Communities

- Are there Community-Based Organizations (e.g., non-profit services, faith-based and resource-based organizations) that the family already has a connection with that could be helpful? Can you provide additional resources that the family may be able to access?
- How can your district or school leverage already existing relationships in the community to reach and serve more students?
- How can your district or school foster new relationships with

Community-Based Organizations to reach and serve more students?

Resources

- [Working with Families, Dr. Karen Mapp](#)
- [Engaging Families to Support Distance Learning \(Oklahoma\)](#)
- [You for Youth](#)