

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Family Engagement in the Time of COVID-19 and Remote Learning, and Always

Culturally responsive-sustaining (CRS) family engagement has always been an essential tool for schools to advance learning and equity. Now that home *is* school for tens of millions of students during the COVID-19 pandemic and families are playing the role of administrators, educators, facilitators, coaches and IT for student learning, CR-S family engagement is absolutely critical for meaningful learning to take place. This document provides guidance for districts, schools, and educators who want to deepen family engagement and continue to foster learning during the pandemic, and for parent and community groups advocating for stronger and more community-connected practices in their schools. This is a living document that will evolve based on new contributions and ideas. We invite your participation in that process.

Family engagement is not about ways that families should partner with schools, but about ways that districts, schools, and educators must partner with and see families as assets for teaching and learning. **Culturally responsive-sustaining family engagement is the practice of authentic, equal partnership with families, rooted in a deep knowledge and appreciation for the rich social and cultural identities, assets, habits and contexts that families bring to learning.** It means that districts, schools and educators:

- Understand families and their cultures as assets that are central to learning
- Cherish and invest in building authentic relationships between educators and families
- See parents and caretakers as:
 - partners of equal power
 - experts on their children and their communities
 - problem-solvers, not problems to be solved
- Know that educators are allies and partners of families in the project of educating and supporting children, rather than seeing families as allies in supporting educators
- Acknowledge, honor and leverage the funds of knowledge that all families bring to student learning
- Acknowledge, honor and leverage the community cultural wealth that all families and neighborhoods contribute to student learning
- Meet families where they are, rather than waiting and expecting families to meet the school and educators where *they* are
- Accept that the effectiveness of family engagement is measured in impact, not intention
- Recognize that families' overall wellbeing is an essential precondition of student learning and that schools play a critical role in society by promoting that wellbeing - whether directly or through community partnerships.

Culturally responsive-sustaining family engagement will, by definition, look different for each school and community; the best plan will be created not by one person assigned to the task but through creative brainstorming and innovation with school staff, parents and community members, rooted in a deep understanding of the social (race, class, gender, culture, language) identities and patterns of the school community. However, here are some examples of culturally responsive-sustaining family engagement during remote learning that school districts can encourage and cultivate.

1. **Conduct a multilingual survey** of families' concerns, needs, resources and ideas so you can identify and address the major obstacles to learning and wellbeing for your families, and **share and implement their resources and ideas**. Surveys can be conducted through phone calls to families as well as by text, email, social media and other methods.
2. **Use at least three different methods of communication** to reach families, because no single method of communication will work for every family. For example, a school could post on social media platforms to share information, solicit input and let families know what resources are available on the school's website, and then follow up with personal phone calls to make sure that families saw the posts, and engage more deeply.
3. **Prioritize personal outreach methods**, which are most effective at gathering information and building relationships. Schools should use at least one method from each of these three categories:
 - a. One-way communication like robocalls, emails, postal mail, website updates and app posts: impersonal
 - b. Reciprocal communication like social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), mass texting apps (TextNow, Call 'Em All, etc.), WhatsApp group chats, conference calls or video calls: more personal
 - c. Relationship-building communication like personal phone calls: most personalAdditionally, learn what communication methods are most common in your school community and prioritize communication methods that families *already* use, rather than introduce new ones they need to learn.
4. **Engage families in all major school decisions *before* the decision is made** - especially families from the most marginalized school communities. This requires making one-on-one phone calls to consult with families and discuss, *prior* to large group conference calls.
5. **Require teachers, paraprofessionals and all school staff to spend at least an hour every day calling families** to check in and see how they're doing; identify obstacles to learning and wellbeing, and resources and solutions to share; and discuss ways the school can help address those obstacles, and elevate those resources and solutions.

Stagger assignments so that some staff make calls during daytime and others make them in the evening, to reach parents and caretakers who are still working. For families that don't have access to phones, other social distancing methods may include social media, contact through family members or neighbors, or other creative solutions.

6. **School administration should create systems for direct, ongoing communication and feedback with families.** This should include **spot calls to families every day**, to get an on-the-ground sense of how learning is going and what the gaps and opportunities are.
7. Take this opportunity to **tap families' talents, skills, knowledge and networks** to support learning and wellbeing, and build community that will continue once school is back in-person. Could a parent who is a dancer start a weekly online dance class for students? Could a multilingual parent lead a video book club for Multilingual Learners? Could a grandparent who has the trust of other families work with the school social worker to organize a remote social-emotional support group?
8. **Organize Parent Association meetings** using phone conference calls, zoom video calls, WhatsApp group chats or other methods. Organize these calls/chats for each language spoken, and for each constituency (i.e. families of students with disabilities).
9. **Establish weekly communication with community organizations and leaders** that are supporting families, in order to stay on top of the latest resources (health, mental health and well being, food and income assistance, etc.) and coordinate outreach and strategies to meet the basic survival needs that are prerequisite to academic learning.
10. **Translate all major communications that go out from the school** in the primary languages that families speak.
11. **Organize a multilingual support hotline** that allows families and students to call, text or post resources, questions and challenges (i.e. technology, academics, physical or mental health, food, housing or utilities, etc.), and a school staffer will identify the right person to respond within 24 hours in their language (or with interpretation). To make this work, **recruit a cadre of multilingual allies** within your school community (teachers, school staff, family members, community members) who are available to interpret on phone calls, reach out to families who are struggling, translate school communications, and consult on strategies to support families whose primary language is not English.
12. **Record video guidance for families** on navigating remote learning platforms and content as well as other important communications, in the primary languages that your families speak, and include in each day/week's lessons.

13. **Conduct remote professional learning to build skills on CRS family engagement**, including: deepening knowledge about the school community; discussing the school community's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic; reflecting on school staff's own culture, privilege and biases; and sharing effective family engagement practices.
14. In all family engagement efforts, **center families who have traditionally been marginalized** from the school, and invest in the strategies that are most effective at reaching them and building relationships.

These are not practices that educators are commonly prepared or experienced in, so schools and districts must actively and intentionally build the capacity of school staff to engage effectively with families. This means clearly communicating to staff the expectations for family engagement, conducting remote professional learning on the topic, building time into staff schedules for family engagement, and modeling culturally responsive-sustaining engagement through administrators' own outreach to families, and in administrators' personal outreach to teachers. Ultimately, these practices constitute effective family engagement *all the time*, not just during a pandemic. The current crisis provides an opportunity for districts and schools to learn, build confidence and skills, internalize and institutionalize culturally responsive-sustaining family engagement practices that will significantly advance equity and learning when we are all back at school.

For more information, contact the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative at the NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at nyu-ejroc@nyu.edu.