April 27, 2020

Dear Educators:

As a network of parents and organizations that partner with families in the education of their children, we are compelled to advocate for families in low-income communities to sustain and strengthen student learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our deepest gratitude goes to school district superintendents and elected officials across the country whose early actions to rapidly coordinate food distribution provided desperately needed relief for many families. We are grateful that school district administrators have been coordinating the distribution of laptops and other devices to students while training staff in the use of online “virtual” platforms to transition from in-person classroom teaching to distance learning.

We need to do more, however, because the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing “stay at home” directives will continue to have a profound impact on our education system. Also, as officials prioritize needs, we are increasingly concerned about the learning lost for children of low-income families, English learners, foster youth, and students with special needs. As our nation continues to experience disruptions in the coming months, we must provide the following supports to meet the needs of these children and their families, from now through the summer of 2021:

1. **Connect with parents or designated family members to build relationships and co-develop educational plans for children and families.** Parents of children in elementary and middle school need to connect with teachers and co-develop personalized academic plans for students, similar to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), that considers the child’s strengths as well as the concerns of the parent, guardian, or person(s) who will be supporting the child at home. Parents of children in high school need to connect with counselors and/or teachers to meet and review their child’s Individualized Graduation Plan (IGP) and Individualized Transition Plan (ITP). The first such meeting should focus on listening to families and relationship building. Subsequent meetings should focus on discussing the student’s most recent test scores and/or evaluations (e.g., CAASPP, ELPAC, interim assessments, progress toward meeting IEP goals), and working together in setting “SMARTIE” goals (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based, Inclusive, and Equitable), schedules, and practices which will best support the child’s learning. These plans must set clear and realistic expectations of what families need to do to support their children’s academic and socio-emotional development. *We urge you to prioritize outreach to, and partnering with, families of students performing below grade level.*
2. **Support teachers with training on asset-based relationship building so that they can more effectively engage families, given that most educators do not receive significant training on family engagement in pre-service or professional development.** The traditional, one-way, ‘transactional,’ 15-minute parent-teacher conference must be replaced with personal phone calls or virtual, online meetings with the family, to build a relationship and co-develop a plan for their student. Depending on specific circumstances, these calls may include others in addition to or instead of parents, such adult siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, social workers, and/or other relatives.

Research-based training for teachers on “best practices” in family engagement must address and dispel commonly held, deficit-based beliefs and perceptions about families, while building skills and providing strategies to overcome cultural and language barriers. This updated raining helps teachers build strong relationships to increase student outcomes and rethink the role of parents in supporting students’ homework as well as in redesigning conferences. For recommendations on how to support teachers in this process, please see the NYU Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools *Tools for Educators to Listen to and Learn from Families During COVID-19 School Closures*, along with other tools in the *Resources* section below.

3. **After identifying a family’s needs, coordinate and invest resources to develop, assemble and provide the requested resources to support learning at home.** A few issues we’ve identified include:
   
a. **Mental health and well-being:** Many low-income families need information about resources or techniques to help them cope with high levels of stress caused by the current pandemic, and may need referrals to access food, COVID-19 testing, or other necessities.

b. **The “digital divide” is real:** Many families still do not have access to computers and the Internet. In addition to technology equipment, they need training and technical assistance to properly use computers and connect to school.

c. **Distance learning:** Explain what this is and what the school or district can provide, clarify expectations, and discuss what an online learning schedule could look like at home.

d. **Strategies to support the plan implementation and monitoring student achievement:** Some parents may need ideas, examples, and tools to implement strategies in the plan, along with follow-up to see if these strategies are working. Others may need help in learning how to monitor academic progress in literacy, math, or English-language development.

e. **Academic tools and resources:** Students need books, school supplies, and printed materials.

Providing these supports in the short term likely will require shifting resources to gather information from and for families, but we are morally obligated to take this step for the sake of equity. Establish or strengthen communication supports, including translation and interpretation services, to adequately support teachers and families on phone calls or video chats. Also, don’t overlook Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other linguistic communities.
In the long term, we encourage investing in adult literacy, as low literacy proficiency can limit the ways parents engage in their children’s education.

4. **Co-develop projects** with families to help children learn about, and be proud of, their own culture, history and art, while also promoting reading and critical-thinking skills. Explore topics that are of interest to students based on their age and grade level — such as careers and innovators in various fields — to foster a love of learning. When children know their history and the real-life experiences of their families, when they have ideas of who or what they want to be in the future, it is easier for them to find a purpose in schoolwork and in their lives.

5. **Continue to engage families and integrate their input into school-site and district plans and budgets.** Many parents — including those who already serve on school and district advisory committees — are eager to continue providing critical insights for strategic planning and budget development, to address the challenges students and families experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic is shining a bright light on the ever-increasing wealth inequality, the shrinking middle class, and the many inequities and systemic under-investments, including for health, employment, housing, and education. As realists, we anticipate the widening of existing achievement gaps. But as idealists and dream-keepers for our children, we must do everything in our power to overcome these seemingly insurmountable obstacles and empower our children for success, both in school and in life.

We invite all educators to partner with us and with families, to bring to bear our collective strengths, creativity and resilience at this pivotal moment. Together we can not only close achievement gaps, but actually transform the education process itself with significant, sustained investment in those communities that have long been neglected. It’s time we made this a more just society for all our children and families.

Sincerely,

African American Parent/Community Coalition for Educational Equity (AAP/CEE)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice- Los Angeles
CARECEN
Concilio de Padres de Highland Park
Gente Organizada
Latinos In Action
Lynwood Save Our Students
Parent Organization Network
PROedu
Watts/Century Latino Organization
RESOURCES

Tools for Educators to Listen to and Learn from Families During the Pandemic

- NYU Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (2020). *Tools for Educators to Listen to and Learn from Families During COVID-19 School Closures*

Several books and professional development providers offer best practices on how to partner with parents under normal circumstances and may also lend additional support during this time of crisis.

Articles (Theory)


Books (Practice)


Free Webinar Series: *Building Powerful Partnerships with Family by Dr. Karen Mapp*

- Session 1: Where Do We Start?
- Session 2: Virtual Meetings, Gatherings and Publishing Parties
- Session 3: Tips and Tools for Effective Family Communication
- Session 4: Family Engagement Phone Calls
- Session 5: Connecting with Families with Special Needs Children

Professional Development Providers

- High Expectations Parental Service
- Loyola Marymount University Center for Equity for English Learners
- Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) *Teacher-Parent Engagement Workshop*
- Parent Teacher Home Visits
- Riverside County Office of Education *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)*
- San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Level I Training
- San Diego State University Center for Family, School and Community Engagement and the SDSU Family-Community Engagement Academy for Educators
- UCLA Parent Project (UCLAPP) *Partnering with Teachers*