Top Priorities for 2020-21: An Action Guide for Families and Caregivers

October 2020

National surveys have shown that shifting to remote learning last spring was academically and socially challenging for students, and that families and caregivers felt stretched thin by supporting their students at home. We’ve also heard from family members (and students themselves) who are worried their student(s) will fall behind academically if their learning experiences don’t improve during the 2020-21 school year.

Now more than ever, your voice as a family member matters! Parents no longer have to wait to receive updates in weekly progress reports or quarterly report cards; many are in the trenches each day managing remote learning and providing supplemental instructional support. As a parent or caregiver, you should have regular opportunities to share your perspective on your students’ school experiences and make your voice heard as key decisions are made.

Remember, you have the right to share your thoughts and opinions with your students’ teachers, principals, and system leaders, and to play an active role in improving students’ learning experience.

The ideas below can help you get started. This isn’t a to-do list; it’s a set of tools to help you talk to your child’s teacher and/or the leaders of your school community, whether your students are learning from home or in a traditional classroom.

Ask Questions

Ask your child about what they’re learning in school and check out the assignments they are being asked to complete. Familiarize yourself with the kinds of assignments you should expect at your child’s grade level, and check to see if they seem to be experiencing content that is on-par for their current grade level.

In addition to keeping the lines of communication open with your child, it is also important to connect regularly with your child’s teacher and/or school leader.

RESOURCES

- Learning Heroes’ Readiness Roadmap can help you get a sense of what your child should be learning and doing at each grade level.
- TNTP’s Student Work Library includes examples of assignments that are strongly aligned to college and career-ready standards.
- The family guides by Seek Common Ground and Student Achievement Partners, organized by grade level, can help you understand the content your child should be learning this year.
- Keep Learning California has a set of questions that you can use as conversation starters with teachers and school leaders. They also have resources for families of children with learning differences.

Let Your Voice Be Heard

Do you know how your students’ class assignments and lessons will help them achieve their academic and career goals? Do your students’ teachers know what your children want to accomplish this year and after they graduate from high school? Do you know how you can support your child’s learning?
If your answer to any of these questions is “no,” reach out and ask for a conference time. Don’t be afraid to share ideas for improvement or ask for help. If you feel your students are not having a good experience in the classroom or have concerns about their emotional or physical safety, share that feedback with any specific examples you can offer.

Make sure you know the best way to reach your children’s teachers and school leaders. Find out if they prefer email, text, or phone calls. Also find out if they have open office hours or if you will need to schedule time. You can also share the method of communication you prefer and hours of the day that you are typically available.

RESOURCES

- These sample emails from The Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University can help you connect with teachers.

Organize Around Improving Your Child’s Experiences in School

Parents and caregivers across the country have adapted to meet the needs of students and support learning during a global pandemic. But these unique circumstances have also meant a unique set of challenges for all parties.

Whatever your challenge, you are not alone. Connect with other families in your community to learn about their experiences, identify bright-spots and areas of common concern. Be sure to highlight successes and wins and pass them along to your school principal and other leaders. You should also work together to share your concerns with school leaders or your local school board if your children aren’t having an engaging learning experience, aren’t receiving high-quality schoolwork, or if you aren’t able to access clear information about whether your child is on grade level. Organize with your local Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) or other parent forums to advocate and push for change.

It’s also important to know the rights afforded to you and your child under local, state, and federal law. For example:

- Do I have to purchase a device so that my child can participate in distance learning?
- If my child is eligible for free and/or reduced-price lunch, do they still have a right to school-provided meals during distance learning?
- Does my child have a right to an education if they are an English Language Learner?
- Is my child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Learning Plan still in effect if my child participates in distance learning?
- If my child or a member of my family becomes sick, what provisions will be available to my child?

RESOURCES

- This sample letter can provide a starting point for addressing concerns with your child’s principal or school board.
- If you feel your child’s rights are not being protected, please reach out to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights.