



This guide includes resources and best practices for engaging parents and families virtually, and fostering a sense of community while practicing social distancing.

As school systems across the country move toward at-home learning, they should focus more than ever on strengthening relationships with students and families and providing them with regular opportunities to share feedback and elevate concerns. Research shows that when parents and families are engaged in student learning there are tangible benefits: higher test scores, higher grades, increased school-readiness and improved attendance.

At TNTP, we believe that authentic engagement rests on four key pillars that schools and systems can integrate into their day-to-day work:

1. **Shared Vision:** Communities and school systems must first work closely together to shape a common vision for student success and make sure that everyone—from students to teachers to families to community leaders—have a role to play in that vision.
2. **Intentional Culture and Diversity:** To build trust—especially in communities that have experienced divestment—schools and systems must address biases, understand the unique context and assets of specific communities, and encourage the sharing of diverse perspectives.
3. **Authentic Collaboration:** Families and community organizations are critical to student success. Schools and systems need to share data and resources that can help families and community organizations better support student learning outside of school.
4. **360-Degree Communication:** Sharing information regularly and transparently is critical, but it is not enough. Schools and systems must create meaningful opportunities for all voices to be heard—and families and communities need to know how their feedback was incorporated into decision-making.

Below, we offer guidance and resources that will help school and system leaders incorporate these best practices into their at-home learning plans.

Virtual Engagement Tips

Keep it simple and consistent.

Authentic Collaboration, 360-Degree Feedback

Parents and families have likely been inundated with emails and social media posts that provide access to free online learning resources, virtual field trips, and updates from the CDC and local news media. Although technology allows for frequent communication, we recommend districts create a streamlined, easy-to-access website that provides regular updates, links to resources by grade band, and instructions for how to submit questions by email or phone. Families should know in advance how often they should expect updates so that they can anticipate any changes or

next steps. Be sure to share your most important updates on multiple channels (e.g. email, text, robocall, local TV/radio).

Use technology for outreach.

Authentic Collaboration, 360-Degree Communication

Many teachers and school leaders use email blasts, robocalls, and apps like [Remind](#) and [Class Dojo](#) during the regular school year—and they're great tools for sharing information during extended closures, too. All are fully accessible by smartphone for families who don't have a computer or internet access at home, and most have translation capabilities. You can also consider posting assignment packets as PDFs and families can privately reach out to teachers or each other with questions and helpful tips. School leaders and teachers should also consider hosting virtual office hours either by phone or online so that their staff, students and families can reach out with questions, comments or concerns.

Make health and social wellbeing a priority.

Intentional Culture and Diversity

According to a recent study published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, nearly one in six school-aged children in the U.S. have a treatable mental health disorder. Additionally, the challenges associated with social distancing and a global pandemic are likely to cause anxiety and mild depression for students who have not previously faced these challenges. That's why it's so important to make sure that closing schools does not create a void in students' access to counseling services. By relying on community partners such as United Way and deploying school counselors, students can have access to services and supports for mental health through email, phone calls, and video conferencing tools.

Conduct stakeholder feedback surveys.

Authentic Collaboration, 360-Degree Communication

Administering high-level surveys to parents, students and teachers can be a valuable way for schools to understand how stakeholders are adjusting to at-home learning in real time. Surveys should be shared via text, email and online to broaden accessibility and increase response rates. These can be quick 2-3 question polls that can be completed in under five minutes. To conduct a more comprehensive survey, we recommend using online tools or email with clear guidance on the time commitment required.

Remember: true 360-degree communication requires not only collecting data but also deliberate follow-up with participants to share the results and invite them to help design new strategies that result from the feedback.

Host virtual town halls and listening sessions.

Shared Vision, 360-Degree Communication

Virtual events are a great way to provide updates and solicit feedback from parents, students and other community stakeholders. We recommend platforms like Zoom, which is [temporarily offering free unlimited use to K-12 schools](#), and [Google Hangouts](#). For example, D.C. Public Schools is hosting Twitter town halls that allow families to get answers to their at-home learning questions and hear important announcements from district leaders. To ensure equitable access to the information sessions, we also recommend providing a join-by-phone call option and partnering with community agencies to post the presentation on their website afterwards.

Support English Language Learners and students with IEPs.

Intentional Culture and Diversity

Families of English Language Learners and students with IEPs may face additional challenges as learning from home becomes the norm during the coronavirus pandemic, so districts should provide direct guidance and support for this population. [CommonSense.org](#) has curated a list of online applications for parents to access, and [Understood.org](#) also provides resources for parents supporting their children with learning differences or disabilities.

Parents of students who are English Language Learners will also need additional supports and learning opportunities. [BrainPOP](#) has provided free online tools for parents and district administrators.

Provide opportunities to maintain "school community."

Intentional Culture and Diversity

Schools are so much more than a brick and mortar building. They are essential components of our broader community, providing a space for children to grow and mature emotionally and build relationships among their peers. They provide outlets for creative learning and expression through the arts. These components should not be overlooked while building at-home learning plans. We also know that students need to feel a sense of belonging to be fully engaged in learning. Fortunately, emerging research suggests that virtual interactions can produce the same levels of connectedness as in-person activities.

School leaders should review their calendars and make provisions for virtual connectivity, taking activities online as much as possible. Google Hangouts, Facebook and Zoom can be used for the following:

- Show-and-tell
- Book report/science presentations
- Band/cheer/dance/theatre practice
- Prom or school dances
- Spirit week daily challenges

Meet families where they are.

Authentic Collaboration

Local nonprofits are supporting families with meal distribution and other necessities during these tough economic times. Districts should collaborate with these partners to not only meet immediate learning needs but also provide access to tools supporting job searches, housing, financial assistance, food pantries, medical services, and other needs that may emerge.

Need More Help?

If you have questions about these resources or need help adapting your current engagement strategies, please contact info@tntp.org.

A national nonprofit founded by teachers, TNTP helps school systems fight educational inequality. We work at every level of the public education system to attract and train talented teachers and school leaders, ensure rigorous and engaging classrooms, and create environments that prioritize great teaching and accelerate student learning. tntp.org