

How Your District Can Engage Families in Online Learning

Tips, tools, and best practices to keep families involved and help students stay motivated to learn

Many families are facing challenges due to current circumstances. Guidance and support from your district, as well as empathetic and open communication can go a long way toward providing reassurance to families and students.

These are guidelines and best practices that your district can adopt in order to help families adjust to online learning and keep them more engaged so that students continue to have the opportunity to truly learn.

Let Families Know That You're in This Together

Educators are facing many of the same challenges as the parents of their students—they understand how important it is to be sensitive to the needs of families. Communicate that compassion and patience so that parents feel supported.

- Let parents know that your district's priority is to ensure that students are happy and healthy.
- It's important to make parents feel like more of a partner.
- Recognize that parents are doing the best they can. District leaders can be the “cheerleaders” who encourage parents and students to be involved in the learning process, and encourage them to reach out if they need help.

Provide Consistent and Accessible Communication

Keep parents regularly updated on your district's plans and on any state plans that are important for them to know. Remind them that educators are there to help.

- As state/local decisions are made, let parents know, for example, if EOCs are cancelled. This also signals that people outside the district understand the challenges students now have.
- Use multiple channels for communication to ensure that families aren't cut off from receiving critical information and updates. If parents only have mobile devices, texting may be the most effective way to reach them.
- Encourage principals to send a daily morning message and end-of-week wrap up email. Teachers can have weekly emails or video announcements.

Help Parents and Students Adjust to Virtual Learning

Provide encouraging and patient guidance as they adjust to this new arrangement and become familiar with a new online learning program or a new device.

- Students may be working with different devices at home than what they use at school. Or they're being provided Chromebooks for the first time. Provide general guidelines about how parents can help students transition to different devices.
- Set up parent support groups so parents can share tips for structuring time for children, managing anxieties, and share concerns.
- Make extracurricular activities virtual if possible, using platforms like Zoom, Facebook Live or Google Hangout. Extracurriculars are a great way for students to develop different skills, build confidence, and explore their interests.

Provide Guidance and Resources for Parents Who Need Help

Parents may feel overwhelmed and not sure where to start or how to move forward to help their student(s) adjust to online learning.

- Be open, candid and empathetic with parents – understand that this may be a crisis for parents who must work or who lost work.
- Start with the source of anxiety: are there basic needs that need to be met? For example, are students getting meals? Is there an issue with tech access?

- Provide a “one-stop-shop” on your district website that’s well organized so parents can easily find what they need to help their students.

Provide Tips to Help Teachers Connect with Families

Encourage teachers to reach out to families regularly in order to build trust and get to know them. Make an initial contact via phone call or virtual office meeting to establish a connection. Be open to various forms of communication.

- Daily emails from teachers can be helpful to ensure that families feel supported. Provide clear instructions and deadlines (day and time), what supplies will be needed and where assignments should be submitted.
- Encourage parents to have a regular routine for their students and set clear expectations for the day. Teachers can share ideas of what they’re doing with their own families.
- Find out what technology families have available in order to understand how that could impact student learning. Some families may have only one laptop.

Recognize the Efforts of Families and Students

Regular encouragement and recognition of their efforts can help students stay positive and motivated as their families navigate challenging times.

- Have a daily highlight of a student or class accomplishment or activity.
- Harness the power of social media. Have theme days, such as superhero day or show your workspace day.
- Give parents and kids second chances as they adjust to online learning, for example if they submitted an assignment and it didn’t show up, or if they had technical issues.
- Acknowledge the hard work families are doing to support their students and that you know they’re doing their best.