TNTP *reimagine teaching*

5 ESSENTIALS FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN REOPENING EFFORTS

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional barriers between families, community, and schools are being dismantled. More than ever before, it will take an entire community to ensure that every child has the support they need to be successful. As school systems and schools plan for reopening, it's essential to engage families, caregivers, and a wide range of community organizations as full partners in student learning. Below are five key steps for kicking off the engagement process:

Reach Out

Start a dialogue with families and community partners right away, while plans are still being developed and before any reopening decisions have been made:

Establish strong two-way communication mechanisms with every family in the school system. Don't assume that families are visiting websites to seek out information. Instead, use every available means of communication to share key dates, timelines for making decisions, and opportunities for families to provide input. Ensure that families have a mechanism for asking questions and receiving timely answers from both the school system and the school, and then address frequent areas of concern in upcoming communications. For example, in Hamilton County, Tennessee, the district has created a Continued Help Hotline where families can call and speak directly with a district staff person to get answers to their questions. As always, it will be critical to provide accessible information to all families, including those who speak languages other than English.

Share information transparently with families and community partners alike and begin to set expectations for the next school year early on. Identify what is known and what has yet to be decided. If remote learning is a strong possibility, encourage families to explore options for childcare and learning support on days that students will not be in school—and reach out to community partners who could help with this when needed. The more time communities have to plan, the more likely they will be able to create a strong support system for children.

Develop a comprehensive plan for tracking down students and families who cannot be easily reached.[1] If possible, work with community organizations or school and school system staff to contact high-need families. When possible, arrange for a personal touchpoint from school system or school-based staff, like a virtual or in-person home visit, or wellness checks for students.

Stop and Reflect: Do all your families have access to consistent, transparent updates, and a means of getting answers to their questions and sharing what they need?

Listen

Collect input on student and family needs and preferences, as well as resources and support that are available from the broader community:

Collect data[2] **on student and family needs and preferences for returning to school, in-person or remotely** (e.g., health concerns, childcare needs during remote learning days, lack of access to technology, scheduling considerations, etc.), as well as students' and families experiences with remote learning options in the spring.

Set up a diverse stakeholder advisory committee to provide more detailed feedback during various stages of the planning process. Pay special attention to ensure you include traditionally marginalized subgroups and families with students who have special needs.

Engage families and existing community partners (e.g., government agencies, community organizations, philanthropic organizations) to better understand who families rely on for information and which trusted partners are already supporting high-need students and families. Map community assets as well as existing touch points for families and students. These touch points will look dramatically different in urban versus rural areas.

Stop and Reflect: Do families have a variety of ways to connect with you, receive accessible, easy-to-understand updates, and give feedback about what is and is not working?

Assess

Review data about existing needs and engage community partners in addressing resource gaps:

Map out assets and potential partners within the community using a tool like this one[3] and begin to strategically match student and family needs with community partners. Pay particular attention to resources and infrastructure gaps at the neighborhood and feeder-pattern levels. For instance, if many families in a given neighborhood need childcare during remote learning days, is there a place of worship or a trusted community organization that could support remote learning?

Share feedback trends with families and community organizations, and partner with internal and external stakeholders to address gaps. For example, if mental health support is a major challenge, craft a detailed plan for identifying the appropriate community partners to provide support, as well as a plan for delivering that support to students and families.

Stop and Reflect: Are you actively sharing and discussing what you learn with families, ensuring it is understandable? Are you partnering with community organizations to address any gaps in support?
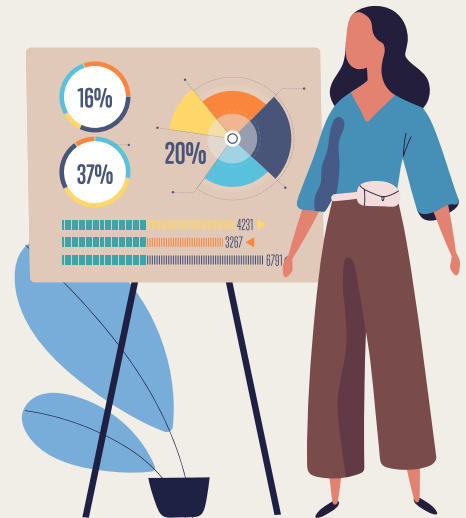
Plan

Develop a comprehensive education support plan that leverages resources, addresses gaps, and includes roles for students, families, and community members—as well as schools and school systems.

Key considerations will include family preferences for reopening and support for addressing inequities, friends and relatives who help students, mental health, basic needs, technology access, and remote learning.

Highlight metrics that will be used to gauge the success of the plan and ensure that those metrics are tied to the values that matter most to students and families.

Summarize the plan in accessible language and provide additional opportunities for families and communities to provide feedback before finalizing it.

Stop and Reflect: Is every department required to make decisions with families, and incorporate their ideas, perspectives, and priorities into their plan?
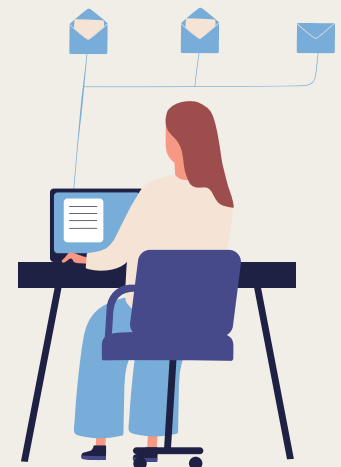
Engage

Share the plan with the community and work together to strengthen supports available to students and families.

Partner with trusted community leaders who are in close proximity to families to share the plan, make sure that families have access to existing resources, and gather feedback about what families need.

Provide a regular forum for sharing information about reopening priorities and students and family needs with new and existing community partners.

Stop and Reflect: Have you done a robust analysis and identified the assets and community organizations that support your students and families? Are you sharing data, resources, and training, with community partners, and engaging with them in the planning to support students and their families?

FOOTNOTES

1 https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/strategies-to-engage-unreached-families-during-covid-19/.

2 https://tntp.org/covid-19-school-response-toolkit/view/covid-19-support-survey-questions.

3 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/5ebd69e1cafc8a4ba12b5349/1589471738982/Virtual+Relationship+Mapping+Strategy+and+Lesson+Plans+2020.pdf.

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