

ENSURING FAMILY VOICE IN RETURN-TO-SCHOOL PLANS



Family-School-
Community Alliance

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<https://fscalliance.org/>

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic places huge demands on schools, communities and families. As schools prepare for re-opening, partnerships between home and school create a foundation for educating students built on equitable collaboration. This approach not only offers the most efficient and effective move to immediate return-to-school implementation but also sets the stage for a long-term shift in the deeper and productive connections between home and school.

This is a ripe opportunity to engage families as true collaborative partners throughout the return to school process. Families need opportunities to share information and participate in planning and problem solving efforts. As a result, schools will be able to make informed, culturally responsive decisions and will benefit from increased buy-in and commitment from families and the community at large. It is critical to ensure outlets for staff, families, and students to be and feel heard, to ask questions, and to engage in real and transparent dialogue.

WHO TO ENGAGE

Ensure the most at-risk, and historically marginalized populations in your school are equally represented in discussions about reopening. Keeping these populations central to reopening plans will ensure inclusive and equitable approaches to public education.

Consider these factors when facilitating engagement:

- Parent/caregivers' employment
- Access to devices, technology, and internet
- Preferred methods for communication
- Needs of specific communities/neighborhoods

Ensure engagement by families of specific subgroups of students. Consider:

- Race/ethnicity
- Home language
- Disability
- Trauma impact
- Income
- Chronic absenteeism



WHEN: IMMEDIATELY, IN SUMMER

- Collect data from families and students about preferences, needs, concerns, and circumstances they face in the return to school. One example from the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project [here](#).
- Accommodate and provide reasonable supports for families' transportation and child care needs.
- Support staff, families and youth in clarifying behavioral expectations and available supports for virtual and in-person settings.
- Prioritize wellness by sharing specific health and safety information related to options for the return to school so families can make an informed decision (mask-wearing strategies, PPE, school distancing guidelines).
- Focus on relationships by remaining empathetic, positive, and collaborative. Validate youth, family, and educator experiences, encourage hope, invite ongoing input and sharing.
- Ensure leadership by creating opportunities for dialogue and discussion among families and educators. Support staff to prioritize relationships.

HOW TO ENGAGE

Carefully consider the goals of family and youth engagement. Distinguish approaches and topics for information broadcast from those for family input, engagement and collaboration.

- Identify what information is one-directional, broadcast-only information. Examples:
 - The risks and benefits of the different established options for school return.
 - Core health and safety information related to options for reopening so families can make informed decisions that are best for their family (state and local policies and practices, staying home when sick, washing hands).



WHEN: IN FALL, AS SCHOOL RESTARTS

- Ensure educators have time collaborating on lesson plans and approaches to instructional delivery methods.
- Consider prioritizing home visits for families of children that may have unique needs or who may be less connected with the school or other families in the community.
- Schedule time and formats that allow families and educators to discuss student progress with academics, emotional well-being so that families can share important information and updates since the school closures. One evidence based example from Caring School Community [here](#). Other social emotional learning curricula and a road map for reopening can be found [here](#).
- Provide school-wide and classroom approaches that prioritize and maintain student social-emotional wellness.
- Offer opportunities to discuss and share strategies for safe social/virtual interactions among youth.
- Collect and use data regarding contacts, connectivity, engagement, and participation in distance learning (cite: [Attendance Works](#)).

HOW TO ENGAGE, CONT'D

- Basic needs (meal, health care and housing access).
- Connection to other related resources (childcare, support groups, classes and trainings).
- Considering family preferences and access data, use multiple platforms for sharing information with families, youth and community members.
- Mail paper flyers or make personal phone calls to families who may not have or use reliable internet access.

Be clear about the focus of your efforts to ensure family input, engagement and collaboration, for example:

- Support for in-person and virtual return to school formats (accessing remote instruction; procedures for distancing within the school building).
- Long range planning for addressing academic and social emotional needs due to extended school closures.

- Prioritization of needs of certain groups of students, both in format and intensity of service delivery.
- Identify ways to ensure representative & comprehensive voice.
- Build on families' funds of knowledge; value their expertise as caregivers and in-home support for their child's virtual learning. What critical observations and new knowledge can they share to inform staff about how their children have been coping, learning and connecting? What recommendations do they have about individual children and the community's needs more broadly?
- Tap into community partners.
- Conduct focus groups or other means of live collective input.
- Use technology to assess needs and concerns such as online surveys, polls, text messages.
- Host town hall meetings, broadcast online or local television.

Identify, create and dedicate resources to systems for ongoing dialogue:

- Identify community brokers (school staff or community agencies) who can help reach and effectively communicate with subgroups or communities who remain inaccessible using typical outreach efforts.
- Create a plan that ensures opportunities for ongoing exchanges between educators and families.
- Be transparent in the type of engagement requested and level of commitment required.
- Clarify how and when the feedback requested of families will be used.



WHEN: CONTINUALLY, LONG TERM

- Continue to ensure systems for ongoing dialogue are working effectively for all families connected with the school and district.
- Ensure plans for 'return to normal' consider strong prevention and intervention strategies including opportunities to integrate teaching of routines, behavioral expectations, and safe social interactions.
- Identify trauma-informed and social-emotional learning practices that should continue within the school and classroom long-term.
- Identify how families and youth can best maintain open and transparent communications and collaborative problem solving.
- Consider proactive communications in anticipation of future alerts and new concerns. Work with families, youth and community partners to create ongoing opportunities for sharing concerns, reducing stigma, and establishing procedures for responding to future waves, new outbreaks, and other emerging conditions.