



# A Principal's Guide to Leading in the Time of Change: Effective and Equitable Family Engagement Strategies and Resources

## WHY NOW?

As schools are consumed with operational changes related to COVID-19 as well as the critical need to accelerate learning for all students—educators need school leader support to effectively partner with families.

One important lesson from this pandemic is how much schools need more equitable practices to support all parents as partners in learning, in and outside of the classroom. Now more than ever, we must build on the momentum to foster and sustain meaningful school-home partnerships that are grounded in trust and based on a more shared and actionable understanding of student progress. A [national parent survey conducted by Learning Heroes](#)<sup>1</sup> during the spring school closures revealed actionable insights:

- A majority of parents feel more connected to their child's daily education and, as a result, want to be more engaged moving forward. Parents want a better understanding of what their child is expected to learn and how they are achieving.
- At the same time almost 9 in 10 parents, regardless of race, education, or income level, believe their child is performing at or above grade level. This is in stark contrast to the National Assessment of Educational Progress data, which show that just over a third of students nationally perform grade level work in reading and math.<sup>2</sup> As noted in NWEA's [The COVID-19 slide](#)<sup>3</sup> report and several [reports](#), the impact on academic achievement given school closures may be significant, especially for our black and brown students.
- This disconnect between how parents perceive their child's performance and the reality must be addressed for parents to most effectively support learning at home.

For parents and teachers to be allies in the learning process, they need a shared understanding of where students are academically and developmentally so they can work together to accelerate learning. This Principal Guide was created to help school leaders support their teachers as they use asset-based, culturally responsive two-way communication practices to both give and receive information about student progress and help maximize family and educator roles.

1 Learning Heroes, [Parents 2020: COVID-19 Closures, A Redefining Moment for Students, Parents & Schools](#)

2 National Assessment of Educational Progress, [The Nation's Report Card](#)

3 NWEA, [The Covid-19 slide](#)

***Two-way Communication is Key***—The following practices can help you share school updates, strengthen relationships with families, provide student data in a parent-friendly way, and help all parents know how to use the resources and platforms you provide.

- As a school, have as **few platforms as possible** that families need to monitor student work and communicate with staff. This is especially helpful for families with more than 1 child at your school.
- Provide **key information in multiple formats** that is translated into family native languages. For example, post brief videos to share updates and reassure parents that children are safe (in the case of in-person models). Getting information in a video is easier than having to read it in an email or document. Use social media channels to direct families to video updates.
- Develop an easy-to-use, curated **list of helpful links** to help families navigate changes and find help. Include school-based and community-based resources and sort them by topics most important to parents.
- Post an **FAQ** about any school changes and share it via email, texts, social media posts, school website, and apps (e.g., Remind, Class Dojo).
- Co-host regular **community conversations** with your school's parent group, such as the PTA, to address parent concerns, questions and elevate parent voice.
- Have grade level teams post **video tutorials** showing families how to use your learning platform and the most important apps. Provide links to the videos via email, texts, social media, etc. and ask parents for feedback on them.
- Create **feedback loops** to ask families what they need most from the school, especially during transition times like before summer break and at the start of the year. Have a designated email address and phone number for parent questions, and assign a staff member to field questions in a timely manner. Use social media to share how you are responding to parent requests.

Incorporate [Culturally Responsive Leadership: A Framework for School and School System Leaders](#) developed by the Leadership Academy. It is a set of leadership behaviors which research and experience in the field has shown support creating more culturally responsive learning environments for every student. To complement the framework, you can leverage this [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School](#).

## HOW SCHOOL LEADERS CAN SUPPORT TEACHERS

**Ensure Parents TRUST the School** — Use every interaction with families as a way to strengthen relationships. Help all your teachers...

- **Conduct family visits** (virtual or in person when possible) to build trust with families. During the first visit ask parents what their hopes and dreams are for their child, and make the connection back to what they are learning to school.
- Create and post “**get to know you videos**” early in the year (for this year’s class) and at the end of the year (for next year’s class).
- **Survey parents** to learn about their priorities, needs as well as their child’s strengths, areas for support, interests, hobbies, culture, etc.
- Ask parents about the **best way to communicate** with them. Confirm when and how the parent and teacher will stay in regular communication.
- **Include families in school activities** like poetry slams or milestone celebrations. Invite them to **post videos** about their cultural traditions.
- Make a **positive call home** to 1 family every day.
- Organize a “**spirit caravan**” and drive through student neighborhoods to maintain a sense of community, especially during virtual or hybrid learning.
- Share how you’re tackling important issues around race and social justice. Use this [Anti-Racism Family Resource Guide](#) in class and send home to families.
- **At every opportunity, thank parents** for supporting their child’s learning!

**Ensure that Parents and Teachers have a SHARED UNDERSTANDING of Student Performance** — Once families feel comfortable with their child’s teacher, prioritize communication about student learning. The following ideas and resources help your staff share data in an actionable, culturally responsive way. Ensure all teachers...

- Know the [most important grade level math and reading skills](#) and be able to share what they look like in parent-friendly language.
- **Use simple visuals** (graphs/charts) to help families see how their child is performing in relation to their peers and in relation to the grade level goal.
- Meet with parents **to co-create a plan** for grade level success. This [Parent-Teacher Planning Tool](#) helps teachers facilitate two-way conversations and create a plan based on a shared understanding of student progress. This [‘how to’ resource](#) helps teachers integrate the tool into existing parent outreach.

- Address **parent questions—even the tough ones**. Provide teachers with this [Discussion Guide](#) that includes sample talking points on how to navigate parent questions. Prioritize time for teachers to **role play and practice** sharing student benchmark and formative data within their grade level teams.
- Create **video tutorials** that show parents how to monitor their child’s progress—how to login to the parent portal, what data you want them to notice, how to recognize issues of concern, and to do in response.
- Avoid using “**educational jargon**”. For example, instead of “student growth” say “student progress.” Use this [Developing Life Skills: Communication Roadmap](#) to help break down social-emotional/life skills for families.

**Help Parents KNOW HOW TO USE Learning Resources —We know what it takes for adult learners to master a new concept—telling isn’t teaching. Families need information on skills and tools, but they also need the chance to practice—sending links isn’t always enough! Ensure all teachers/grade level teams...**

- **Invite families to observe on-line instruction** during the school day. Record and post some of these sessions so parents who aren’t available during the school day can watch the videos at a more convenient time.
- **Connect with parents 1 to 1**, doing virtual demos and facilitating practice of resources. Find ways to safely meet with parents in-person to demonstrate the new skill (e.g. host a tech session outdoors in the school parking lot).
- Clearly communicate **the 1 to 3 things you want families to do**. For example, “help your child be logged in on time, ready for the planned lessons, and follow up to make sure they are doing the assignments after the lesson.”
- Host “**Parent Academy**” sessions regularly to model how to use the learning resources you provide. Make sure you also use these sessions to provide families with multiple opportunities to practice and ask questions about the new skill.
- Invite families to **post videos of them successfully practicing skills** at home with their child. Consider a celebratory ‘badging’ or recognition for this!
- Establish **virtual family support groups** so families can share ideas, questions, and celebrate when they are being successful at home supporting student learning.



## ENSURING YOUR TEACHERS SUCCEED

**Build Teacher Capacity** — As an administrator, you can reduce the anxiety your teachers feel about home-school partnerships by preparing them for success and by supporting them throughout the year with professional learning and coaching. Use these ideas to help your faculty feel more confident and competent:

- **Spotlight, celebrate, or incentivize** the sharing of successful practices or new ideas on how teachers can connect with families.
- **Model** for teachers and grade level teams by practicing student data chats that are grounded in trust, action, and anti-bias strategies.
- **Connect teachers** who are more tech savvy with novice teachers to help them better use virtual platforms to communicate with and train families.
- Prioritize **professional learning** for teachers on adult learning and culturally responsive strategies.
- Incentivize teachers or PLC teams to **leverage free webinars** about family engagement best practice. Here are webinars from [PTA](#) and [Harvard](#).

**Create the Conditions for Effective Home-School Partnerships** — As the “lead learner” in the building, foster the conditions that allow teachers to be successful in their efforts to partner with parents. Use the following ideas to provide ongoing support throughout the year:

- Make **time** for teachers to connect with parents. Prioritize explicit time at all staff meetings for teachers to call families.
- Use staff meeting time to **acknowledge teachers who have made strong connections** with parents and allow these staff to share their successes with peers.
- Create **school-wide “challenges”** to incentivize teachers to be successful. For example, have a contest to see which grade level is able to reach and engage the most families during a 2-week time period.
- During **individual check-ins** with teachers, ask...
  - » *What is going well as you reach out to families?*
  - » *What strategies are you trying to address barriers?*
  - » *How are you being culturally responsive and respectful with your parents?*
  - » *What do you need most from me to help you partner with all parents?*

## ABOUT LEARNING HEROES

Learning Heroes supports parents and guardians as their child’s most effective education advocate. Using key insights from five years of qualitative and quantitative parent research, we work with state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), education nonprofits, parent organizations, civil rights groups, faith based organizations, businesses, and many others, to reach and engage parents with free, research based tools, resources and communications in English and Spanish. Through these organizations, in 2019, Learning Heroes reached more than 27 million parents, and engaged nearly 4 million with our content. For more information, visit [belearninghero.org](https://belearninghero.org).

## ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

The Leadership Academy started in 2003 with our groundbreaking, research-based Aspiring Principals Program, which trained close to 600 principals, most of them women and leaders of color, who have served in some of New York City’s schools most in need of support and change. Seeing our initial success in New York City, school systems across the country began approaching us to help them develop leadership pipelines and strengthen leader practices.

Over the years, we have sharpened our focus on the “how” of dismantling systemic inequities in schools: culturally responsive leadership. We have supported thousands of leaders in more than 200 school systems and educational organizations across 37 states and Washington, D.C., and we continue to expand our reach. As we engage with so many diverse communities, our own work continuously strengthens while our mission remains constant: to develop great leaders committed to leading schools intentionally built to serve every child. For more information, visit: [leadershipacademy.org](https://leadershipacademy.org).

## ABOUT NATIONAL PTA

National PTA® comprises millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of family engagement in schools. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit association that prides itself on being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. Membership in PTA is open to anyone who wants to be involved and make a difference for the education, health, and welfare of children and youth. For more information, visit [PTA.org](https://PTA.org).