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This brief provides some strategies and tips to help educators and schools to engage with families for relationship building during the time of the coronavirus and school closures. These strategies may be used virtually after schools reopen.

Family-School Engagement in the Time of Coronavirus

The Coronavirus pandemic is a challenge unlike any that we have faced in our lifetime. With our schools closed, there are new pressures on schools and educators to meet the learning needs of students virtually. Families and caregivers are also under pressure to transition quickly into their new full-time roles as home schoolers while juggling everything else on their plates.

50 years of research attests to the benefits of family engagement. When families are engaged and partner with schools and educators, students learn more, attend college at higher rates, and are more successful and the entire community benefits. Schools that succeed in engaging families, particularly families from diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic levels, focus on building trusting relationships with family members and staying connected.

Recognizing that most families are struggling under the weight of the pandemic and the new roles thrust upon them, we need to **recognize** these key beliefs about families:

- Families are their child's first teacher and are experts on their children.
- Families have the ability to help their children regardless of their background.
- Families have "hopes and dreams" for their children.
- Families are resilient so honor their strengths.
- Trust is the connective tissue to relationship building.

While this pandemic is an incredibly stressful time for all, it offers another opportunity to build and fortify relationships with families that will be beneficial when schools finally reopen.

There is no better time to be connected than when life turns us upside down.

Connect More Meaningfully with Families-Conduct a Virtual Family/Home Visit

Family/Home visits is a high impact family-engagement strategy linked to learning. Results from a Johns Hopkins study of school districts implementing a systematic home

visiting program, experienced decreased chronic absenteeism and improvements in reading and math proficiency.

Relationship building serves as the basis for the family visit. Getting to know the family allows us to see the cultural resources and assets that exist in the family and that can be leveraged for student success and wellbeing. While schools face barriers (i.e. time, childcare, work conflicts) that prohibit families from attending school events and teacher-parent conferences, this does not mean a lack of interest in their child's education. Despite these challenges, and during the time of the coronavirus, educators are making the effort to connect with families through various online platforms, "grab and go" pick-ups, and calling and texting.

Focus on Opportunities

With everyone sheltered in place, and with many families using some form of technology for student learning to communicate, now is an opportunity to meet the entire family and get to know them better by conducting a virtual family/home visit. However, some families, particularly those in rural communities may not have access to technology and Wi-fi making it difficult for a virtual visit. In those instances, scheduling a conference call or phone call is a way to conduct the family visit.

Here are some **tips and strategies** for a successful virtual or non-virtual visit.

- **Have authentic communication** – Our communication with families, needs to be at the most basic level, **authentic**. It needs to be kind, honest and sincere.
- **Check-In:**
 - Ask the family member/parents how they are doing.
 - Then ask how the student(s) is doing. Do they have any pressing needs?
- **Stick to the purpose** – Remember the goal is to get to know the family and for relationship building, so do not allow the conversation to turn into a discussion of academic and behavior issues during these challenging times.
- **Be encouraging** – Ask how things are going, be supportive and remind the family that we are all going through the pandemic together.
- **Be a "Hope" dealer** – Stay positive by talking about the future.
- **Encourage flexibility** – Remind families to pause and take a deep breath.
- **Wrap-up** – Conclude by thanking families for their time; reinforce how important it is to collaborate to achieve positive outcomes for students and to partner and work together when school reopens.

After the visit

- **Send a thank you by email, text, post card or a phone call** to the family to let them know how much you appreciated the time and meeting family members who took part.
- **Follow-up by sending an invitation** for your next virtual visit. Keep the momentum going.

Reflection

- **Write down** any insights you gained about the family that will help you with instruction when school reopens.
- **Reflect** on your assumptions and remember that everyone is doing the best they can and concentrate on the cultural assets of the family.

Connecting is essential, especially during challenging times. Take the opportunity to speak with the entire family and get to know them better. **Without connection, people can feel isolated.** Now, more than ever before families need our support. Remember families are resilient, so honor their strengths.

Resource Awareness - Be prepared with information on Resources and Support Services

- Families may ask about resources they might need. Have your school district's information on local resources available.
- Families may be in or near crisis situations. Be prepared with information about support services, domestic violence hotlines, referrals to mental health services and nutrition help. Be aware of food distribution networks in your community.
- Visit the NYSUT website for information and resources and the Coronavirus Toolkit <https://www.nysut.org/resources/special-resources-sites/coronavirus-toolkit> and Family Resources: <https://www.nysut.org/news/2020/march/coronavirus-families>

For more information and support related to Family Engagement, please contact:

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