

September 2020

ONcall

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inside

Getting ready for the next normal and the one after that

We are in a period of massive global transformation. We can expect some significant and lasting changes after the turmoil of the pandemic ends. Education leaders can help shape these changes by modeling calm, resiliency and commitment to a vision of a healthy future.

Podcasting 101

Podcasts are popular and relatively easy to produce. If you are looking for another channel for communicating with your audience, you may want to consider podcasting. Read tips to help you get started.

Sample school letter templates for issues related to COVID-19

Ready-to-send letters with key messages and reassurances can help during this busy and challenging time. If your district doesn't already have sample letters for common virus-related situations, the attached letter templates might help.

Serve your students better by understanding their cultures

Schools are diverse. To serve students effectively, schools must understand their particular needs, including cultural considerations. Build bridges and communicate with families better by understanding and meeting cultural needs of your students.

Using surveys to increase engagement

Schools need parent feedback to ensure that they are meeting parent and student needs and creating an engaged school culture. Informal surveys are a helpful tool. Read tips for starting a regular feedback loop using digital survey apps.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Masks for children

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many school districts are also requiring masks in some form as a condition for opening in-person classes. Here are tips to ensure that students are following these safety requirements.

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Getting ready for the next normal and the one after that

One day in March 2020, everything in your school district, school building or classroom was “normal,” and the next day it wasn’t. Something you couldn’t see, smell or taste had invaded your well-ordered world —COVID-19 — and your “normal” world would never be the same.

“What we’re experiencing now is a period of massive global transformation caused by a dramatic change in our environment,” said leadership coaches Karen Carnahan and Marsia Gunter of Continuous Breakthru in Portland, Oregon. (www.continuousbreakthru.com)

Carnahan and Gunter call this situation “punctuated equilibrium.” The term originated in evolutionary biology. It refers to how the evolution of a species (humans included) is generally static for long periods of time until a sudden change is introduced into the environment. Then, the evolution of that species begins to undergo rapid change and development. Think classroom instruction to online instruction in just a few short weeks.

While we humans haven’t physically evolved in the past five months, all our interactions with each other, how schools do business, how we do all the “normal” activities of daily living have changed completely.

Here’s how Carnahan and Gunter describe what is happening to us along with their advice for how to navigate the next “normal” and the ones after that:

Ups, downs, and temporary stability

After navigating three months of quarantine and digital learning, an upended summer, and now uncertainty about life in the new school year, you have likely “somewhat adapted to the next ‘normal’ while still craving the conditions of the past before the virus hit. We instinctively search for a stable state amidst uncertainty,” said Carnahan and Gunter.

“Whatever that ‘stable state’ might feel like, it probably will be short-lived. Our journey might be likened to being on a bucking horse. Any momentary feeling of stability will be upended by the next kick or jump. And then we are just trying to ‘stay on the horse,’ or just keep up with the changing circumstances.

In short, we are still on the bucking horse, and the ride isn’t over yet. Other big changes are likely on the horizon, even if we don’t know what they might be. You won’t be the same person when you get off the horse as when you got on,” they said.

Carnahan and Gunter visually represent punctuated equilibrium with the following graph. Those ups and downs? We are still somewhere in the middle of the middle, they say.

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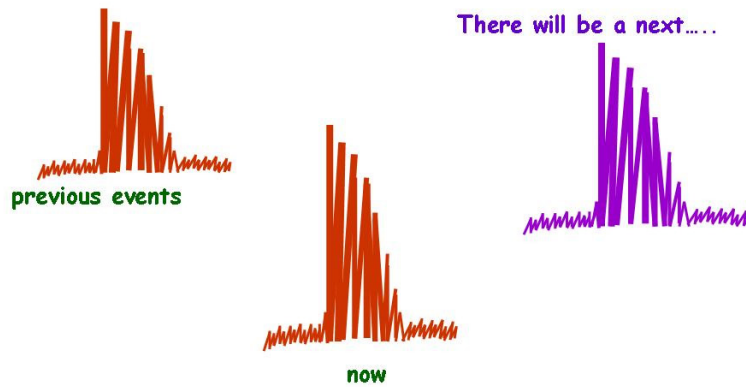


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Punctuated Equilibrium

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In fact, living in a punctuated equilibrium is a completely different experience than any of us have lived through before.

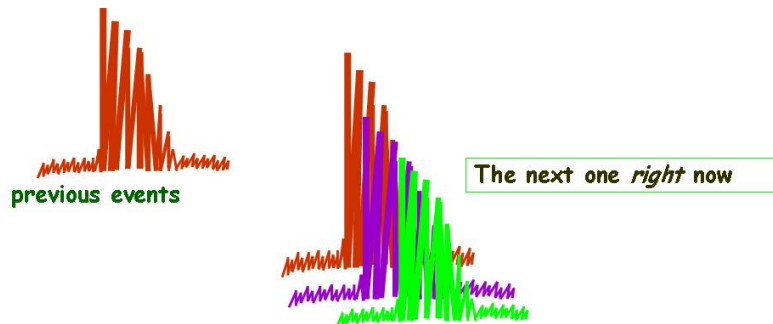
We can't say, this will be over by the time school starts...by the new year...surely next summer...as soon as there is a vaccine. We want certainty. We don't want a world where we just don't know. We don't want to accept there are no time limits anymore.

These times have morphed into multiple punctuated equilibria — all happening at the same time. In addition to all of the physical and mental consequences of living with a microbe, we must assimilate closed workplaces and virtual education, protests for racial justice, impacts of climate change, wearing masks, social distancing and washing our hands incessantly.

If we thought everyone would band together for the common good and have the stamina for self-sacrifice, we were mistaken. Loneliness, fear, concern, mistrust, suspicion, anger, resentment, confusion and exhaustion abound.

What Now?

Punctuated Equilibrium xx 2 or 3



What do we do? According to Carnahan and Gunter, a more useful question might be “How can we be?”

“The truth is none of us likes disruptive change. It upsets our sense of control and throws a monkey wrench into things we thought we had handled. Plans for the future, which may have seemed solid, now seem malleable, different or even completely obsolete.

“It is OK to feel sad, panicked, fearful, angry, anxious or stressed right now. These are all ‘normal’ reactions when you are trying to stay on the horse. Cultivating and practicing useful (in other words — practical) ways of being can help diminish a lot of our fears.”

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Helpful states of being during a punctuated equilibrium

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Carnahan and Gunter find the following states of being enormously helpful in these current crises, these punctuated equilibria:

Start with a sense of calm. Breathe and work to maintain a sense of stillness. Despite bad things happening, you can still cultivate a sense of control, starting with your breath.

Stay resilient. You also can help retain a sense of control by retaining optimism, even after unexpected or unfortunate things happen. Realize that you are more than just your circumstances. Stay on the bucking horse. Ride it out.

Stay awake. Keep tabs on your own emotions and actions so you can manage yourself without spinning out of control. Ask: What is my experience? Why do I care? How do I need to manage myself through this?

Stay connected. Connections with others will lift your morale. Find opportunities to help each other. A tangible thing you can do to help often alleviates anxiety. Sometimes just “showing up” (from a socially responsible distance with your mask on, of course) is a huge relief and a help to others.

Get creative. How can you come up with new and effective ways of dealing with emergent problems? Ask yourself, ‘what if?’

Here’s the big one: Remember, you are a leader — of your school district, your school building, your classroom. You can still have a vision for the future and work toward that vision despite these crises. You do not have to be elected, chosen or titled to be a leader. Great leaders take turns leading and following.

These are challenging times for everyone — especially for educators charged with educating the next generation. Just remember, the experiences you are having, these punctuated equilibria, offer the learning to help you build a bridge to the future beyond these current crises. Though some people think this kind of vision is reserved for the political realm, it really is a responsibility for all of us. All of us are empowered to find a way to make these difficult times mean something, however challenging it is to find that meaning.

Remember, too, as educational leaders, you are the ones who will determine what schools of the future will be like for students, for parents, your staff and your community. Your job now is to envision what the next “normal” for schools will be in six months, in 18 months, in the next normal and the one after that. Your willingness to live and thrive in whatever is next will make the difference.

There is no ‘normal’ to come back to because it’s we who will change. Our perspectives will have shifted. It’s OK not to know what is going to happen next, Carnahan and Gunter say. So, stay tuned...there is much more to come on building a future for education through equilibria.

Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, senior consultant, C&M Communications, Portland, Oregon, with permission to reprint from Continuous Breakthru. Carnahan Smith & Gunter, Portland, Oregon, 2020. Principals Karen Carnahan and Marsia Gunter are applied futurists who work with businesses and organizations to be resilient, vital, and successful.

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Podcasting 101

Podcasts are all the rage these days. Everyone has one. They're attached to each new movie that comes out, and television shows have podcasts about television shows. There are mystery podcasts, sports podcasts, how-to-fix-your-car podcasts and just about any topic you could want to know about.

Podcasts are easy to set up and fairly easy to edit and produce into a high-quality product. This may be why there are so many — they are accessible. You can make a podcast entirely on your phone these days with decent audio. And with just a few hundred dollars, you can make an audio-studio-quality podcast.

With so many podcasts, it's very difficult to stand out in the crowd. There are countless abandoned projects littering the podcast landscape, making it difficult to find new content. And let's face it, a good podcast idea doesn't mean the podcast will be great. Just because you can podcast, doesn't mean you should.

To improve your chances of making a great podcast, here are some things to consider.

Should I start a podcast?

This is not the first question you should ask, but it's often the first question someone asks before diving into the process of creating a podcast. The most important question is, "what am I trying to communicate and why, and what's the best platform for what I'm trying to accomplish?"

Podcasts are a valuable tool for communicating many topics, but it is a storytelling tool. Sometimes those stories contain valuable advice, conversations, or interviews with knowledgeable and interesting people. But you should never start a podcast just because you can.

Some reasons to start a podcast

1. You have a lot of information that isn't enough for a book, but it is too much for social media.

In other words, your content doesn't fit other platforms very well. A podcast still may not be the best tool, but it's one to consider.

A lot of audio content already exists, perhaps from old recordings, speeches and videos. Having audio content that would be interesting to share within the context of your topic can be a strong basis to start a podcast. A podcast might be a good consideration if the limits of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook don't allow you to get the whole package of your information out to a crowd.

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2. You have access to interesting/knowledgeable people, and you can put them at ease and help them convey that information through conversations or interviews.

Some of the most popular podcasts in the country follow this format. You already have a good social media audience and you plan to leverage that audience for the podcast. Realize that not everyone will become a listener just because they follow you on social media, but having a good base audience to push your podcast can help build your audience through word of mouth.

3. You have an active interest in audio storytelling, interviewing or conversations and a propensity for learning new technology. Producing a podcast requires both technical and interviewing skills.

How to start a podcast

Once you determine that you have good reason to start a podcast, it's important to understand the technology that drives it. In the most general terms, podcasts are audio files hosted by a podcast service that allows the files to be streamed or downloaded — directly or through podcast subscription services like Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Stitcher or Spotify. A person can then access the audio file by streaming it directly from the podcast host or through their favorite subscription service, or by downloading to listen to on a phone or computer.

Equipment: The basic tools

Audio recorder. Your phone will work just fine. You can buy microphone attachments to produce better-quality audio. Inexpensive options for audio recorders that allow you to manipulate the sound-quality levels range from \$100-\$500.

Audio editor. There are inexpensive and even free audio editors out there. Garage Band can be used to edit podcasts, and it is free with Apple phones and computers. Audacity is another tool that is widely used for editing podcasts. It is free and can be difficult to learn, but there are many tutorials online. High-end editors like Adobe Audition can be purchased.

Microphones. If you're going to spend money on anything in the world of podcasting, put some money into microphones. Shure is a good brand that plugs into your phone with an adapter for less than \$200. If you buy a regular audio recorder, the old Shure SM-58 microphones are very hard to beat for quality.

Podcast host. There are a million choices in this category. The main thing to consider is how often you will be podcasting and how long your episodes will be. Some hosts like Libsyn (libsyn.com) are fantastic but costly. The charges are based on how much audio content they host.

Social media. It's important to be able to tell the world when you publish a new podcast episode. Your platform is a great place to ask people to review and rate your podcast.

Podcast format

Pick a format for your podcast and stick to it. A format is a way of putting a podcast together. It can start with music and then an introduction, followed by an interview, followed by more music and then a closing statement, or any variation of this. You want people to feel like they know what to expect when they come back to listen to the next episode.

Work process

Most podcasters end up finding their own production workflow. Creating audio, filing audio, writing scripts, and editing and sharing on social media can take on many different forms depending on the individual.

Here's my workflow as one example:

Create an editorial calendar. I know I have one season per year and generally one podcast episode per week. What do I want to do for the next 50+ weeks?

Plan the interviews. Interviews make up the bulk of my audio-recording projects, so I spend time putting together interview materials, researching and recording interviews with experts in my field.

Manage your files. All audio is filed in a master file for each episode: main interview, artwork, script, supplemental audio and music.

Edit first. I always start by editing the interview first. This allows me to make notes about where I might want to add an aside or perhaps remove or add something.

Produce the show. Once I have all my show files created, I build them into a podcast using this lineup: Intro 1, Music, Intro 2, Interview and Outro. I also add advertisements into the audio at the beginning, middle and end of the podcast.

Convert the master file to MP3 and post it to our podcast host. Wait until it is added to subscription services like Apple Podcasts or Spotify and then share it on social media.

My podcast: The Beaver State Podcast: myodfw.com/articles/beaver-state-podcast

Essential questions

Nearly every specific part of making a podcast can be researched thoroughly on YouTube. In fact, thousands of hours of tutorials exist to help get you started with podcasting. But the main thing to consider before beginning is if you should be podcasting in the first place. Do you have enough interest to keep this going for the long term? How many episodes do you plan to produce? When will you take breaks? If you get bored, your listeners will likely get bored. If you pause too long, people may unsubscribe or give you poor reviews and ratings. A podcast relies on good ratings and reviews to be found in crowded podcast subscription services. The last thing to consider is time. How long will each episode be? Variable podcasts can make it tough for people to binge listen. As a rule of thumb, keeping a podcast under an hour is a good time frame for maintaining a listening audience. A half-hour to 45 minutes allows people to listen during workouts or commutes.

Podcasts are a fantastic communication tool and, created with a lot of care and thought, can build an enthusiastic audience quickly. But they can be a burden when you burn a lot of creative energy on a platform that wasn't the best fit for the kind of information you want to provide.

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Sample school letter templates for issues related to COVID-19

By now, districts have sent out many communications to families because of COVID-19. States are providing guidance to school districts about requirements for reopening or required closing. Sample letters and communications resources may also be available to all districts from state authorities.

Fall is always a busy time for schools, and it is especially hectic now as conditions and recommendations continue to change. Ready-to-send letters with key messages and reassurances can help.

If your district doesn't already have sample letters for common situations, the attached letter templates can be revised quickly. They are addressed to parents from the school principal. Print them on school letterhead, modify them as needed and send with a principal's signature — or email them if that is standard practice. Replace any italicized text with school-specific information.

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After they have been sent, post the key messages from the letters on school websites and social media sites.

The letter topics in this packet include:

- Notification of childcare closures
- A student or staff member has tested positive for COVID-19
- School reopening
- Why school is reopening
- Mask requirements

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Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant

**From the Principal:
Child Care Closures**

Dear Parents,

We continue to make adjustments to our school programs to protect the health and safety of students. Due to ongoing public health concerns, child care programs will be closed effective (*date*). No before or after-school care will be available at (*school or program name*).

We understand how important this program is to our families, and we will reopen as soon as it is safe to do so. Your child's well-being is our highest priority.

If you are an essential worker and lack child care, the state (*or our district*) has compiled a list of resources to help essential workers, including options for child care. Please visit the COVID-19 resource website for information (*website*)

We are following official guidelines for tracing exposure to the virus. Please let us know right away if you or a family member in your home has received a positive COVID-19 diagnosis. We will notify the families of children in the childcare program that their child may have been exposed to the virus. Any notification will be strictly confidential.

Thank you for your understanding. This is a challenging time, and we appreciate how important child care services are for your family. We will contact you immediately when we can reopen.

Sincerely,
Principal

**From the Principal:
Student or staff COVID-19 diagnosis**

Dear Parents,

We have recently learned that a student or staff member at (*school*) has tested positive for COVID-19. They are in our thoughts, and we wish them a quick recovery.

We are following state guidelines for reporting these results, and we are working with the health department to ensure compliance with all recommended health and safety rules at our school. Our first priority is to ensure the safety of our students.

Steps we are implementing in cooperation with the local health department include: (*closing school? tracing contacts? sanitizing?*) You can find more information about these rules and procedures on (*district or state health website*). We will continue to update families about the rules at our school and any additional steps that we will follow.

Testing and isolating people who have had a possible virus exposure are very important in helping prevent further spread of the virus.

If your child has any of these symptoms, please contact your medical provider.

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough

(Over)

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- Loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea

You can find more information about COVID-19 symptoms on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html.

We will maintain the confidentiality of the individuals who test positive. If you have questions about the health-related procedures and response, please contact us.

Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,
Principal

**From the Principal:
School Reopening**

Dear Parents,

I hope your family is safe and healthy. We appreciate your understanding and patience during this challenging time, and we empathize with families during this difficult time. I am grateful to our families for adapting to the changes and new demands during this public health crisis.

Based on guidelines from the state health department and the governor, we are planning to open schools for in-person instruction on *(date)*.

Our first priority is the health and safety of our students. We will not open without careful consideration of all factors that impact the well-being of our students.

School will look different this year. Our reopening plan includes *(hybrid? distance? in-person instruction)*. The plan includes *(e.g., extensive and regular sanitation, required masks, isolation recommendations for persons exposed to others with COVID-19)*.

Read the whole reopening plan on the district website: *(URL)*.

We know you have questions. Please follow us on social media and check our school and district websites often for the latest information. I am committed to sharing information as I hear it and will send out additional letters in the near future.

The whole staff at *(school)* is excited to see your child when school opens. This is a difficult time, but we are committed to doing our best to provide an excellent education to your child.

Thank you. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,
Principal

**From the Principal:
Why we will have an in-person reopening**

Dear Parents,

Our district has decided to reopen schools and bring students back into the classroom for in-person learning. I have heard concerns from parents and would like provide additional information and reassurance about your child's safety.

The decision to resume in-person school is not easy. District leaders considered safety guidelines, current health recommendations in our state and the ongoing damage to students who miss school. The safety of our students is our highest priority. This includes protecting student health and ensuring that all students have access to equitable educational opportunities.

The fact is that in-person school is best for most students, and we will be carefully following the guidance from our state health department. You can read the specifics of the plan on our website (*URL*).

It will be essential that families help children comply with school rules for masks, handwashing and social distancing. I will send reminders of the rules prior to the state of school. If problems arise, we may have to go back to a home-based school model.

I am excited to see students for the new school year. Thank you for your support and understanding. If you have questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,
Principal

**From the Principal:
Reminders about masks**

Dear Parents,

Our district has adopted requirements for masks in all school buildings. This means that students who are (age) and older must wear masks at all times during the school day. This recommendation follows the CDC guidelines for reducing the spread of COVID-19 and keeping others safe.

I know that this is a challenge for many students, and we appreciate your assistance with complying. The bottom line is that we can open school if we all follow the rules and try to keep each other safe. We all want to be able to return to the classroom.

The rules will be simple: masks at all times in common areas and when there are fewer than six feet between students, and no sharing or trading masks.

Younger children could benefit from a lanyard attached to the mask, so it is within easy reach. Help them get used to it by practicing wearing it at home. Parents can also model wearing masks to help students understand how important they are.

We are asking for students to have a basic cloth mask. They are easy to find at local department stores. If you do not have one, we can provide a mask for your child.

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Thank you for understanding. We can all work together to keep each other safe and get back to normal as soon as possible.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Letter Templates

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Sincerely,
Principal

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Serve your students better by understanding their cultures

How many different cultures do your students represent? What do you know about those cultures? How well do the staff who work with diverse students understand them? Are you able to communicate with parents appropriately? Does your district have bilingual and bicultural staff who can help you communicate with families?

When COVID-19 closed schools in March, the answers to these questions became imperative. Understanding a student's home environment suddenly meant the difference between being able to teach them online or leaving them without access to the free, public education the law requires schools to provide.

Schools that understand their students can serve them more effectively. This was essential as school staff rushed to meet emergency needs, including providing Chromebooks and internet connections, delivering lessons and free and reduced-priced meals for eligible students, and ensuring that teachers could transition to online instruction with limited resources while enlisting parent help.

Schools are diverse places. The July 1, 2019, U.S. Census population estimate data shows:

- African Americans make up 13.5% of the U.S. population and are the second-largest minority group.
- Latino, an umbrella term describing people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, including Mexico, Central and South America, Cuba and Puerto Rico, is the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S. This group represents 18.5% of the population.
- Asians, Pacific Islanders make up 5.9% of the population and come primarily from China, Japan, Korea, The Philippines, Asia, Pacific Islands, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Indigenous populations — Native Americans, Native Alaskans, Native Hawaiians and Native Pacific Islanders represent just 1.5% of the population.
- Eastern Europeans from countries that were part of the former Soviet Union are also coming through the schoolhouse doors, often in large numbers in urban and suburban school districts, swelling the languages spoken by school families to 50 or more.
- Homelessness and poverty are impacting more and more school families each year. With COVID-19, statistics today certainly include many more than the 11.8% of the population listed as living in poverty in 2019. Homeless families are often less visible because they live in emergency shelters, sleep in cars or abandoned buildings, share housing with others (often just the children), camp or live in motels. When schools closed in March 2020, it came as a shock to Americans to learn that more than 30% of the children in U.S. public schools depended on free and reduced lunch programs for their food.

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There is no “one size fits all” way of communicating with the various cultures represented by the students in your classrooms. Each student comes with his or her unique set of family values. They come with that family’s preferred methods of communication, its own suspicions of anyone in authority and, especially, with their hopes and dreams for their children’s education and opportunities for success — achieving their version of the American Dream.

Building cultural bridges

The uncertainties of the coming school will require good communication with families. These 10 tips can help build communication bridges to the cultures in your school:

- 1. View cultural diversity as an opportunity.** Start by celebrating the diversity in your schools and classrooms by learning as much as you can about student cultures, customs and challenges. Use the resources at the end to find out more about the cultures you have in your school community. Identify facts and myths about these cultures and best practices for communicating with each group. Then develop a plan for sharing this information with all staff.
- 2. Start with the data.** The U.S. Census website (www.census.gov) and your state’s department of education have demographic statistics for your community and school district. District enrollment information for your students may include data about students’ ethnic backgrounds and cultural home environments.
- 3. Identify your students.** Include an inventory of your student population to find out the countries and cultures they represent. If most are English speakers and American-born, they may be acclimated to our American culture and would resent being singled out for any special attention.
- 4. Make this information available to staff.** All staff need to know about the children in your district beyond who is and isn’t eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Teachers need to know the backgrounds for each of their students and how best to communicate with their parents, especially if school starts online this school year.
- 5. Set the tone for an inclusive and welcoming in-school environment.** When parents and students come to schools in person, they “scan” offices and body language for clues to determine inclusivity. They are generally nervous about coming to school for any reason and need visual and verbal help to make them feel welcome and comfortable. Smile and make eye contact, if possible. Make every effort to pronounce parents’ and especially students’ names properly.
- 6. Set the tone for an inclusive and welcoming online environment.** Check the district website to make sure it reflects the demographics of your district. Is the site easy for any parent to navigate? Is the content in more than one language? Do the pictures look like the children in your classrooms? For classroom instruction, are there clear expectations and adequate resources to help teachers fully engage their students and their families in successful online learning?
- 7. Build relationships on mutual respect and trust.** It takes time to learn about students’ cultures and to identify the best methods of communication for each group. Written and electronic communications may not work for many families. One-on-one communication is often not possible. Translators and/or translations may be required. Sometimes a third party — a pastor or trusted community member — is required to convey school messages.

If parents aren't English speakers or American-born, find out more about their family values and who the primary person to contact should be. For example, in Latino and Asian Pacific Islander families, it is essential to involve fathers as well as mothers. In lesbian and gay families, both parents generally want to be included.

8. Connect with community partners. Explore all the communication options available in your community for communications with diverse populations. Non-English radio and television stations or newspapers likely carry school announcements and news. Churches, ethnic associations or neighborhood groups can help too. Social service agencies often have identified networks that can help.

9. Include a count of families in your schools that may be homeless. Keep track of the number of children in free and reduced-price meal programs. If the count is going up, find ways to connect with other social service agencies that help families find housing or supply food. If your district participates in a community program that supplies food for children on weekends or during school vacations, make sure all eligible students in your schools are included.

10. Use the diversity of your school population as a teaching opportunity. Inviting families to share their cultural celebrations can be organized virtually as well as in person. Encourage teachers to include lessons about other cultures and diversity as part of the curriculum. Highlight and celebrate this diversity on your website too.

Additional resources

- **U.S. Census Bureau:** www.census.gov/quickfacts
- **U.S. Department of Labor:** www.bls.gov
- **Pew Research Center:** www.pewhispanic.org
- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center:** www.datacenter.kidscount.org
- **National Center for Children in Poverty:** www.nccp.org
- **National Coalition for the Homeless:** www.nationalhomeless.org

Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, communications consultant

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Using surveys to increase engagement

Do you want to know how parents feel about their child's school? Do you know what parents think their children need? Ask them.

Such a simple concept, yet many schools spend a lot of time talking at parents instead of with them. Schools send home flyers, newsletters and text messages, dispersing a lot of one-way information; not information that invites feedback.

True parent engagement, on the other hand, is interactive. It involves parents in shaping school culture and contributing positively to their child's learning experience.

One way to get that feedback is through one-on-one conversations and meetings. It can be difficult to reach the entire parent base this way, especially now with reduced school days and social distancing.

An easier way to reach the majority of parents is through an informal survey. There are many free and low-cost tools, such as Google Forms and SurveyMonkey. Whichever you choose, the goal is to ask questions that reveal parents' ideas and perceptions about their child's school and, specifically, what is working and not working for their child. For example, if a school is considering a new homework policy that will specify a certain number of minutes of homework per day for different grade levels, use a survey to ask what parents think about the idea. Then incorporate parent feedback into the design before launching it. This advance work will reduce the likelihood of cleaning up a flawed process afterward.

Surveys also can be useful in learning more about your families, so you can improve your programs to serve them better. For instance, you might ask how they prefer to receive communications from the school — by text, email, telephone or printed materials.

Parents are sometimes reluctant to speak out in public meetings or to pick up the phone and call a teacher or principal. A survey allows them to share opinions out of the spotlight, providing insights that otherwise might go unnoticed.

Keep your survey design simple and easy to complete. Multiple choice questions are good, but be sure to include a few open-ended questions for more detailed responses.

The most important benefit of parent surveys is the message that the school really does care about what parents think.

While surveys provide important, useful information, they bring some challenges. Participation rates are uncertain. It is sometimes difficult to get parents to take time to complete a survey, and some parents don't have access to a computer. Remember that surveys are just one tool, and other feedback should be considered when making important decisions.

(Over)

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Maximize survey participation

Parent Surveys

A key to getting good participation in surveys is to make them relevant. Consider these tips:

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1. Tell parents what's in it for them.

Many schools have good luck offering incentives to those who complete a survey. Offer extra motivation, like a chance to win a school t-shirt or an iPad. Be clear about why parents should complete the survey and how the results will be used. When parents believe you want their feedback because you truly intend to listen to it and consider it, they are more apt to take time to give it.

2. Snag them in the subject line of your email.

In the subject line, don't just say, "Survey," but instead say, "Complete our school survey for a chance to win an iPad," or "Tell us your thoughts on homework." Offer a short one- or two-sentence introduction about why you're sending the survey and what it's about. List the number of questions, so parents can see that it won't take all evening to complete. Embed the survey link in the email, so it's easy for parents to click and find it.

3. Keep things anonymous

Parents are more likely to fill out a survey that allows them to remain anonymous. You can include an optional space for parents to provide a name, email, or phone number if they choose. Be sure to require this information if you have offered the chance to win a prize.

4. Thank them for participating

Follow up after the survey to thank parents for participating. Some online surveys enable you to do this automatically with a personalized message. The goal is to let parents know that you value their feedback and appreciate their involvement in their child's school.

5. Share the results

Once you have tabulated the results, share them with parents. Let them know how you plan to use the results and what next steps will be. They will be more likely to participate in future surveys if they see that you actually paid attention to the results of the first one.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant



Masks for children



**September
2020**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

School will look different for students this year. School operations will differ from state to state and district to district. And plans are likely to change during the year as COVID-19 case counts go up or down within each state.

Families will need to continue to be flexible to manage the rapid changes that impact their children and then their own work schedules in a trickle-down effect.

Following the guidelines

Federal and state officials are watching the spread of the virus and making recommendations to help contain it. Many of the recommendations have become a trigger for hostility among people who disagree with them or believe the guidelines are politically based.

To be fair, the guidelines have not been consistent and clear, and officials have periodically disagreed among themselves and even contradicted the recommendations.

We have all felt the impact of the changes from coronavirus. It is in our best interest to follow the latest sound advice on how to protect ourselves and those around us. Even if we disagree, the cost of following the guidelines is small compared to escalating disputes with our neighbors and the opportunity to set a good example for our children.

The case for masks

Official healthcare experts agree on one universal recommendation for almost everyone: wear a mask. They say masks are intended to contain virus germs droplets and protect others--perhaps even more than protecting the wearer.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends non-medical cloth face masks. It is a hot-button issue for many, but it seems like a small gesture that may help prevent illness to reduce the risk of death and help us resume normal life as soon as possible. It seems too trivial to cause opposition that results in violence, public tantrums and threats.

Regardless of our personal opinions about masks, they are required for entrance to many public spaces, including a growing number of schools.

If our kids want to go back to school, and we want them to go back to school, we will need to agree to follow the rules. Mask-wearing may be one of them, and it won't be easy. Some kids can't keep their shoes on all day. Imagine the challenge of keeping their mask in place. But we have to try.

Mask Management

Schools and teachers are responsible for so much more than academics. This year, they will also be responsible for the critical job of mask management. Dr. Orscheln, an associate professor of pediatric infectious diseases at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, offers the following tips for safe schools with masks:

- Mask usage is important for students older than nine, but all students should wear one in common school areas.
- Students must understand the importance of not sharing or trading masks.
- Masks should come with a lanyard help students keep them within easy reach.
- Adults should model wearing masks and repeat this safety message: “This is how we keep each other safe.”

www.edweek.org

Politics aside, mask-wearing is not that difficult. Here is guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help make it easier:

- Children under two years old should not wear a mask.
- Masks should be worn in any place where it is not possible to stay six feet away from others and when they are required for entrance.
- Children don't need a mask at home if there has been no COVID-19 exposure.
- Children do not need to wear a mask outside if they are not within six feet of others. Please remind children not to touch surfaces that others have touched, including drinking fountains, tables, etc.
- Reconsider cloth masks if there is a choking or strangulation hazard or if it causes your child to touch his or her face more frequently.

If your child is scared of wearing a face covering, try these tips:

- Look in the mirror with the face coverings on and talk about it.
- Put a cloth face covering on a favorite stuffed animal.
- Decorate them so they're more personalized and fun.
- Show your child pictures of other children wearing them.
- Draw one on their favorite book character.
- Practice wearing the face covering at home to help your child get used to it.
- For children over three, focus on germs. Explain that germs are special to your own body. Some germs are good and some are bad. Since we can't tell which are good or bad, the cloth face coverings help keep those germs away.

<https://bit.ly/3gqW879>

Getting your mask

There has been a shortage of medical-grade N-95 masks for healthcare workers. Cloth masks are sufficient to meet mask requirements. You can buy them at stores like Walmart and Target. You can also make them yourself with simple sewing skills. Do an internet search for easy directions.

The bottom line is that health experts recommend masks to reduce the spread of the virus, and they are required in most public places. Help make a difficult and uncertain school year easier by ensuring that children are ready to comply with mask rules.