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ONcall

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inside

Attendance still matters

The school structure is different this year, but one constant is attendance. Students must show up for class — even virtual class. Minimizing absences may reduce the stressful impact of an atypical year and help reduce the odds of pandemic learning loss. Read these reminders about the importance of prioritizing student attendance and tips for increasing student participation.

Communicate, communicate!

The pandemic has presented an excellent opportunity for schools to practice crisis communications. That may be the only upside to a very challenging situation. This is a chance to build and maintain trust with parents. The key points are to communicate often, explain your expectations, conduct check-in activities and be available to answer questions.

Controlling comments on Facebook

Managing Facebook comments can be daunting, but it shouldn't dissuade districts from engaging on this important platform. Learn to manage comments like a pro with these suggested best practices.

Launching a new app or system for parents, students or staff

New technology systems should make work easier, but first impressions matter. In order to help your audience embrace the new tech, you need to roll it out as smoothly as possible, so you don't start with a critical or distrustful audience. Announce it early to help avoid surprises, have FAQs and tutorials ready for new users, and communicate regularly with your audience.

Protecting student privacy during remote learning

Schools rushed to implement online learning programs in the spring. New programs were implemented when school started this fall with the benefit of more time to consider important issues such as student security and privacy. This round-up for student safety tips includes information about FERPA, transparency with families, and safety during videoconferencing.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Covid mental health tips for teens

The pandemic is making mental health concerns worse for teens. This “new normal” is disrupting routines and adding an anxiety and uncertainty. Although it affects everyone, teens and kids may feel it more acutely. These mental health tips may help.

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Attendance still matters

The standard school model is on the shelf for now because of the pandemic, but one constant is attendance. Students must show up — virtually — to their online classes. Showing up for school is as important as ever, even if the systems have changed.

Does your virtual school include attendance tracking plans?

Schools pivoted to remote learning in the spring as a response to the coronavirus crisis. Most of the online systems that launched were not perfect — far from it. They were generally stop-gap measures as a response to an emergency. Since that time, districts had the opportunity to plan a whole new system and incorporate lessons learned from spring trials.

Now, several months into the new school year, additional adjustments may be needed. A key question is how to track attendance. Does your online program include a clear attendance plan? Do your students and parents understand the rules and processes for tracking student absenteeism?

Tracking attendance is essential for student success

By now, students and parents understand that online school is still school. While they may adjust their expectations, they should be able to feel confident that students are following an appropriate instructional plan to help them progress toward learning goals. School is in session, and it is important that the messaging and the systems support academic progress.

Minimizing learning loss and helping support students emotionally during this stressful time are primary goals of the new virtual education programs. Other concerns are to help at-risk student populations. How do districts continue to meet the nutritional needs of students who are eligible for the free- and reduced meal program? How can teachers and other mandatory reporters spot and report possible abuse or neglect?

If students are not in class, these issues may go unnoticed. The district plan should include input from all key staff who can provide input into the range of student needs that may affect student success, including tracking absenteeism — even if the district has received a federal or state waiver to exclude absenteeism from accountability reports.

Some students will struggle more than others. Missing class may widen the achievement gap and make it harder to recover the lost time when school resumes in person. It is a serious problem:

- Absenteeism in the first month of school can predict poor attendance throughout the school year.
- Poor attendance can influence whether children read proficiently by the end of third grade or will be held back. It is especially challenging to teach reading online. Every day counts.

(Over)

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- By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school.

Communicating the attendance requirements of the distance learning plan

Any new program or initiative needs a well-written communication plan. It must include purpose, audience(s), resources, timeline and opportunities to revise it based on post-launch evaluation.

Be sure to include attendance requirements in the communications plan for the pandemic education plan. First, ensure that expectations for attendance are clear. Do students know the schedule and whether remote attendance is mandatory or optional? How do teachers note individual student attendance? How are absences communicated to parents? How do students get technical support if they struggle to connect within the remote system?

Are the answers to these questions easy to find on school and district websites? Have they also been shared several times through various channels with parents? Do staff know the answers to these questions when they are contacted by parents?

It is easy for school staff, who are in the midst of this intense and prolonged planning process, to assume that parents are as attuned to the details of this work as they are. This is always a mistaken assumption and can increase frustration among staff and parents alike. When parents ask questions, try to avoid saying that they should have received this information. It isn't helpful, and you can assume they don't have that information if they are asking those questions.

Tips to increase your virtual attendance

Define how you measure attendance. Students should understand how their presence in class is recorded. Flexibility is a necessity now. The variety of remote programs requires clarity about how each class records attendance.

Create a positive environment. Remote classrooms should be managed exceedingly well, and teachers should understand the technology completely so they can turn off student microphones and videos to maintain decorum. If teachers run late and students have a free-for-all forum, they may target or bully students while they wait. Students who are bullied are likely to have a higher absentee rate. All students should feel welcome and safe, and classes should not provide opportunities for cyberbullying.

Form cross-departmental teams to conduct a whole child/family approach to learning. Attendance efforts will be more effective if students and families feel connected to the school. Relationships are more important than ever because of the isolation of prolonged social distancing. Communicate frequently with parents.

Resources

Maintaining good attendance during this uncertain time is challenging. Many districts were making good progress toward their chronic absenteeism goals. The following resources offer useful tips to continue improving.

Learning Continuity Attendance Plan Template

California Department of Education: <https://bit.ly/34rUP3d>

Coronavirus: Resources for Educators

Attendance Works: www.attendanceworks.org/coronavirus-resources-for-educators

Attendance
Matters

Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the Covid Era

Future Ed: www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook

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Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant

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Communicate, communicate!

It's an understatement to say the start of the 2020 school year has been confusing.

Early in the summer, many districts were hopeful they could welcome students back to regular classrooms. A month or two later, they did an abrupt shift to prepare online lessons and contemplate how to reach students who may not have technology at home, including internet access.

School administrators said it felt like whiplash as metrics continued to change and then change again. For parents, one thing has remained steady: a sense of confusion. So, how to remedy that?

Communicate. Communicate even when you don't have a lot to communicate.

When things are uncertain, parents clamor for information. When they don't get it, they not only feel frustrated, but sometimes angry. Misinformation is often circulated because parents don't have the facts at hand.

That's why solid, steady communication is critical. Give parents all the details you can and let them know you will keep them updated regularly on any information you don't have. Send out updates at least weekly. It's OK to send an update saying that you still don't have the answers, but you will continue to seek information and share it when you get it.

There are a lot of areas of confusion in schools this fall. In some cases, the confusion stems from implementing new programs without having sufficient time to work out all the kinks. Many districts scrambled to provide online options for their students, and sometimes the ink had barely dried on the contract before teachers were preparing their first lessons.

Confusion lingers around COVID-19 and the safety protocols to try to keep students and staff safe. In the midst of all the confusion, one thing is certain: Parents want to hear from their schools and their child's teachers on a regular basis. While good news is always appreciated, they want to hear about the rocky spots, too, so they can better understand the situation. And if they understand it, they most likely will cut you some slack as you work through it.

Don't be afraid to over-communicate.

Below are some tips from Lanschool, a virtual classroom management system, to help you keep parents well informed and as clear as possible about what's happening with their children's education:

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1. Explain your strategy.

Be clear about your expectations and how parents can help keep students engaged and progressing toward their goals. Let them know when they should expect to hear from you and how they can contact you.

2. Conduct check-in surveys.

Check in with parents to understand their needs and concerns. Use this feedback to develop strategies to help, such as partnering students for virtual study groups or making sure they have resources they need, such as a laptop and internet access. Some questions you might ask are:

- How many hours per day does the student have access to a digital device and the internet?
- Are multiple family members sharing that device, and if so is this causing challenges?
- I am most comfortable helping my children with homework or lessons for [list subjects].
- I am less comfortable helping them with [list subjects or areas of concern].
- Is there anything specific that I can do to help support your child during this time?

3. Send Monday Motivation emails.

Help parents start the week on a good note by sending motivational emails at the beginning of each week. These “Monday Motivation” emails can share your goals for the week, along with inspiring quotes, resources and tips. The small amount of time spent preparing these will go a long way toward building positive relationships with parents.

4. Schedule Q&A times.

Parents likely will have a lot of questions for teachers during this time of change and uncertainty. Let them know the best way and time to reach out to you.

- Email — Parents can email questions that are highly specific to their children and only require a short response. Teachers should provide parents with an expected response time for these types of questions (e.g. within 24 hours).
- Weekly office hours — Parents can schedule virtual one-on-one time to ask questions that are highly specific to their children.
- Virtual Q&A forum — Multiple parents can join a group chat to ask questions that may be relevant for the entire class, keeping you from answering the same question over and over and allowing parents to learn from other’s experiences. You may want to schedule these on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

Don’t feel pressured to answer tough questions on the spot. If you need more time to come up with a thoughtful answer, simply let the parent know you will have to get back to them after you’ve had time to research or think about their question.

5. Include parents in progress reports and one-on-one student meetings.

Since you’ll be delivering student progress reports remotely anyway, it may make sense to include parents in these meetings or emails. Schedule time as needed to discuss how students are progressing, any concerns they have and how parents can help.

It’s particularly important to allow students some grace right now, as all of the changes they are experiencing can take a toll. Schools and parents know their students and how to strike the right balance between pushing them to challenge themselves and encouraging them to practice self-care and acceptance.

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Controlling comments on Facebook

If you've ever had a pit in your stomach while checking notifications on your school Facebook page, then you've probably dealt with negative, problematic, and/or annoying comments.

Learning to manage comments on social media is critical to maintaining decorum and building trust. There are general guidelines for managing your social presence among a variety of social media channels (*see October 2020 issue*), and there are Facebook-specific tips for this widely used platform.

Facebook is the most popular social media engagement platform worldwide, with 2.5 billion active users. It is the go-to for many school districts.

School communities want to hear about school programs and activities, which creates an easy-to-build following. Facebook users include:

- 71% of American adults
- 63% of men and 75% of women
- 51% of American teens
- 74% of high-income earners
- 74% of Facebook users log in daily.
- 52% of American adults get news from Facebook.

<https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-statistics>

Moderating your Facebook comments

Let's get this out of the way: You CANNOT disable all comments on Facebook.

We get asked this question from school leaders and communicators all the time — “How do I turn off Facebook comments?” The answer is that it is impossible. Instagram allows you to turn off comments on a post-by-post basis, and YouTube allows comments to be switched off for the entire channel. But that's simply not possible on Facebook.

So let's dive into what IS possible. Your options are outlined below. Keep in mind that you should always consult with your district's legal counsel before enacting policies that include the more extreme options, especially if you are a public school.

1. Post commenting guidelines on your Facebook page.

An easy way to do this is with a Facebook Note. Go into your Settings and add the “Notes” tab under “Templates and Tabs” if it isn't already enabled. Next, go back to the main page and click the “Notes” tab. Start a new note and input text. See sample policy here: <https://bit.ly/3ipm9E5>.

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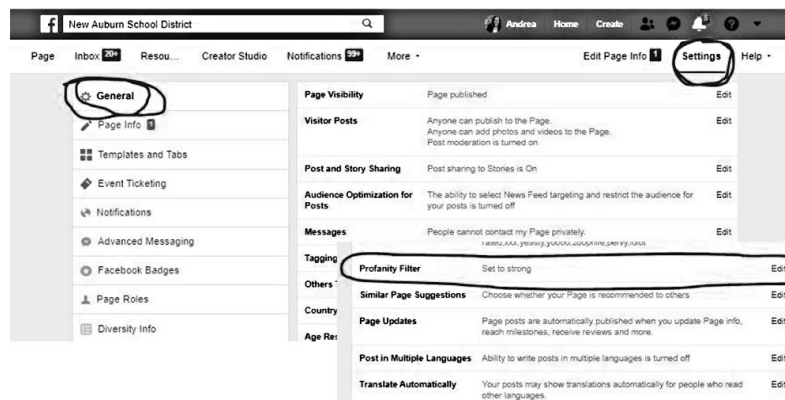
You can then “pin” this note to the top of your Facebook page, so anyone visiting your feed will see it first. Having these guidelines in place gives you some structure and a visible policy when it comes to monitoring, hiding and even deleting comments that appear on your page.

Another option for posting commenting guidelines is to publish them on your school website and mention that web location on a periodic basis. The downside is that the guidelines won’t be readily accessible to anyone who just visits you on Facebook.

2. Set your page’s profanity filter to “strong.”

Go into your settings and look under “general.” You’ll see a setting for profanity filter that you can set to “strong.”

What happens: If someone uses a word that Facebook deems profane, the entire comment will be automatically hidden. As the page manager, you can still see the comment, but it will be grayed out, or you will see three dots. Most people who visit your page will not be able to see the comment either. *However, the person who made the comment and anyone they are friends with can still see the comment.*



3. Block vulgar words.

We have a vulgar word list that you can copy-and-paste or upload as a .CSV file under Settings < Page Moderation. It’s a pretty extensive list, and we share it with clients in our membership group. *See subscription information: <https://bit.ly/3d0esmC>.*

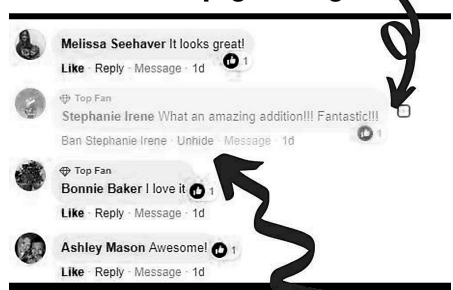
What happens: If someone uses a word that appears on this list, the entire comment will be automatically hidden. As the page manager, you can still see the comment, but it will be grayed out, or you will see three dots. Most people who visit your page will not be able to see the comment, either. However, the person who made the comment and anyone they are friends with can still see the comment.

Note that some comments will be unintentionally hidden, such as when a person’s name is Richard and their Facebook name is the common nickname for Richard. You can easily unhide that comment, if that happens, as the page manager.

4. Manually hide problematic comments.

If a comment goes against your commenting guidelines, a page manager can manually hide it. This also hides all replies to that comment. Only page managers can hide/unhide comments.

Example of what a hidden comment looks like to the page manager:



This is obviously a positive comment, and you can unhide it easily.

What happens: As the page manager, you can still see the comment, but it will be grayed out or you will see three dots. Most people who visit your page will not be able to see the comment either. However, the person who made the comment and anyone they are friends with can still see the comment.

See this guide for more tips: <https://bit.ly/3nk3opu>

5. Delete problematic comments.

As the page manager, you also have the option to delete a comment. We recommend consulting with your legal counsel before enacting a policy that includes deleting comments. We also recommend taking a screenshot of the comment before you delete it.

What happens: The comment is gone from your page — no one can see it, including the page manager. There is no record of the comment on Facebook. The person who made the comment is not notified; however, if they revisit the post, they will not see their comment.

6. Ban problematic commenters.

As the page manager, you can also choose to ban someone from your page completely. The commenter could be a spam bot, but it could also be a real, live person, so this should be a last resort action. We recommend consulting with your legal counsel before enacting a policy that includes banning users. We also recommend taking screenshots of their comment(s) before you ban them.

What happens: That Facebook user will not be able to see your page or interact with it. They could still find and interact with your page if they go under a different Facebook profile or create a new profile, however.

7. Block all common words on your Facebook page.

Instead of only blocking vulgar words, as outlined in #3, you could also block all common words under Settings > Page Moderation. This includes words such as “the,” “they,” “at,” etc. This allows you to approve comments before posting publicly.

What happens: If someone uses a word that appears on this list, the entire comment will be automatically hidden. As the page manager, you can still see the comment, but it will be grayed out, or you will see three dots. You can choose to manually unhide comments that are acceptable. Most people who visit your page will not be able to see the comment, either. *However, the person who made the comment and anyone they are friends with can still see the comment.*

Options 4-7 are pretty extreme, aren't they? Here are a few things you could try before taking these more drastic steps:

- **Take the conversation offline.**

The majority of negative or problematic comments are coming from concerned parents. You — or a school administrator — have the ability to contact that person by picking up the phone and having a human-to-human conversation about what's going on. This is the best way to diffuse a difficult situation and minimize the negative comments they are making on your school Facebook page.

- **Minimize the chances of out-of-control comments.**

You can't stop people from commenting, but you can minimize the chances that they'll use your page to complain. If you have to convey important information that is potentially controversial, directly communicate with families via robocall, text, or email — and post on

your website — instead of putting detailed information on Facebook. You can also follow the advice of this blog, in which the Facebook post simply directs people to check their email or the website.

As a company, #SocialSchool4EDU believes that comments are an important part of effective school social media. Blocking all comments will severely reduce your ability to engage your community with all the wonderful things happening in your learning environment. And 99% of the comments are positive and supportive.



But that means we also have to take the good with the bad.

The best piece of advice we can provide is this: *Don't take it personally.* Every Facebook commenter is a real, live person with real, human concerns. When they use your page to vent or complain, they are doing it out of frustration but also out of love for their kids. You might not agree with them, and they might not be “right.” Try to approach every interaction with compassion, and make sure you have the support of your administration when it comes to taking some of the steps we’ve outlined here.

Contributed by Andrea Gribble. Andrea's passion is helping schools recognize their daily awesomeness and sharing that story with the world. She's built a team that celebrates hundreds of schools across the country! #SocialSchool4EDU provides full social media management, personally coaches social media teams and individuals, and offers a vibrant online community that provides ongoing professional development for school social media champions.

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Launching a new app or system for parents, students or staff

Many work and communication systems are app-based — applications to track grades and progress, emergency notifications, staff HR systems and more. New software can be a blessing or a curse for parents, students and staff. Even assuming that the technology works and staff are well trained to use it, there is still a lot of room for a new system to go off the rails due to poor communication. But with proper communications planning before, during and after the go-live date, many pitfalls can be avoided.

Before implementation

New systems generally replace older software or manual processes. And that's a great thing for school staff. Depending on the type of software, it might replace periodic student progress reports with real-time information about student assignments and grades. Or maybe it is a texting service that will replace an old phone message system. It could be a new online learning portal. Regardless of what the benefit of the new system is, the customer will not automatically know why something is changing. You have to tell them.

Under the best of circumstances, new technology is disruptive for the customer. So you need to assure them that you are making any changes to software for good reason. Remember to keep the customer focus when talking about benefits. Don't just say, "This will save our office staff time." Make sure you point out the benefits to the customers first. "This new system will give information to parents more quickly than the old monthly bulletins we used to produce. In addition, it will allow office staff to focus more on meeting the needs of students and parents instead of producing the monthly bulletin."

In addition to sharing the potential benefits of the system, you simply need to give the customer time to get used to the idea of changing something about the way they interact with their schools. People don't always like surprises — especially when they come with a learning curve. Rather than letting parents know about a new software interface along with the other back-to-school news in the fall, give them a heads-up before school is out for summer, or send an email/text during the summer to allow them time for mental preparation.

As with any communication effort, one of the most important aspects is the context in which the information is going to be received. So pay attention to events in your community and at a broader level. Is there breaking news that will distract people from your messaging? Maybe you should wait a day. Is there a big election coming up? Maybe you want to get the next communication out there to your customers a bit early to avoid all the election week noise. Did something tragic happen locally? Perhaps you need to acknowledge that so you don't seem tone-deaf with your cheery messages about the new system that you prepared weeks ago.

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The most valuable communication about your new online platform or digital service will be from customers, not to them. So, invite them to help test the new system before it goes live. Many systems are tested elsewhere and implemented in your district. Sometimes this works. But other times, local processes and terminology can crop up as problems that were not anticipated by testers in another state. Arrange to have parents try the new technology without having someone in person helping them. This beta test shows usage by the average person who does not have access to expert technical help. Ask if the terminology makes sense. Ask if they were able to access the system using only the directions you provided. Adjust accordingly.

During implementation

The implementation phase is when customers begin struggling to learn the new system. As educators, you know how important positive emotions are for any kind of learning to take place. Your students and parents need to feel valued and supported as much as they need FAQs about how to navigate the new system. Certainly, tech tips and tutorials are important. And a helpline with a real person is a must.

It is common to confuse a technical problem with a problem requiring the human touch. For instance, the person who gets angry due to problems with the technology and then a long wait on the phone is not simply experiencing technical issues. He or she is also feeling a sense of loss — a loss of confidence as well as a loss of feeling truly valued by the school or district. Such a customer is not just in need of a technical answer to their question. They also need to be reassured that you care about them and regret their frustration. And you will help them.

Avoid shaming the customer. If a parent, student, staff or community member cannot figure out what seems easy to you, don't blame them. Stop and think about how you would feel if this was totally new to you and you were home alone trying to figure it out. If this software is easy for you to learn, think about something you had a hard time learning. How did that feel to you? Ask for feedback and use it to formulate resources that will help people get on board from a technical standpoint and feel valued as customers.

Instructional materials and directions for new users must be concise and easy to read. Lengthy videos are not good for helping people navigate new systems. Bullet points, lists, screenshots and other short form communications are best. Digital communication is great, but don't forget that print has a place, too. A simple card with instructions might be much easier than web-page instructions to log into something new and get started.

After “go-live”

For the district implementation team, the go-live date is a big deal. This is the scheduled date to flip the switch on their big project and begin using it. So much of the communication planning naturally leads up to the big day. But not all users will be jumping onto the bandwagon early and learning as they go along, despite the team's best efforts. It will pay dividends to keep the initial pre-implementation communications tools at hand and available for the entire first year. It can be difficult to go back in time and find previous messages to share with someone coming along late. Plan on people needing to go back to the very beginning. This will be easier if the initial messages and how-tos are maintained.

And most importantly, after the new system is up and running, send out communications soliciting feedback. Even tough feedback is better than none. If the system is widely seen as difficult to use, it is better to hear that directly from your customers so you can make changes. The alternative is to seem out of touch or uncaring and create trust issues. All of the negative

things they would have said directly to you are now being said about you, where you have no ability to respond or prove you care.

The pandemic is changing school and many other parts of life. Some of the changes include new learning platforms and other software solutions. But districts will always launch new systems. Proper planning before, during and after going live can reassure the parents, students and community that you have their best interest at heart and move forward in partnership.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant

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Protecting student privacy during remote learning

Most students started the new school year with remote learning. While schools rushed to distance learning in the spring because of COVID-19, districts have since had a few months to implement strong privacy and security policies related to online learning. Part of the planning process for learning during the pandemic should have included plans for schools to communicate to families how they are protecting student data.

This new school year has added to the anxiety of an uncertain time. Families are worried about their student's education, health and privacy. According to a survey by the Center for Democracy and Technology that was conducted last spring, parents reported that they are only mild to moderately concerned about their children's online safety and data privacy. Even though the survey found that parents are more concerned about their children's education and progress, results showed that the more parents learned about student data privacy, the more concerned they became. <https://bit.ly/34ojzbt>

The Future of Privacy Forum (FPF) and National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) published "Student Privacy and Special Education: An Educator's Guide During and After COVID-19," to help schools address privacy challenges for students with disabilities during virtual learning. The guide covers how the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) applies to distance learning, best practices for using videoconferencing with students, whether other family members can be present during live video lessons and how one-on-one services can be provided on live video platforms. <https://bit.ly/34lX7kk>

FERPA and virtual learning

Federal laws such as FERPA can help districts choose what new technologies to use and how to protect student privacy during remote learning.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, here are the top five things to consider about privacy and security:

- 1. Look at what your school or district already uses.** Review your current solutions first, as many education platforms include features that can be leveraged to support distance learning.
- 2. Identify options.** When identifying and choosing technology tools, work with your attorneys and information security specialists to vet prospective solutions against FERPA requirements using a risk-based analysis.
- 3. Consider best practices.** Products that apply best practices like encryption, strong identity authentication, and a statement and terms of service that explain how the vendor's use of personally identifiable information (PII) from student education records complies with FERPA.
- 4. Communicate.** Be transparent with parents, students and the school community. Make them aware of the risks of their children's online activity and share easy-to-understand tips to stay safe.

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- 5. Ask for help.** Consult your team of experts — your attorneys, information security specialists and peers — and ask questions.

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

Build transparency with families

Communication with families is essential to build trust and calm anxiety. Families want to know you're implementing policy measures to protect their child during school programs and activities — in person and online. Take these actions to build in control for parents:

- Share your student data privacy policy. Let parents know your guidelines for protecting student data, how class recordings will be stored and why you chose the video conferencing platform.
- Not all students will have access to a webcam or feel comfortable being on camera. Allow parents to decide if their child will participate in video conferencing and provide an alternative method for students to connect with their teachers.
- Give parents a schedule of designated times when students are able to talk with their teachers and classmates and when the webcams will be in use.
- Provide safety and privacy tips to families who lack wifi at home and must use public wifi.

Safe videoconferencing tips

Whether your teachers are using pre-recorded or live video lessons, follow these tips from the Consortium for School Networking to protect student privacy:

- Use a platform designed for use in the K-12 classroom to ensure privacy laws are followed.
- Avoid using platforms that require students to create accounts.
- Avoid recording classroom discussions with students since audio and video of a student is considered personal information.
- Store recorded video lessons in a secure place, available to limited staff members.
- Provide teachers with guidelines on keeping their video conferencing accounts secure. Determine a secure method for teachers to share web links to lessons with students.

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

Resources

U.S. Department of Education COVID-19: www.ed.gov/coronavirus

U.S. Department of Education FERPA FAQs: <https://bit.ly/34ukZCr>

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services HIPAA resources: www.hhs.gov/hipaa

Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant

For Families



Covid Mental Health Tips for Teens



**November/December
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.

Mental health issues are a growing concern for today's teens. During the pandemic, the problem is worse.

Many are struggling with greater mental health effects because of this "new normal." Disrupted routines, uncertainty, worry about world events, separation from friends and peers and second-hand stress from parents and adults around them are all compounding their stress levels.

In a national survey of more than 1,500 teens, seven out of 10 teens said they are experiencing mental health effects from the pandemic. This survey was completed in May; the effects are likely greater after several more months of coronavirus uncertainty.

Findings, published in Huffpost.com, include:

More than half said they'd experienced anxiety, 45% said they'd felt excess stress, and 43% identified that they'd struggled with depression.

For some context, roughly 12% of American teens meet diagnostic criteria for depression, and roughly 30% generally meet criteria for having an anxiety disorder by the time they are 18, although that data is by no means identical.

"It is clear to us, based on the survey findings, that COVID-19 has had a measurable adverse impact on teens' mental health," said Jennifer Sirangelo, president and CEO of 4-H. "For example, 61% of teens said that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their feelings of loneliness."

<https://bit.ly/2Gkonrp>

Mental health tips for teens

This is a tough time for everyone, but teens and younger kids may be grieving the loss of normal activities, milestones and their friend/support groups. And they do not have highly developed coping skills to help them through these feelings.

Mental health professionals have published teen-specific mental health tips for teens who may be feeling a negative impact from the current environment. These tips, from UNICEF, include strategies for a new (temporary) normal. <https://uni.cf/2Gvgtv0>

1. Recognize that your anxiety is completely normal

Your feelings are also a "new normal" for you. If school closures and alarming headlines are making you feel anxious, you are not the only one, and your stress is normal. Stress can actually be productive by creating greater awareness of the situation to help shape decisions.

(Over)

Remember that communication is essential. If you have symptoms, speak to your parents and seek medical guidance. Do some research about the virus, but be sure the sources are reliable. Follow standard health advice on hand-washing, social distancing and masks.

2. Create distractions

According to psychologists, a helpful response is to divide a difficult problem into two categories: things you can do something about and things you can do nothing about. Create a sense of empowerment by identifying tasks that may help improve things and things you are powerless to change. It can be very freeing to let go of worry that you have no responsibility for and no ability to change. After you have dissected the source of your stress, it may help to engage in a distracting activity, such as homework, reading or watching a favorite movie.

3. Find new ways to connect with your friends

Your friends are extremely important. During social distancing, social media can help fill the connection gap. Find ways to group chat, video conference and spend virtual time together. While it doesn't replace in-person socializing, it can be a good substitute if you observe healthy limits. Too much social media can add to anxiety.

4. Focus on you

A positive of the pandemic is the extra time you have to focus on learning something new. Take this opportunity to explore new interests. Learn an instrument, practice painting, read more books or start to code. You may already have projects, or you can find an online tutorial for almost any new skill. Focusing on yourself and finding ways to use your time is a productive way to look after your mental health.

5. Feel your feelings

Missing out on activities with friends, school events, or sports matches is disappointing. Experts say the best way to deal with this disappointment is to let yourself feel it. If you're sad, let yourself feel sad. It is not comfortable, but it isn't fatal either. Try to observe your emotions, so you can understand and process them. There is no right way. Do whatever feels right to you.

6. Be kind to yourself and others

Remember that we are all in the same boat. We are all sharing this experience and trying to navigate life changes, uncertainty and fear or worry. It is helpful to remember that others need the same compassion and empathy that we need. Treat others with kindness and do what you can to stand up to bullying behavior toward others.

Online classrooms may offer new ways for some kids to be targets of the bullies. In new school online programs, classroom management is still a work in progress. If teachers don't catch some of the hurtful comments during class, be a bystander against bullying. Kids who are being bullied need other kids to stand up for them. If you know a friend is being bullied, offer support. You can make a difference.