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Teaching in the time of COVID: When a “drive-by” is good for families

Direct communication, face-to-face interaction, is the most effective way to communicate, especially in schools. Families must trust school staff in order to believe them and partner with them to support students. And trust is built on relationships with communication and engagement.

Communication is much harder, but also much more important, in a remote or hybrid learning environment. Schools have been innovative and creative with new outreach efforts. Speaking to families at a distance in a “drive-by” format is a quick way to check in and show care and concern for students.

Drive-in communications at a K-5 school

“Talking in person — even from a car — makes the kids just light up,” said Brett Gaboury, library teacher at EAGLE Charter School in Salem, Oregon.

That’s partly why this K-5 school of 144 students hosts parades full of curbside smiles, virtual hugs, free resources and funny themes as a safe break from comprehensive distance learning.

It is an effective outreach tactic throughout the year or to mark special occasions or recognitions. As you prepare for summer break, consider this idea as a great send-off for kids.

How it works: Staff pick a monthly theme, dress accordingly and set up tables appropriately spaced around the parking lot to greet families in a steady stream of cars during a designated time. Consider planning for a once-per-month event to kick off the weekend. Staff can get “flex time” to make up for the extra hours worked.

Practical origins: Drive-bys started as a COVID-induced solution to collect laptops, library books and other borrowed items at the end of the 2019-20 school year when pandemic closures were in full swing and kids used Zoom for remote classes. “The idea was so popular, we continued with a fun theme each month,” said Principal Dr. Marie Ballance. Examples: March was “Green Day” for the environment; the parent club handed out seed kits to plant, and they put out a box for donations to the humane society. February was Friendship Day, and April 1 was “tell us a joke from your car” day.

They love a parade: The new tradition has turned into a raucous parade of kids (in masks) who often poke through sunroofs, hang out windows or hold pets (even bunnies) in their laps for teachers to greet. Some families are timid, often seeing staff for the first time —

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then light up when connections are made when the staff of this small school recognizes ALL kids, including siblings, from virtual classes.

Not just for fun: Each grade level stakes out a table, so families can chat from cars, get school supplies and treats, buy “EAGLE gear,” or simply make social connections. “When we started this, I found my music participation dramatically increased the next week,” said teacher Janet Romine. “It gives me a different perspective on a child, a chance to say, ‘I haven’t seen you in class’ or actually see how little and young they are! Seeing families this way also quietly tells her “who is supported — and who needs extra help,” she added.

Parent club connects: “This gets us as close as we can to spoiling our kids and talking to parents!” said Parent Club President Melinda Watson. “We are such a small community. We’re used to being together, so this is one way to keep that feeling.”

Added benefits: “Families love this; it gives everyone a chance to shout “love you!”, see new families, stay in touch with older siblings who graduated, and meet the teacher they’ll have next year,” Ballance said. As this principal greets cars, you quickly notice that she remembers everyone with something personal about them, or how they’re doing in school... similar to how principals used to stand at the door to greet kids coming and going... a scene we all look forward to again.

Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former public information director for the Oregon School Boards Association (and current board chair for EAGLE Charter School).