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Communication tips for your reopening

In the era of COVID, when teachers, parents and students have had to make huge changes, school communications have had to pivot as well. The flyer-in-the-backpack-routine no longer works when backpacks stay home with their owners. So, how have schools fared, and what can we do now that schools are reopening?

Amanda Laughtland is a guardian for a child in suburban Washington and is pleased with her school's approach. "They are doing half days, which works well as they don't all have lunch together. They have an outdoor snack break and the school packs lunches for any child who wants to take one home." Her school has maintained current information on the school's website, circulated an email newsletter and held a Zoom meeting with parents about changes to the schedule. "Honestly, I was able to figure out all I needed from the newsletter."

Cindy Besch, who has children in an Arizona school district, has also appreciated promptness. "Our school has been very good with communicating changes," she explains. "They shoot out an email and text usually as quickly as possible after board meetings."

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Reopening at last... but not for everyone

"My kids can't go back until they are vaccinated because of my son's heart," explains Spring Liles, a parent in a rural part of Washington State. "We are hoping for fall of 2022. Until they have vaccines for younger children, we will stick with video chats. For many of us parents of young children with special needs, the quarantine and lockdown continues."

Liles has been pleased with how her district has handled communications. "They are consistently emailing and making public statements. And they are reaching out for a lot of parental input."

What about the missing students?

Unfortunately, schools are having to face a real reckoning with how accessible online education has been for the most disadvantaged students. For approximately three million of the most educationally marginalized students in the country, March might have been the last time they experienced any formal education — virtual or in-person.

"In Washington D.C., back-to-school family surveys found that 60% of students lacked the devices and 27% lacked the high-speed internet access needed to successfully participate in virtual school.

In Miami-Dade County, 16,000 fewer students enrolled for the 2020-21 school year compared with the previous year." <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-COVID-19-attendance-crisis>

(Over)

When school districts reach out to families, they often do so through text messages, robocalls, emails, Facebook posts and snail mail. It's communication that requires families to have a working cellphone, internet access and a fixed address. That means families who move frequently, change cellphone numbers, or do not speak English can be left out of the loop and difficult to find. During the COVID-era, people moved at higher numbers than usual due to job losses, concern about viral transmission in the cities, and other factors. www.mymove.com/moving/COVID-19/coronavirus-moving-trends/

"In North Carolina, a state education official told state lawmakers in December that more than 10,000 students had not been accounted for. New Mexico could not account for more than 12,000 students at the start of the school year — children who were enrolled before the pandemic but never showed up in the fall. This month, the state's education department reported that more than 2,700 students were still missing." www.washingtonpost.com/education/pandemic-schools-students-missing/2021/02/25/f0b27262-5ce8-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html

For these students, getting them back into the classroom is urgent. And that means finding them.

Some schools have used coronavirus aid to hire family liaisons to find missing students; Others have launched door-to-door campaigns, sending staff and parent volunteers to the homes of students who have not been attending classes.

For Sacramento Unified School District, where three-quarters of the schoolchildren qualify for social service programs, the district not only dispatched staff members to students' homes, they set up a food truck at large apartment complexes in order to draw out families and their children, in addition to going through the food stamp program and local social service agencies to find addresses. This creative approach was successful in helping them locate almost 50% of their missing students.

In thinking about some creative ways that your district can reach out to find their missing students, ask yourself where families hang out. What services do parents of school-age children access regularly? Can you get help by coordinating with local service agencies, churches and grocery stores?

What's next?

Once everyone is back in the classroom, figuring out how to handle all the different ways the pandemic and remote learning (or lack thereof) has affected our students is the next step.

The students who have missed school are not the only ones who have fallen behind. Remote learning has proved challenging for even the most reliable pre-pandemic students.

Laura M., whose son is in a New York City charter school, is concerned that his school doesn't understand the magnitude of the challenges that remote learning has presented. "As a student with significant executive function challenges as a component of ADHD, he has gone from getting top grades in a gifted class mid-fifth grade to failing all but two classes thirteen months later." Her son reads *Scientific American* for fun, but is "failing reading" because he can't complete his reading logs. "He needs significant redirection to stay on task during class, both of which are essentially impossible to provide remotely." His parents work full-time as a lawyer and a teacher and are unable to provide the assistance that his individualized education program (IEP) calls for.

Laura notes her son is at very real risk of failing sixth grade. “It’s ridiculous. He has not had a sixth grade.” She’s been frustrated by the lack of communication about what the school plans to do about it.

“I want to hear that children like my son, who have been unable to learn effectively through remote schooling, will not be penalized for what has been essentially a lost year,” she says. “We’ve given it everything we had, but everything isn’t enough when a child is in the wrong learning environment.”

As districts transition back to in-school learning, there will need to be discussions around how to accommodate the needs of the students who were left behind by the extraordinary circumstances of the past year. Many families are also reeling from unexpected losses, and those children are going to need additional mental health resources as well. We have our work cut out for us, but school teachers and staff have risen to the challenges of the pandemic with extraordinary resourcefulness and passion, and no doubt they can do the same in the coming year.

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