



## **NAFSCE Recommendations on Engaging Families in School Reopening**

Over the past several months, the global COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to adapt how we live our lives and required governments and enterprises, large and small, to provide immediate responses. Schools across the country and around the world which abruptly shut their doors in the spring faced unprecedented challenges in how to support the education and well-being of children, and the increased importance of partnering with their families took on a new level of urgency.

Now, as educational systems plan for the safest and most effective way to initiate learning in the fall, the debate around reopening schools is lacking a critical component: families. Regardless of what schools look like or where children learn this fall, families must play a central role in their children's education, development, and overall well-being. While the importance of family and community engagement isn't new, the pandemic has shone a bright light on the interdependent roles of schools, families, and communities working together to launch *every* child to succeed in school and in life.

A recent [NAFSCE survey](#) of 1,552 educators, administrators, parent leaders, and family engagement professionals found that 93% of respondents believe that families should be partners in the school reopening planning process, yet only 64% felt that the leaders of their school system valued the role that families play in their children's success. While there is a growing groundswell of support for meaningful, impactful family and community engagement, current policies have failed to keep pace. In a [joint statement on school reopening](#), the National Education Association, National Parent Teacher Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and other national organizations stated "educators and parents should be central to figuring out the 'how.' Public school educators, students and parents must have a voice in critical conversations and decisions on reopening schools." NAFSCE agrees.

**Recommendations:** NAFSCE believes the following components of equitable family and community engagement must be incorporated into all reopening plans and urges federal, state, and local leaders and policymakers to address them moving forward.

- **Champion Equity and Diversity:** While all families are facing a myriad of challenges during this pandemic, circumstances and resources vary greatly. Existing gaps in access to technology and achievement levels have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Educational leaders should thread equity strategies throughout their reopening efforts, including:
  - Engage families of diverse backgrounds and collect and analyze disaggregated data to better understand the different challenges and circumstances faced by families, such as families who face eviction and chronic unemployment; families with members who are trying to work remotely; and children of essential workers.
  - Offer differentiated supports and solutions to meet the unique and varied needs of families.
  - Include the voices and perspectives of families from diverse backgrounds and circumstances at tables where potential solutions are being developed.



- **Value and Support Families as Decision-Makers:** Families now find themselves facing multiple, often competing concerns. A national [poll of parents conducted by Learning Heroes](#) found that parents' top concerns include their child being negatively impacted by school closures and not being on track in their learning, as well as someone in the family getting coronavirus. The poll also found diverging parent perspectives on when and how schools should re-open and how equipped parents felt about supporting remote schooling.
  - Engage diverse families as partners and joint decision-makers (e.g. family representatives on planning committees and relevant voting bodies) at all levels of the re-opening.
  - Provide meaningful options that allow families to make the best choices for their situation.
- **Build the Capacity of Educators to Effectively Engage Families:** Consistent with past surveys of educators, NAFSCE's recent survey found that only 43% of early-childhood and K-12 educators who responded to the survey agreed with the statement, "I was properly prepared and trained to engage families in their children's learning during my training and preparation program." Just 33% of parents in the Learning Heroes poll say they have regular access to their child's teacher(s), and yet a recent [Data Quality Campaign survey](#) found that 89% of parents are interested in information about how school closures and other coronavirus-related interruptions affected students' long-term outcomes. Instead of returning to "business-as-usual," it is important for educational systems to enhance their internal capacity to build relationships, communicate effectively, and engage with families.
  - Equip educators with professional development, including how to conduct outreach, build relationships, and communicate effectively with families;
  - Provide educators with the time and resources needed to build relationships with families during the unique environment of the pandemic.
  - Provide families with easily-accessible and timely information about health, safety, and efficacy of solutions being proposed or options being presented.
  - Establish or enhance systems and expectations for regular, two-way communication between families and schools.
- **Provide Families with Access and Resources to Be Learning Partners:** Learning can happen wherever children are, and families can support learning; however, they need to be equipped to do so. According to the NAFSCE Survey, when respondents were asked about families' needs for services during the pandemic, technology and connectivity topped the list, with 89% indicating families they serve have a greater need for technology including laptops, computers, and printers; 88% indicating a greater need for high-speed internet access; and 89% indicating a much greater need for remote learning opportunities. Lack of technology and internet access are also noted as the two greatest barriers to engaging families during the pandemic. Much of the disruption in learning that took place in the spring can be avoided by equipping families with the resources they need to partner with educators in their children's education.
  - Provide families with training, toolkits, guides, or other resources which help them understand how to support learning at home.



- Provide *all* families with access to technology (computers, printers, etc.), high-speed internet (broadband access, local hotspots), and programming (software, online services) that support remote learning.
- Establish two-way communication with families around determining and communicating student progress and potential learning loss, including learning about what each student experienced during the pandemic, as well as available remediation supports and resources.
- Connect individual families to relevant resources which meet their specific needs, leveraging one-on-one relationships and communication strategies including readily available translation services.
- **Support Family Well-Being:** With increased unemployment and strained social safety-net resources, it is essential that families have what they need to meet basic needs, from access to food and housing to health and mental health services, in order to be able to partner around learning. In NAFSCE’s survey, 84% of practitioners identified an increased need for resources for basic needs, such as food, shelter, or health care, and 84% for mental health supports since the beginning of the pandemic. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents reported taking advantage of existing or new partnerships with community-based organizations during the pandemic to address those needs.
  - Establish community partnerships with local non-profit organizations, libraries, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and others which support the needs of the whole-child and family well-being, including food and housing insecurity, as well as child care and extended learning opportunities.
  - Address the specific needs of families in transition (kindergarten, college, middle school) and target populations, such as children with special needs, English learners, homeless families and families experiencing housing insecurity, and those with incarcerated family members.
  - Identify and compile well-being resources for families (e.g. asset mapping, community service directory, etc...) and train staff on how to connect families to the specific resources they need.

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The [National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement \(NAFSCE\)](https://nafsce.org) is the first membership association focused solely on advancing family, school, and community engagement (FSCE). Our mission is advancing high-impact policies and practices for family, school, and community engagement to promote child development and improve student achievement.