



Building Bridges to Families

With remote learning, engaging parents as co-teachers is more important than ever

BY CHERI STERMAN

Family engagement has always been key to educational excellence. And the importance of engaging families as partners in educating students has only increased since schools shifted to distance learning to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Beyond mastering in-school pedagogical practices, educators need to cultivate new skills and mindsets to deliver effective remote instruction as communities pivot between in-school and remote instruction. This work depends on strong relationships with families.

Schools can no longer check off the family engagement box by hosting an annual family event or planning a program with the parent-teacher association. Instead, schools need to demonstrate a deep commitment to learning from parents while helping them embrace teaching practices that honor student voice and champion creatively alive children.

It all starts with relationships. Research shows that students learn best when they have positive relationships with caring adults and that family engagement increases when parents have strong relationships with educators. Crayola's CREATE™ Relationships framework sets expectations for positive interactions and reminds children and adults how to establish and maintain optimal relationships.

In response to school leaders' requests, Crayola developed the CREATE™ Relationships framework to help families and teachers co-educate. The acronym is based on six actions that can help build positive relationships:

1. **Celebrate** strengths and personal qualities.
2. **Respect** diversity by learning what is unique and universal.
3. **Engage** fully while honoring multiple voices and learning styles.
4. **Accept** mistakes as human learners, since mistakes build a growth mindset.
5. **Trust** one another with positive intent.
6. **Extend** learning with high expectations.

With the current blend of remote and in-person instruction, educators must be intentional about cultivating relationships. Even when teachers are in classrooms with students, they can't provide children with the subtle visual feedback they need; a smile, for example, will be hidden behind a face mask. Intentionally articulating each of the six pillars helps to make up for the loss of in-person contact and subtle cues.

"Celebrate strengths" and "Engage fully" are two aspects of the framework that need extra emphasis. Teachers and students alike are more easily distracted in distance learning, so honoring different learning styles is essential. "Respect diversity" and "Trust one another with positive intent" are also important in addressing bias and inequity in age-appropriate ways.

During remote instruction, family members often work alongside students at the kitchen table. Many parents/relatives have not taught the topics of personal identity and social justice, but there are no better partners to guide these reflective conversations. Their participation in the projects can "Extend learning."

When educators model a growth mindset and admit to personal fallibility, it enables family members to take risks and reflect on outdated notions of others. "Accept mistakes as human learners" is important in building relationships, especially when educators acknowledge their own missteps. The framework can guide discussions in the classroom, on digital screens, and with families.

Best Pedagogical Practices

Sharing responsibility for distance learning with families provides opportunities to embed effective pedagogy into

the bridges between school and home. Effective remote instruction engages learners personally, supports their social-emotional growth, provides relevant hands-on projects, and connects lessons with timely topics.

Social-emotional learning.

COVID-19 brought social-emotional learning to the forefront by producing additional stress and confusion among children. Young kids can't comprehend the science of microorganisms, which are too small to see but strong enough to close restaurants, postpone sports events, and cancel birthday parties.

Parents know how difficult it is for children to maintain physical distance and how uncomfortable wearing masks can be. Everyone struggles with how to teach virus-protection protocols without instilling fear. Projects that address confusing emotions can help children discuss their fears and gain self-management skills.

Hands-on projects. Project-based learning is engaging and personally meaningful because it empowers learners to co-design their own instruction, and its assessment is authentic, since it is based on what they created. Hands-on projects also allow a window into children's thoughts and feelings, since they make thinking visible.



The Michigan Department of Education released an insightful “Learning at a Distance” guide in April that emphasizes building family members’ capacity to support learning continuity. One recommended strategy was arts-integrated, cross-curricular projects that engage students to build a more complete understanding of all subjects. Educators can help families embrace such strategies as a bridge between school and home learning.

Connect to relevant issues. Not since the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic has the world faced such a devastating health crisis, and current events are touching students in profound and personal ways. Help them gain a deeper understanding by exploring relevant topics using local and global lenses. Ask them to document stories in journals or through video clips. Literacy skills, historical perspectives, science insights, and math concepts can all be covered in lessons that explore the impact of COVID-19.

Addressing social injustice is another relevant topic. Explore the stories of individuals and communities that are underrepresented in picture books and history lessons. Help students understand the deeply felt frustrations of being oppressed and dismissed. Ask students to envision new public art murals and statues that celebrate what they value.

Lasting Partnerships Start Now

Students need help transitioning when schools shift between in-person and remote instruction. Each time students are brought back into schools, they will face new rules that redefine what they can touch, where they can sit, and so on. After months of living in isolated, family-based ecosystems, children will need to refresh their social skills. Learning how to create relationships with others is a positive start.

Remote instruction at its best creates a partnership with families. One thing the pandemic has taught us

is that we can't do it alone—schools can't educate students without significant family involvement. The silver lining is that principals will want to sustain the engagement they have built with families as co-educators. These bonds will continue, and students will be the beneficiaries. ●

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Hands-on With Families

Creative projects are great for co-educating with families. Share these project-based learning ideas with teachers and families to implement during class or remote instruction:

Emotions Alive!

Students design card games to help them deal with their emotions.

Murals and Statues: Explore What Communities Value

Discuss how public art aligns with family and community values and design new works of public art.

Collecting Today's Stories

Capture the news and personal experiences that make this year so unusual, and save them to reflect upon later.

Hand-Drawn Selfies

Self-portraits aren't mirror images when students use words and visual symbols to show what makes them unique.



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