

Virtual Listening Tour 2020

COMMUNICATION PROVES ESSENTIAL TO TEACHER SUCCESS, STUDENT LEARNING AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused life-altering disruptions in many people's personal and professional lives. Data from our listening tour show that when Florida's education system transitioned to distance learning, educators, students and families experienced myriad challenges. A streamlined, multi-level communication approach is effective and efficient for the entire school community to foster a successful teaching and learning environment. When schools closed and transitioned to distance learning, the need to communicate frequently and effectively across all stakeholders in the learning community became a fundamental need. In a recent [study](#) published by the Center for American Progress, effectively communicating with families leads to better academic, social and behavioral outcomes for students. A series of key themes and recommendations emerged from our interviews and surveys of over 4,000 parents, educators and families from across the state—open communication plays a critical role in the success and well-being of students, families, and educators, particularly during this time of predominantly remote learning.

THEMES

Educators deployed a variety of innovative approaches to engage in two-way communication with students and families.

Most educators interviewed expressed a true understanding of the significance of communication throughout this time of crisis. In this era of social distancing, communication is a lifeline that knits communities together. Sixty-percent of educator survey respondents continued to communicate with their students and families once a day or more throughout distance learning. Teachers and school administrators used multiple channels to check-in with students and families, including online videos, apps, phone calls, emails, and text messages. Social media, including Facebook and Twitter, also proved to be valuable tools to leverage engagement with families. In many cases this cultivated more family involvement and increased teachers' understanding of unique student needs. Understanding families' and children's' needs is crucial, as the knowledge paves the way for customized instruction—a very important and effective teaching method used in distance learning settings.

Increased frequency of communication between administrators and educators fostered a sense of trust and collaboration.

Regular check-ins with teachers provided administrators and district-level staff with valuable, real-time information to inform higher-level decision-making. Similarly, teachers who felt they had open and honest lines of communications with school and district administrators expressed a greater sense of trust and confidence. More frequent communication among educators also facilitated idea-exchange, collaboration, and sharing of best practices to overcome challenges and better support students and families. The increased frequency of communications that emerged throughout the distance learning period was cited by interview participants at all levels of the school community as one thing that they would like to see continue as schools resume in-person instruction.

CONSIDERATIONS

UTILIZE MULTIPLE APPROACHES, BOTH TRADITIONAL AND INNOVATIVE, TO INFORM AND CONNECT WITH FAMILIES.

In addition to providing streamlined, timely, and clear information, quality communication provides much-needed social and emotional support and allows educators to understand and meet families' and students' needs. In Miami-Dade, the school district recorded [webinars](#) with their local public radio and TV affiliate for dissemination to families and also opened a [distance learning hotline](#) that answered over 18,000 calls in three different languages. Voice and video communications are particularly powerful tools to convey information while improving student and family engagement. Collier County Public Schools' principal Jon Bremseth recorded a [video](#) on campus to the song "Mr. Lonely" as a way to show students they were valued and missed. In Pinellas County, Superintendent Michael Grego and Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Kevin Hendrick, recorded and disseminated numerous [videos](#) to both encourage students and teachers and keep them informed as they navigated the transition to distance learning.

Connecting with certain student populations during distance learning, including those with exceptionalities, younger students, and English Language Learners, prompted many schools and districts to innovate. In an article by the Palm Beach Post, Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind president Jeanne Glidden Prickett [reflected](#), "Having video and audio available and so readily usable for blind students and deaf students has been a major breakthrough for distance learning." A private school participating in the Step Up For Students program hired Spanish translators to ensure they were effectively communicated with their large English Language Learner population. This [video](#) by Pinellas County Schools also demonstrates the use of a sign language interpreter to ensure accessibility.

TAILOR COMMUNICATIONS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS, INCLUDING SPECIAL STUDENT POPULATIONS.

PROVIDE EDUCATORS WITH A CENTRALIZED PLATFORM TO ACCESS AND SHARE OUT INFORMATION AS WELL AS CONNECT WITH PEERS.

Information dissemination can be streamlined by utilizing a central hub that offers access to educators, administrators, and district staff. Using a student information system or a centralized platform for all teachers is a beneficial communications strategy for educators as well as families, particularly those whose students had multiple teachers. Creating a designated space for resources, messages, assignments, and grades reduced confusion and increased student participation. Pasco County Public Schools required teachers to use the Canvas platform to provide consistency and consolidate information for teachers and families. In some districts, teachers relied on more informal or familiar platforms to stay connected. For example, teachers in Polk County transferred an organically-developed Facebook group into a new communications and collaboration hub for district leaders, educators, and community members.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, a national leader in researching and improving how teachers deliver learning, launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a Virtual Listening Tour, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about the effect of COVID-19 and how it impacted the delivery of educational services. The work was made possible with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.