

RESEARCH BRIEF APRIL 2022

Improving School-Family Communication and Engagement

Lessons from Remote Schooling during the Pandemic



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Introduction

The initial shift to remote schooling that occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to school communities across the country. Among the many challenges, searching for ways to collaborate more closely with families to sustain student learning and development under the new context became paramount for educators.

Although the home has always been a site for important learning and development, school in 2020 was now occurring at home. For more students than ever before, students' academic experiences depended on parent and educator¹ cooperation. Just as elsewhere throughout the country, educators in Chicago frequently expressed greater need for support with family communication and engagement during remote learning.²

resources which were necessary for schooling, including access to broadband internet and electronic devices with which to participate in school. Educators, some of whom were also parents, also experienced challenges during this time. Many found themselves in new territory: teaching through digital platforms, communicating and collaborating with colleagues virtually, and partnering with families to support virtual schooling

The goal of these focus groups was to identify the promising communication practices found in school communities during remote schooling prompted by COVID-19.

School communities experienced numerous challenges as a result of the pandemic. Parents who were essential workers were often unavailable to support learning at home during the school day. Other families contended with the loss of employment, creating a heightened sense of uncertainty. Especially early in the pandemic, many families had limited basic

experiences. The pandemic did not impact all schools equally, however. Chicago's primarily Black and Latine neighborhoods were disparately impacted by the health and economic hardships associated with COVID-19, when compared with predominantly White neighborhoods,³ and thus experienced more difficulty in the abrupt shift to remote schooling.⁴

1 The parent focus groups we refer to throughout this brief included a wide range of caregivers, family members, and guardians who supported students during remote schooling. Because of this, we often use the term "caregiver." Where we do use "parent," we consider it a broad definition that includes the full breadth of people who cared for and supported students. Additionally, sometimes we use the term "family" to refer to the rich home life that encompasses students' worlds. We use "educators" generally to refer to the professional teachers, school leaders, and other

non-instructional staff who participated in focus groups.

- When appropriate, we refer specifically to individuals' roles—for example, "teacher," "principal," "mother," or "sister."
- 2** Clausen, Bunte, & Robertson (2020); Gauvreau & Sandall (2019); Hubbard, Kurtz, & Richmond (2020, May 20).
- 3** Nelson & Friedman (2021); Tai, Sia, Doubeni, & Wieland (2021); Krompak & Teter (2020); Latino Policy Forum, Somos Unidos, & Latino Decisions (2020).
- 4** Kids First Chicago (2020); Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors (2020).

To understand educators' and families' increased support needs during the pandemic, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) partnered with Chicago Public School (CPS) leaders and community-based organizations to conduct focus groups with parents and educators who worked and lived in Chicago's south, west, and southwest community areas.⁵ We conducted six focus groups—three with parents and three with educators—from September through December 2020. Focus groups ranged in size between 4-14 participants in each and, in total, the data represent the experiences of 59 participants. The goal of these focus groups was to identify the promising communication practices found in school communities during remote schooling prompted by COVID-19. The lessons learned from these focus groups can also inform educators' communication and engagement practices with families beyond remote contexts.

Parent focus groups included a cross-section of mothers, grandparents, siblings, and family members who supported students during remote learning. Educator focus groups included a range of K-12 teachers as well as non-instructional school staff. Nearly all of the parent participants were people of color, primarily Black and Latine. One of these focus groups took place in Spanish. The educator focus groups were split; about one-half of the participants were White and one-half were Black and Latine educators. It is important to note that these conversations with caregivers and educators revealed a diverse mural of experiences and perspectives with remote schooling. However, during these

difficult times, and across both groups, many expressed a call for “grace” and empathy for entire school communities, including families, educators, and especially for students. And despite the shared hardships they experienced, Chicago's school communities have reminded us that they are resilient, responding to these unexpected adversities with adaptations and innovations, which were evident in the stories presented here.

In this brief, we outline seven lessons that we drew from the insights shared by our focus group participants. The first three lessons address educator practice in the classroom, reflecting dimensions of communication that occur day-to-day. The following four lessons describe school-wide communication efforts that were positively received during remote schooling. We then highlight a central challenge that emerged in our conversations with both educators and caregivers: participants described a desire for additional guidance and support in improving their communication efforts. As such, we conclude the brief with a reflection resource for educators. We hope this will help them situate their practices in relation to distinct family engagement approaches that have been documented in prior research. In general, the evidence suggests that communication practice is most impactful when it coheres with intentional and sustained strategies that have clearly-expressed purposes and goals. We report these learnings in this brief with the hope that by deepening these practices, communication and collaboration between schools and families can be strengthened across Chicago.

⁵ For additional information about our research partnerships and procedures, as well as a description of our focus groups and analysis, see the appendix.

Why is School-Family Communication Important?

Parent involvement in schools has been linked to the academic and social-emotional development of students. From an educator vantage point, building meaningful, reciprocal relationships with parents plays a decisive role in improving parental involvement.^A Parents, especially of younger children, also benefit when schools form “strength-based partnerships with families,” which can lead to positive impacts on a family’s overall well-being. Some of the positive impacts of school and family partnerships can include fostering housing, neighborhood, and community safety by

creating family linkages to other neighbors, resources, and organizations.^B For schools serving primarily Black, Latine, as well as other nondominant cultural groups, positive communication and meaningfully reciprocal relationships emerge when families share in decision-making and are treated with dignity and respect—this is especially the case in contexts where relationships across racial and cultural difference must be fostered.^C All of the potential benefits that can be gained from parent involvement begin with successful communication between educators and families.

A Barajas-López & Ishimaru (2020); Kyzar & Jimerson (2018); Rafferty, Grolnick & Flamm (2012).

B National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (2013).

C Barajas-López & Ishimaru (2020); Ishimaru (2020); Latunde (2018).



Communication Lessons from the Pandemic

Our six focus groups with parents and educators revealed a diverse mural of experiences and perspectives with remote schooling. We used the insights shared by our focus group participants to draw seven communication lessons that emerged during all-remote schooling—and that remain salient as in-person learning resumes.

Lesson 1:

Virtual meeting options provided more flexible scheduling opportunities for parents to communicate with educators.

No longer able to meet in the classroom and in person during the pandemic, schools needed to adapt to virtual modes of communication in order to engage students and their caregivers. When schools switched to video and voice options for hosting meetings with caregivers on virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meets and Voice, Facetime, etc.), they eliminated the convention that required caregivers to travel to the school for the purpose of communicating with school staff and, more broadly, for the purpose of remaining involved in their children’s school experience.

Focus groups with caregivers described how this commonplace in-person practice at schools afforded parents with bounded options—and a constrained window of time—with which to communicate with their children’s school staff. This posed an additional challenge for parents with limited time. As one parent shared:

“When parents were the ones that needed to speak to a teacher, we were the ones that needed to go directly to the school either very, very early before classes started. Or go very, very late when we picked

our children up, and we would ask the teacher if they could do us the favor of listening to us.”
(Translated from Spanish)

While this parent was willing to travel to the school, the limited opportunities to access their child’s teachers became a source of frustration. In addition to being inefficient for both parties, this often conflicted with the parent’s work schedule and other obligations.

At the same time, some of the participants in our focus groups—upon reflecting on what promising practices emerged during the remote schooling—highlighted the use of video call platforms for communicating with educators. Video chats over Google Meets were deemed especially useful during remote learning because they provided caregivers with more flexibility, in that they were more likely to fit the meeting into their schedules. Lifting the requirement to travel to school lessened the burden on their time and resources. As one grandparent summarized, virtual meetings represented “an opportunity to make it easier on us [caregivers].”

Lesson 2:

Mobile apps increased timely communication between parents and educators.

Remote learning also presented a particularly novel communication challenge for the upper grades. While both educators and parents in the elementary grades often described the common use of phone apps in regular messaging with one another prior to the shift to remote schooling, many middle and high school educators found themselves having to adopt the use of phone apps (such as Remind and Google Voice) to communicate with parents. For those who were new to using the phone apps, the ability to send quick, direct messages back and forth between educators and caregivers was perceived as a valuable and convenient new tool.

Educators recognized that they were now able to contact caregivers to inform them about attendance and student behavior (even during class time) via direct messages in the phone app, and often receive a prompt response. A high school teacher shared her experience, saying:

“This one student had a black screen [with their camera off]. We’re taking the midterm. I can’t get a hold of her, so I just sent a quick text to her mom and immediately [the student turned] the screen on, and she’s getting the midterm done. You know, so that’s constant communication. We have been

finding that a quick text message [via the app] is something that parents are more apt to see, and immediately respond to rather than leaving a voicemail.”

For parents, the use of apps was generally viewed positively because it meant that channels of communication were opened between them and educators, as well as between parents and children. In one example, a high school teacher was able to share information about a student’s attendance with the parents. The parent explained that she appreciated the use of apps during remote schooling. She said,

“...because my daughter, with one of those apps, there was one teacher, I would get a message when classes started and it would let me know if they didn’t go to that class. She [daughter] was like ‘Why do you get the messages?’ I don’t know. But she would get it. And I would get it. It’s a good thing.”

By adding brief, convenient messages that went directly to their smartphones, caregivers were able to remain informed and interact at key points throughout the school day.

Lesson 3:

Translation features in mobile apps allowed for direct communication between educators and parents who speak languages other than English.

Focus groups with Spanish-speaking parents revealed that sometimes the language barrier with English-dominant educators interfered with direct communication. Caregivers were at times directed to non-instructional personnel (for example, an administrative support staff member) to relay essential information in the caregivers' dominant language. A parent in our focus group described this common pre-remote practice at schools and remarked that there were times when caregivers didn't talk to the teacher, which they viewed as an issue. She said:

"The communication we had with teachers [before remote schooling], like another parent said, was through the secretary [who spoke Spanish]. If we wanted something we needed to communicate with

the secretary. And sometimes we didn't talk to the teacher [...] And I think it's really important to talk with a teacher."

During remote schooling, with the increased use of apps and virtual platforms, educators and caregivers were able to use built-in translation features to allow them to communicate directly with one another. It is understandable that it is favorable for schools to have a staff member to translate for teachers in instances where they don't share the same language as caregivers. However, with the advancement in accuracy of translation technologies, schools leveraged these features for more direct communication between teachers and caregivers.

Lesson 4:

Schools enlisted all staff members, including non-instructional staff, to serve as additional resources to help cultivate additional relationships between schools and parents.

Focus group participants repeatedly pointed to how all school staff—including administrators, counselors, security personnel, and teachers—were empowered to communicate with families to address logistical issues and questions about remote schooling, like technology components. This shift in typical school procedures was described as an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to communication where all staff were tasked with supporting school-family communication. In some examples, this involved parents reaching out to educators with whom they'd had a relationship with in previous years, but not at this time. Another staff member described the new role of the support staff during remote learning. They said,

"We have used our support staff, our security team. They've done home visits, because they have really good rapport with a lot of the families..."

Schools pivoted to incorporate all staff in relaying important information during remote schooling. This

shift in operations opened additional channels for communication that had been previously underutilized. In another example, a parent shared their experience with receiving information from a non-instructional staff member. They explained,

"Everyone [all school staff] has information. So I asked about wifi and Chicago Connected access. I talked to the security guard about it, and that's who told me more about it."

Staff members had information that students and their families needed. By empowering all staff to answer parent questions—and also disseminating with the information necessary to respond—schools supported timely and thorough communication between parents and schools. Altogether, this practice encouraged the development of additional ties between schools and families.

Lesson 5:

Schools created inclusive, family-focused co-curricular events that helped deepen their relationships with parents.

Another key feature of relationship-building during remote schooling encompassed the development of family-friendly co-curricular programs. In focus groups with middle school teachers, participants indicated that school-wide efforts that focused on family interaction could deepen relationships between educators and families. In one instance, participants discussed how school-wide, family-inclusive events could provide a space for educators and parents to connect and communicate in ways that did not address students' performance or behavior, as is often the case. The following excerpt highlights this discussion:

Teacher 1: *[For 'family night'] we're doing a read aloud, a bingo, and mask-making for staff, teachers, parents, and the kids. The whole thing is [students'] parents will sit with them. It's more family-centered. So, I'll be there, but more of a DJ, and [facilitating conversations among parents and students]. So that's kind of my role.*

Teacher 2: *I think something like the literacy night [would be good to bring to our school] where it's like, "okay, this is going to be informal, no penalty" if [a lot of parents] don't come, we [the teachers and parents who did show up] can just casually talk.*

In discussing the programmatic efforts that aimed to engage parents, these teachers believed that programs which did not reprimand students for their or their parent's lack of participation would lead to positive communication. Other examples of programs that facilitated communication included home visits and routine wellness checks that some school leaders and teachers implemented. By creating these events with the primary goal of engaging parents, these teachers were also strengthening their communication with caregivers in a context that was not centered around the academic or behavioral performance of students. These events were conducted virtually, also pointing to the benefits of using online communication platforms for creating flexible opportunities to deepen the relationship between families and educators.

Lesson 6:

Schools created virtual and in-person forums where parents connected with one another and deepened their sense of community.

Connections among caregivers were especially salient for families during the most difficult parts of the pandemic. Caregivers came to value the opportunities to connect with other caregivers for social and emotional support that were sometimes presented to them through their children's school. In addition to the added benefit of receiving information, one parent shared that there was a general need for parents to feel supported throughout the adversity they were experiencing. She said:

*"Parents need a lot of support. They are expected to take orders—this is how this works, do this, this is what you have to figure out, your child needs this, figure out your employment, figure out how to feed your child for hours that they were not usually at home. **I feel there needs to be a parents' support group to support parents through this frustration that they're having to endure.** Adjusting to something that they've never had to experience themselves."*

Another participant shared how her child's high school responded to this need for parent supports by

creating a virtual group for parents with a classroom teacher. These group messages (conducted through a smartphone app) were one form through which caregivers communicated with their children's teacher, but also enabled caregivers to communicate with each other. A parent described how her child's school used these group messages,

*"Lately, I've been experiencing that teachers [use] apps and make groups of parents in their class and they communicate there [...] I think that when apps are used throughout the school, sharing what's happening around campus through the app is good because it's not just a few moms that find out stuff, but **all parents do.**"*

This practice made it easier for educators to relay information to parents by grouping them by classroom and disseminating information more widely. A secondary result was that group messages enabled for more relationships to be created among parents. For parents having these groups meant that they were able to feel connected and supported during these challenging times.

Lesson 7:

Understanding students' family and community contexts helped schools to reach—and know how to be reached by—families during the pandemic.

During remote schooling, having a working knowledge about their students' families, cultural background, and community context became vital in communication between schools and families. This was especially the case when schools attempted to overcome student disengagement, which was observed as a widespread issue across schools nationally during the pandemic.⁶ Educators in our focus groups shared the need to expand the reasons why they communicated with parents, since they could no longer rely on their prior in-class indicators to know whether students needed support during remote learning. A high school educator shared:

"I think [some of why I'm communicating with parents and caregivers] does change because now I'm not seeing [students] in person, so I can't really read the room, I guess, to know that you are okay, to know that you know maybe you need support. I think we [educators] get so good at watching our students in the mechanisms that they have in class like: I know when you're struggling. I know when you're okay. I know when you need to be left alone. And I think in the remote capacity, I'm not able to read the room. I can't know if [students] are okay. I can't know if [students] need support. I can't know those things because I can't see them."

Despite the remarkable adversities faced by school communities as a result of COVID-19, across the focus groups, educators relied on their knowledge of students' family and/or shared a cultural background with their students. The rapport that developed alongside this knowledge led to more positive communication than they believe they would have experienced otherwise.

One second-grade teacher described encountering challenges in engaging students, where she'd lost touch with one student in particular. She'd had no success in her outreach efforts with the student's parents. She proceeded to describe how her assistant principal used

their knowledge of the family's background to find a way to communicate with the family by reaching out to an older sibling who'd attended the school years before. She described how her assistant principal's knowledge was an invaluable resource when attempting to reach students' caregivers during remote schooling, saying,

*"I'm able to reach out to my assistant principal; she's really good about **knowing all the families—everything about the families**. And I'm like, 'There's this family, I can't get in touch with.' And she responds, 'Know what, we can get in touch with a sibling.'"*

Since the assistant principal knew the older sibling, the teacher was able to re-establish communication with the student and offer additional support with remote learning. Having knowledge about the local community is also a useful resource for developing rapport with caregivers. In this way, we also noticed that educators who shared the same cultural background (including race, ethnicity, language, and/or home neighborhood) with families observed that they were able to more easily form connections and to open communication with caregivers of the same background. A Latine high school teacher shared how he was able to make connections with Latine caregivers because of the cultural affinity they shared from living in the same neighborhood. As he described:

*"Fortunately, I do live in the neighborhood I teach in. And I'm also an alumnus. **So, I do have that, you know, that connection with parents here**. So, if something happens, I'm **the person they talk to**. That [ability to connect with caregivers] could change if that wasn't the situation."*

Growing up and living in the same neighborhood as the families of his students, in addition to having been an alumnus of the school, provided this teacher with the experiential knowledge and skills to communicate

⁶ Spitzley (2020).

in culturally-responsive ways with caregivers. The teacher having a common background with the families school made him a ‘point person’ there. The experience of cultural familiarity may also have had something to do with language, as illustrated in the next example.

In a focus group with bilingual caregivers whose native language was Spanish, a common theme emerged around how they navigated schools with a predominantly English-speaking staff. While they recounted being able to successfully communicate with English-speaking teachers with some effort, they experienced a deeper sense of comfort and connection when they shared the same primary language with educators. One noted,

“When there isn’t that language—you want to express yourself in your language the way you want, but you can’t. I feel more supported. I feel more comfortable [when a teacher speaks] in my own language.” (Translated from Spanish)

When caregivers shared a cultural affinity with educators, particularly around language, the rapport and trust that was established resulted in more open and honest communication. Parents shared more

information about their own parenting practices (e.g. discipline) and challenges without the concern of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. Notably, following the prior comment, another caregiver emphasized the sentiment, exclaiming,

*“El mundo se ilumina, y digo, ‘¡que maravilla!’” /
The world opens up; it lights up and I say to myself,
‘how wonderful!’”*

Experiences with staff from underrepresented backgrounds, those who shared a common background and language with the students’ home community, were generally well-received by caregivers, often resulting in strengthened relationships with their children’s teachers.

By knowing about students’ family and community contexts, educators were able to rise to the daunting challenge associated with student engagement during the pandemic. When educators shared some of the same language and community of the students and families they serve, parents experienced the shared cultural understandings and a sense of affinity. Parents described feelings of connection and support in these contexts, thus promoting communication.

Encountering Challenges:

Teachers and caregivers called for additional guidance and support in their communication and collaboration.

Focus groups with caregivers and educators also revealed the wide breadth of hardships that school communities have endured throughout the pandemic. Participants continuously expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment caused by their new, drastically shifting demands. Frequent mentions of feeling overwhelmed by the additional requests being made of them to support remote schooling—and feelings of needing support—were echoed across all focus groups.

Caregivers, despite their eagerness to collaborate more closely with educators during remote schooling, did not know precisely what they could do to support their children’s teachers during this period. At the same time, educators often cited a number of obstacles that hindered their successful engagement with parents. Chief among the obstacles teachers experienced was a sense of insufficient guidance from school leadership. As one teacher explained:

*“My principal’s **very** supportive—however, if we’re speaking specifically in the area of communication [with families]... Nothing. I am on my own. All year ... in terms of communication... I’ve been pretty much on my own. [The principal] says, ‘Here’s a spreadsheet.’ But it wasn’t meaningful. **It didn’t come with any guidance on how we should be communicating with parents or what to do if certain communications are ineffective or how to communicate about some of the common problems we’re seeing as a school.**”*

From a teacher’s perspective, knowing the intended goals of family communication were central to developing their practice. At the same time, as demonstrated in the prior quote, some educators found that their outreach to parents was met with limited success. While both caregivers and educators understood that remote schooling called for augmented communication, more direction and shared understanding of the purpose and goals of collaboration was needed—on both sides.

Conclusion

The pandemic required school communities to adopt new practices to support communication with families. Our focus groups demonstrated that both caregivers and educators experienced communication positively when a concerted—and sometimes new or creative—effort was made to address building and sustaining relationships between schools and families, as well as among families.

Communication efforts were also most challenging when they were not guided with purpose, intentionality and support. Reflecting this experience, prior research suggests that communication is most impactful when the practice is tied to coordinated and sustained leadership-driven approaches to engagement with families.⁷ The next chapter summarizes prior research that can inform schools’ evolving communication with families.

⁷ Kyzar & Jimerson (2018); Gengler (2014).

School-Family Engagement Approaches

This chapter contains an overview of three different approaches to school-family engagement that have been documented in prior research. We also offer reflection questions to help educators and school staff consider their current approach and develop their vision for family engagement moving forward.

School-family communication practices are most impactful when they are grounded in clearly identified intentions and goals. Research suggests that when a purpose for communication is articulated, it can motivate and orient teacher practice.⁸ A shared purpose can also define the character and tone of their interactions with parents. When intentions, goals and structures are outlined, they comprise what we can call a strategic engagement approach to building relationships with families.

Better understanding a school's approach to family

engagement will guide staff members' practice with intentionality and toward clear goals. **Table 1** categorizes school-family engagement research into three school engagement approaches with families: 1) traditional parent involvement, 2) school-parent partnership, and 3) family- and community-centered engagement. We offer additional details on each of the approaches and their distinct forms of relationships with parents and caregivers, differing intentions and goals, and accompanying decision-making structures on p.14-15.

Communication and Engagement

What is the difference between communication and engagement? Clearly, communication is necessary in order for educators to engage with families, and in many instances, engagement happens primarily through communication. However, there is an important distinction to be made when it comes to school-wide practice.

Communication generally refers to the conveyance of information from one person or group to another. **When we say engagement, we are referring to strategies, processes and policies that inform how educators and families experience their relationship with one another.**

⁸ Mapp & Kuttner (2013).

TABLE 1
Comparing Different Approaches to School-Family Engagement

School Approach	School's Relationship with Families	Intentions and Goals	Decision-Making Structure	Communication with Parents
Traditional Parent Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools assume responsibility for children and youth at school, and assign responsibility for them at home. There is a clear division of roles and responsibilities. School and family are each independent—considered separate spheres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help parents develop at-home behaviors that will lead to improved student academic performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools make most decisions independently, without the input of families and with limited attention to the perspectives and experiences of parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is limited and one-way, and is typically about academic performance and scholastic events.
School-Parent Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School routinely solicits feedback from parents. Parent perspective is collected often. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To improve student academic achievement. May also aim to improve parent involvement levels across the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools consult with parents, gathering input to make selected decisions. The values and opinions of parents have some influence in school matters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is two-way, with parent feedback focused on selected topics, often initiated by the school.
Family and Community-Centered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools facilitate the leadership of parents by providing space and welcoming their participation in influential school decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To create a community within the school that collaborates to arrive at shared goals. To promote the overall well-being of students and their families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools share decision-making responsibility with parents. Community perspective is taken into account for a range of concerns. The school's goals and strategies are decided upon collectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is two-way, with conversations that address a wide range of topics, including out-of-school needs and experiences, often initiated by parents.

Traditional Parent Involvement Approach

This approach operates on the premise that parents are instrumental to the learning and academic performance of students.⁹ Interactions with parents occur in limited capacity, conventionally through narrowly-defined structures (e.g., on-site activities such as report card pick-ups, fundraisers, or student recitals) and parents are expected to do work at home that will ultimately support their children's academic performance.¹⁰ Parents may be expected to provide at-home conditions that can reinforce what is learned in school.

The relationship between parents and schools in this approach is typically independent, however, when important decisions about school are made, they are communicated to parents with limited opportunities for input.

School-Parent Partnership Approach

The principal goals within this approach are to increase parent involvement, welcome parents into the school environment, and to improve student performance and school outcomes.¹¹ In this approach, the school routinely solicits feedback from caregivers on surveys, questionnaires or during parent-teacher meetings, and values the inherent expertise of caregivers about their children. Opportunities for interactions with parents may be more flexible and expansive. Some examples of these types of interactions may include school-wide non-academic family-inclusive activities, home visits, and other parent committees that support school-led initiatives. The school makes efforts to assess and modify their approach to parent engagement, seeking ways to more closely collaborate with parents.¹²

One assumption within this approach is that educators and parents both require additional skills and knowledge to better collaborate. To that end, a school may sometimes develop a school-wide action plan for increasing more family involvement in school activities. Key decisions are made primarily by school leaders,

with some input from parents. The overall direction of a school would be decided by school leaders and executed by school officials.

Family & Community-Centered Approach

One goal within this approach includes to build a community that wraps around students, where bonds between schools and families are strengthened in culturally-responsive forms; the aim is to address the overall wellbeing of students, families and their communities.¹³ The school facilitates caregiver leadership in this approach by creating space for parents and community members to organize and lead around the issues they identify as priority. In addition to learning-oriented support structures like some of those described in the other two approaches, the school works with families to create opportunities to collaborate. Here we may think of community-wide events, on-site resource fairs, and parent advisory councils that target what may appear to be extra-educational goals. Acknowledging that families hold a wealth of knowledge about their children's learning, school leaders actively develop trusting relationships with families, and often co-lead various school- and community-related programs or events.¹⁴ We have defined this approach drawing on previous research and models from schools that serve marginalized communities, which enter into family engagement on the premise that many of their students' families and communities encounter structural disadvantages and may require resources, and that many families have been historically excluded and estranged from their schools because of their cultural background.¹⁵

Within this approach, the goals of the school are developed in close collaboration with families, and typically positioned in relation to the needs of the students' community. Critical decisions are arrived at collectively—often disrupting traditional power dynamics found in educator-parent relationships.¹⁶

⁹ Williams-Johnson (2021); Rattenborg, MacPhee, Kleisner Walker, & Miller-Heyl (2019); Wilder (2014); Park & Holloway (2017).

¹⁰ Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, Valle, & Epstein (2015); Preston, MacPhee, & O'keefe (2018).

¹¹ Constantino (2020); Garbacz, McIntosh, Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Hirano & Ruppert (2016); Rafferty, Grolnick & Flamm (2012).

¹² Gerzel-Short (2018); Hughes et al. (2016); Mapp & Kuttner (2013); Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle (2010).

¹³ Latunde (2018); Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson (2016).

¹⁴ Ishimaru (2020).

¹⁵ Barajas-López & Ishimaru (2020); Ishimaru (2019).

¹⁶ Alameda-Lawson & Lawson (2019); Nygreen (2017).

Reflection Exercise

Schools represent a central connection point in the lives of students where their peers, educators, families, and communities intersect. Positive communication between schools and families can accelerate the collective growth and wellbeing of school communities. And as the research demonstrates, when school and family engagement is strong, students have the most to gain.

We conclude this research summary with a brief

reflection exercise to help teachers and school leaders situate their family engagement practices within different engagement approaches, each of which reflect distinct purposes, decision structures, and relationships with families. Our colleagues at the Network for College Success have also developed a **discussion protocol** for educators interested in an additional resource to aid in reflection and discussion.

1. Relationships with Families:

- a. Think for a moment about the relationship you have with parents at your school. How do you develop and maintain trust with your students' families?

2. Intentions and Goals:

- a. What goals motivate your approach for engaging with families? How did you arrive at these goals?

3. Structures for Engagement:

- a. Thinking now about your school's engagement approach. How is engagement coordinated across teams? Across functions? Among parents?
- b. How would you describe the influence parents have on decision-making in your school? Why is this the case?

4. Communication with Parents:

- a. Describe your overall communication with parents. What are some challenges you face when communicating with families?
- b. What type of communication could parents expect from your school leaders? From teachers at your school?

5. What's Next?

- a. Are there any aspects of your school's communication efforts you wish to continue? Are there any elements of your school's family engagement approach that you may want to change? Why?

Interpretive Summary

This study surfaced several lessons about engagement among educators and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard from educators that a key challenge in implementing engagement with families was a need for more support and guidance from school leadership. Moving forward, in order to fulfill schools' commitment to equity in family engagement, there are important points that should be considered.

The pandemic has magnified the need for strong parent-teacher communication—but school-family engagement has historically required significant attention and support, and will continue to require them.

As the summary of prior research has shown us, for some time, school and family communication has been a priority for school improvement efforts for school communities and districts across the country. Some of the earliest research that explores the role parent and family involvement on student's educational outcomes dates back to the 1980s.¹⁷ For the caregivers and educators in our focus groups, some of the communication practices that were perceived as successful could find their success in practices that were established prior to the pandemic (e.g., *Lesson 7. Understanding students' family and community contexts helped schools to reach—and know how to be reached by—families during the pandemic*). And at the same time, one of the main challenges educators grappled with could also be traced back to in-person schooling conventions, namely a lack of preparation for and guidance with engaging their students' families (see *Encountering challenges: Teachers and caregivers called for additional guidance and support in their communication and collaboration*).

Research shows us that there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to school and family engagement, but cohesive and coordinated strategies are key. Each of the approaches to school and family engagement summarized in Chapter 2 carries significant strengths and, according to prior research, has the potential to achieve distinct outcomes based on the context and needs of the school community. It is likely that many CPS schools employ a combination of the three approaches. Our focus groups showed a constellation of practices across schools, but the nature of our data collection method did not allow us to depict practices within any given school holistically. One opportunity became clear throughout this study: if relationships between schools and families are to be strengthened, it is important that schools develop coordinated and cohesive strategies at a school-wide level.

Increased technology adoption can help expand communication between schools and families. It is important to acknowledge that technology-use is not a novel concept in education. There are many documented instances of technology integration into schooling outside of the pandemic context.¹⁸ However, understanding

¹⁷ Rafferty et al. (2012).

¹⁸ Mason, Griffith & Belser (2018); Dede (1990).

how equity of access influences the successful incorporation of technology into communication practice must be attended to at the school level. Within our early focus groups, which took place a few months into the beginning of remote schooling, we observed a number of challenges with devices and internet-use among both educators and parents. Internet connectivity during early focus groups remained unreliable and unstable, causing a number of participants to be disconnected unexpectedly. In many cases, participants were still learning how to use the platforms and to troubleshoot them when needed.

With the launch of the Chicago Connected initiative in early 2020,¹⁹ a public-private partnership between the City of Chicago, CPS, nonprofits, businesses, and philanthropies, aimed at expanding access to reliable internet, access to low-cost and free internet and devices was improved across the city.²⁰ These far-reaching improvements notwithstanding, internet equity has yet to be fully realized.²¹ Ultimately, our focus groups were more likely to include the parents who had a device with which to enter into virtual conversations and had proficiency in using video conferencing platforms. And so our focus groups likely included participants who faced fewer barriers in accessing and using technology to communicate.

Expanded communication between educators and parents via digital platforms is only practical when all families have internet, devices, and sufficient support for adopting that technology. Schools can leverage

technology most successfully under such conditions. Until then, in-person communication and engagement activities remain important for creating an open and inclusive environment for families at schools. Decisions made at the school level, including those about technology implementation, require that school leaders remain attentive to the needs of families.

School leaders have the ability to influence the mindsets that teachers and staff have about family engagement.²² Another subset of research has explored more specifically how school administrators, and principals in particular, can play a key role in fostering a culture where families and communities feel at home in schools. Some of the key features of leadership found in the research described guiding practice around family engagement by providing additional professional development opportunities for teachers,²³ and creating a clear set of norms and expectations for staff.²⁴ Building on these strategies, principals could specify and cultivate values around family engagement at a school-wide level. More fundamentally, researchers have documented the core role that school leadership plays in driving profound school improvement efforts. They have found that an integral part of leadership work in organizational improvement includes facilitating the leadership and capacity of their colleagues to advance change.²⁵ Schools, they have found, cannot be improved by one person alone. In fact, it takes the entire school community.

¹⁹ Kids First Chicago (2021).

²⁰ Koumpilova (2021, January 12).

²¹ POWER-PAC IL Remote Learning Recommendations (February 2021).

²² Smith, Reinke, Herman, & Sebastian (2021); Kyzar & Jimerson (2018); Gengler (2014); Mapp & Kuttner (2013).

²³ Smith et al. (2021).

²⁴ Auerbach (2009).

²⁵ Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010).

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Appendix

Researching Remote Schooling During the Pandemic

To examine the experiences of educators and families in communicating during remote schooling, the UChicago Consortium partnered with five organizations and two district offices to conduct six qualitative virtual focus groups with caregivers and educators across K-12 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) schools located in Chicago's west, south, and southwest community areas. The research partners included: Kids First Chicago; the Middle Grades Network of the To&Through Project; the Network for College Success; Stand for Children Illinois; and the UChicago Urban Teachers Education Program, as well as the Offices of Family and Community Engagement and Language and Cultural Education at CPS. Partners supported the research in project development, participant recruitment, and in discussion, development, and dissemination of the insights reported above. The research team iterated between existing literature, data from focus groups, and insights from organizational partners. This dynamic information-gathering process allowed the research team to identify the conditions of school and family communication that promoted positive, supportive, and culturally-responsive engagement.

Focus groups took place from September through December 2020, offering an extended view of remote

learning. Given the uncertainty around the mode of schooling during the pandemic, the Consortium team designed an expedited program of information-gathering that would yield insights timely enough for a prolonged remote context. However, we believe the insights reported herein apply to a range of contexts, including in-person, remote, and hybrid modes of instruction. Additionally, we believe the findings reported here also represent promising practices for a range of grade levels, including the upper grades. It is important to note that focus group data represents a wide range of experiences from diverse participants, across a large number of schools and grade levels. In total, focus groups included 59 participants and the experiences, perspectives, and stories were equally diverse. This brief, then, is the result of an analytic process grounded in data from focus groups with caregivers, who included a cross-section of parents, grandparents, siblings, and family members who supported students during remote learning, and with educators, who included teachers as well as non-instructional school staff members. As such, the stories reported above represent a mosaic of experiences related to communication and engagement during the sudden shift to remote schooling that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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VANESSA GUTIÉRREZ is a Research Analyst who has contributed her qualitative skills and background to work on various projects at the UChicago Consortium. She is deeply interested in how our systems and institutions have constructed racial-cultural inequities and how these systems and institutions continue to reproduce, perpetuate, and sustain this inequity. She is also interested in how marginalized communities resist, heal, and thrive. She is Purépecha, which is one of the many indigenous groups in Mexico, and she uses her culture and family as a source of inspiration.

This report reflects the interpretation of the authors. Although the UChicago Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice, no formal endorsement by these individuals, organizations, or the full Consortium, should be assumed.

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