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New research: Seven lessons from school-family communication during the pandemic that are still helpful today

A new UChicago Consortium on School Research study points to **seven lessons drawn from remote schooling experiences that can help schools strengthen communication and collaboration between schools and families today**. Consortium researchers partnered with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and community-based organizations to hold three parent and three educator focus groups in September–December 2020, for a total of 59 participants.

“We wanted to hear from parents and educators who were working and living in the south, west, and southwest sides of Chicago—and hear what was helpful to them as they navigated the blurred divisions between school and home in fall 2020,” said David Orta, a report author.

These research findings are particularly notable as school communities work to meet students’ continued need for innovative academic and social-emotional supports.

“We came away with a diverse mural of perspectives,” said Vanessa Gutiérrez, a report author. “Ultimately, many parents and teachers found it very helpful to remove constraints and open lines of communication—like using communication apps to find better modes and times to talk, using translation apps for direct communication, and embracing a broader sense of relationship building.”

The seven lessons from school-family communication during the pandemic that are still helpful today are:

Day-to-day classroom communication:

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

Offering virtual meetings provided parents with more flexibility, compared to pre-pandemic communication expectations that were rigid and burdensome (e.g., in-person, at-school visits; limited hours; uncertainty whether teachers were available/willing to meet).

2. Mobile apps increased timely communication between parents and educators

The ability to send quick, direct messages back and forth was perceived as valuable and convenient for both parties to communicate.

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

Educators leveraged the improved accuracy in translation features for more direct communication with parents who spoke and preferred different languages, rather than relying on colleagues to translate.

School-wide practices:

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

Pivoting to incorporate all staff in relaying important information during remote schooling opened additional channels for communication that had been previously underutilized.

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

Schools created events with the primary goal of engaging parents. Educators who attended these events were able to strengthen their communication with parents in a context that was not centered around the academic or behavioral performance of students.

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

Some educators grouped parents by classroom to share information more widely. As a result, parents felt more supported and more connected to one another.

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

Educators expanded their communication approaches, and relied on their knowledge of students’ families and/or their shared cultural background with students’ families for positive and helpful communication.

Additionally, authors categorized prior research about school-family engagement into three school engagement approaches with families. School staff can use these approaches to identify the current status and future goals of their family engagement approaches:

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	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.	To help parents develop at-home behaviors that will lead to improved student academic performance.	Schools make most decisions independently, without the input of families and with limited attention to the perspectives and experiences of parents.	Communication is limited and one-way, and is typically about academic performance and scholastic events.
School-Parent Partnership	School routinely solicits feedback from parents. Parent perspective is collected often.	To improve student academic achievement. May also aim to improve parent involvement levels across the school.	Schools consult with parents, gathering input to make selected decisions. The values and opinions of parents have some influence in school matters.	Communication is two-way, with parent feedback focused on selected topics, often initiated by the school.
Family and Community-Centered	Schools facilitate the leadership of parents by providing space and welcoming their participation in influential school decisions.	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	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.	Communication is two-way, with conversations that address a wide range of topics, including out-of-school needs and experiences, often initiated by parents.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

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