




## What can we learn about promising practices in school-family communication that emerged during remote schooling?





Parents\* and educators of K–12 students from Chicago’s south, west, and south-west communities shared their experiences via focus groups in fall 2020. Their responses and insights are captured in 7 communication lessons that are shared in detail in an accompanying research brief. The 7 lessons are summarized here, followed and complemented by Table 1, which categorizes prior research about school-family engagement into three school engagement approaches with families. Together, these insights can help strengthen communication and collaboration between schools and families across Chicago.

### 7 School-Family Communication Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### Day-to-Day Classroom Communication:

-  **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).
-  **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.
-  **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:

-  **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.
-  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.
-  **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.
-  **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.

\* We refer to “parents” here, and intend to be inclusive of all family members. See the full brief, linked on p.2, for details.



# School-Family Engagement Approaches

Better understanding a school’s approach to family engagement can guide staff members with clear goals and intentionality. When intentions, goals and structures are outlined, they comprise what we can call a strategic engagement approach to building relationships with families.

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

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- [Discussion Guide for Educators](#), by the Network for College Success
- [Research Brief](#): Orta, D., & Gutiérrez, V. (2022). *Improving school-family communication and engagement: Lessons from remote schooling during the pandemic*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.