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# Family Engagement in the Time of COVID-19

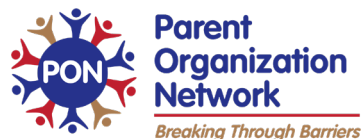
Lessons Learned from the Learning Continuity Plans

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With contributions from:



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# Lessons Learned from the Learning Continuity Plans

## School District Planning Requirements and Family Engagement during COVID-19

- The California legislature passed **Senate Bill 98** in June 2020, establishing minimum expectations for teaching and learning during COVID-19. SB 98 also suspended the usual **Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)** for 2020-21 and required a new **Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan (LCP)** instead.
- As with LCAPs, the LCP template required school districts to solicit family and community input and describe the process. However, neither template nor the laws behind them explicitly requires districts to address how they will ensure relationship-centered and one-to-one connections between school staff and families, which research finds to be a valuable resource for school improvement.
- In 2018, the Statewide System of Support launched the **Community Engagement Initiative (CEI)**. The CEI brings together cohorts of selected school districts to share lessons about effective community engagement practices. Since the pandemic's start, participants have developed and made accessible **several resources** to develop each other's and their statewide colleagues' capacities.

## Key Question Addressed by this Brief

*How did California school districts plan to engage families during the pandemic and school closures? How might California leaders strengthen the LCAP, other planning tools, and systems of support in order to strengthen family engagement?*

## Family Engagement: Research-Aligned Practice and Definitions

**R**esearch shows that fostering teacher-to-family relationships is critical to improving student opportunities and achievement.<sup>1</sup> When shelter-in-place orders forced school facility closures, relationship-centered family engagement became “**make or break**” to ensuring continuity of learning — especially for the most vulnerable students and their families. Given the importance of this one-to-one contact, we examined relationship-building as separate but related to broader family and community engagement practices and systems, like collecting information about family needs and preferences via surveys, providing family support services, and communicating with families in multiple languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student learning. Austin, TX: Southwest Education Development Laboratory.; Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education*, 42(1), 82–110.

To define relationship-centered family engagement we relied on definitions and recommendations from *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*, which asserts:

- Effective family engagement depends on close working relationships between teachers and each child’s family.
- Effective working relationships require capacity-building for both families and teachers.
- Education professionals, not families, are responsible for providing the conditions and support for relationship building.

We used these definitions to identify relationship-centered family engagement in the LCPs.

## Our Analysis of Learning Continuity Plans: Key Findings

To better understand how California school districts were planning during the 2020-21 school year, we examined Learning Continuity Plans from a non-random sample of 20 school districts, deliberately choosing districts that skewed larger and higher poverty than the state as a whole. These plans were meant to describe how districts were ensuring continuity of learning during COVID-19, including their plans for in-person instruction, distance learning, and the additional support they would provide to students who are English learners, are from low-income families, have exceptional needs, experience homelessness, or are in foster care.

We holistically reviewed these plans and analyzed them using a standardized protocol. In addition, we interviewed leaders in three districts about their LCPs and their pandemic response plans more generally using a semi-structured interview



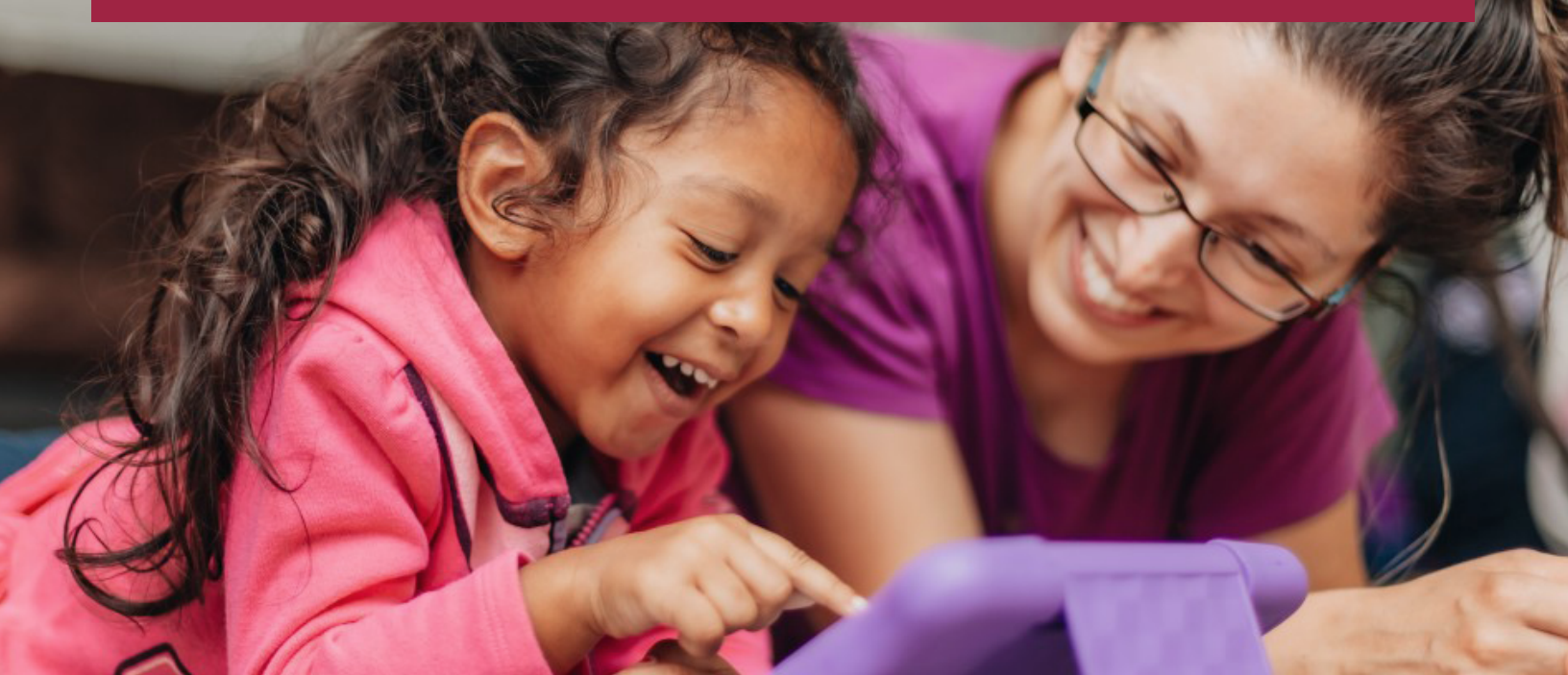
protocol. Finally, we spoke with other advocates and researchers who are closely studying LCPs to triangulate our findings and conclusions.

Our team has previously examined LCAPs as well. In reflecting upon the LCPs, we sought, in part, to compare and contrast the two planning tools.

Our findings are presented in two briefs. This one describes what we learned, observed, and concluded about family engagement. The other describes what we learned about the planning process itself.

Here, we make a few observations about family engagement practices employed by school districts, including what looked promising, where efforts seemed to fall short, and the connections between LCP descriptions and implemented practices.

**Although most districts planned for reactive one-on-one contact necessary to improve student attendance, LCPs rarely included the type of proactive one-to-one outreach between teachers and families essential to building**



**meaningful relationships.** Most districts planned one-on-one teacher and/or staff outreach to students who miss class or do not submit work – i.e., ‘reactive’ outreach. Of the 20 LCPs we reviewed, 75% of districts said teachers specifically would do this outreach and 95% of districts said it would be done by staff in general. Some school districts like West Contra Costa Unified even required teachers to set aside one hour per day for “family outreach.” Readers should note that school districts described reactive one-on-one contact as part of their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support after prompting in the LCP template.

However, building relationships early is a proven strategy to help curb student disengagement in the first place and can be critical to supporting meaningful student participation in distance learning. For these reasons, we specifically looked for proactive one-to-one teacher outreach to individual families. We found only one district out of the 20 that specifically included this practice in its LCP: Berkeley Unified School District planned for K-5 teachers to reach out to each family in the first two weeks of the school year.

When we interviewed district leaders, however, we learned that some were implementing proactive one-to-one contact between teachers and families,

even though these practices may not have showed up in their LCPs. For example, in years prior to the pandemic, Chula Vista Elementary School District teachers hosted one-on-one introductory meetings with families early in the school year, before performance-focused parent-teacher conferences. Because of their relationship-centered approach, Chula Vista administrators and educators knew they could best reach families through cell phone numbers when schools closed. Chula Vista leaders also rallied their social workers to support teachers in their family outreach – triaging and redoubling efforts to reach students who were especially vulnerable or disengaged, while also connecting families to emergency supports via a longstanding partnership with a network of family resource centers.

**Few districts described relationship-centered family engagement training for education professionals in their LCPs.** Fifty percent of LCPs we reviewed planned some kind of professional development for staff and teachers to support family engagement during distance learning. Most of these districts published handbooks, virtual seminar recordings, and/or made available other resources. Only two out of 20 districts, both with long-standing Parent-Teacher Home Visit programs, specifically planned to train teachers how to support one-on-one



relationship building. These districts intended to revamp their practices for virtual **Bridge Visits** to meet distance learning needs. Most districts fell far short of the kinds of training and capacity-building that would support teachers and staff to forge the most effective working relationships with families during and beyond the pandemic.

Importantly, some districts like West Contra Costa Unified School District adopted family engagement professional development following stakeholder feedback during the planning process. These changes are important, as research on the disruption to learning during the early days of the pandemic highlighted the importance of listening to families to meet local needs.

**LCPs varied in their support for developing families' digital literacy and capacity to support learning at home.** Distance learning added many new teaching responsibilities for families that education professionals needed to support. Many districts met some of these challenges. Four in five LCPs promised technical training like how to access Google Classroom, and just over half of the districts planned to offer families training to support learning at home. Even more, 85% of districts planned to offer at least some of these capacity-building

opportunities in multiple languages. Bright spots like Hemet Unified and Ontario-Montclair School Districts moved their Parent Resource Centers to virtual hubs for families to access whenever needed. A district leader at Stockton Unified School District similarly explained that synchronous workshops were recorded and later uploaded to their resource libraries.

However, we found limited evidence that districts are adequately advertising and connecting these services and resources to families and tracking their use. Even though districts ensured computer and Wi-Fi connectivity access for students, families still report trouble accessing the internet, navigating resources, and getting needed help from districts. As other advocates found, even some of the most involved families faced difficulties knowing about and accessing these available resources.<sup>2</sup> Notably, one-to-one outreach to families would go a long way to ensuring specific needs around digital literacy were identified and addressed in a timely manner.

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<sup>2</sup> Parent Institute for Quality Education. (2021). Community Needs Assessment 2020. [https://www.piqe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PIQE2020\\_CommunityNeedsAssessment\\_Fall.pdf](https://www.piqe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PIQE2020_CommunityNeedsAssessment_Fall.pdf).

## Recommendations

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No planning tool will in and of itself ensure meaningful family engagement. After all, people form relationships by engaging with others, not templates and documents. In fact, it was often our interviews – not our review of LCPs – that revealed the depth of the relationship building work happening in school districts. However, planning requirements can be written in ways that encourage the types of behaviors we would like to see.

As schools and districts work to engage families during and after this pandemic, we offer the following recommendations for how districts, statewide partners, and state agency leaders can support authentic and equitable engagement strategies:

### Continue

- Increasing district awareness of and capacity to implement the 12 practices found in the **LCFF Priority 3 (Family Engagement) Self Reflection Tool** which are grounded in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework's basic principles and practices.
- Supporting districts in creating and sharing family-friendly, accessible, and translated information for families and communities.
- Providing options for families to engage with their school sites remotely in addition to in-person where remote methods have expanded accessibility for families who could not travel to meetings at the school site.

### Stop

- Requiring districts to only describe how they collected and considered stakeholder feedback. To encourage meaningful family engagement, require districts to also describe how they are practicing relationship-centered family engagement and capacity building for school staff.
- Including prompts or policy language suggesting family engagement is limited

to reactive contacts to remedy drops in student attendance and participation. Family Engagement must be proactive and understood as a strategy necessary to improving the full range of outcomes for students – social, emotional, developmental and academic.

### Start

- Aligning accountability and planning tools with support for school improvement – including, systematizing guidance for relationship-centered family engagement across all vehicles in the Statewide System of Supports.
- Providing additional resources and targeted support to districts on how to build effective relationship-centered family engagement systems, including educator training and support. For example, CCEE should disseminate resources developed from the CEI more widely and the Statewide System of Support should tap into the wider range of organizations building districts' family engagement capacities.

## Recommendations continued

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- Measuring family engagement in terms of relationships formed between teachers and students' parents or family members.
- State agencies and organizations should develop, translate into multiple languages, and distribute basic information, updates, and tips on public health information related to COVID-19, student social-emotional health and wellness, potential effects on student performance, science on safety of returning to in-person learning, and other important updates.
- Building staff capacity and structures to strengthen relationships between teachers and all families (i.e., expand translation and interpretation; cultural bridging training; hiring bilingual staff; and dedicated staff time for family outreach or office hours).
- Tracking family use of capacity-building resources like training and resource hubs to identify needs and fill gaps.