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Families Are Key to Building Back Better: Unpacking Elements of Effective Engagement in Remote Learning

*"Family" is used throughout this brief to describe the person or people who are the primary points of contact, or primarily responsible for a child's learning in the home (i.e., parent, grandparent, guardian, or caregiver).

Tasked with planning and implementing remote learning for over 55 million children in the U.S. in the wake of COVID-19 school closures, districts and teachers relied heavily on families* to support youth learning. Many families took on intense new levels of responsibility in education, while other pressures on families increased simultaneously. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that 16% of families experienced new food insecurity and 17% of families with school-age children became unemployed during the pandemic.¹ The Family-School Collaboration Design Research Project noted, "this pandemic—along with the many overlapping pandemics our nation now faces, including racial, economic, political, and environmental injustices—has also heightened existing barriers between families and schools."²

In 2017, through a collaborative process with families, policymakers, community members, and teachers, a coalition in Connecticut defined family engagement as "a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career."³ Families taking on new roles in learning during the pandemic stretched the idea of school-family partnerships to new levels. Overnight schools and teachers made family engagement a top priority and sought unique, flexible, sustainable, and effective strategies to reach all families and build school-family partnerships. The new focus on remote opportunities also pushed schools beyond traditional, in-person, and event-based engagement, opening up variation in how school-family partnerships can be successful.⁴

While prioritizing family engagement at this level may be new, there is long-established research on the benefits of family support in student learning and improving schools.⁵ The National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools reviewed several studies and found positive associations between family involvement and students' growth, including increased academic achievement. Westat and Policy Studies Associates found that underperforming elementary and middle schoolers' scores grew 40 percent higher when teachers frequently met with or called families and sent materials home to families with information about how to support learning.

1 Harwin, A. & Furuya, Y. (2021, January 19). Where families are feeling pandemic impacts the worst. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/where-families-are-feeling-pandemic-impacts-the-worst/2021/01>

2 Alvarez Gutierrez, L., Hernandez, L., Kim, T., Kuttner, P.J., Lopez, G.R., Mayer-Glenn, J., Niang, A. & Yanagui, A. (2020, October 6). Family-school relationships are the missing link in COVID-19 era education. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-family-school-relationships-are-the-missing-link-in-covid-19-era-education/2020/10>

3 Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Full, equal and equitable partnerships with families. Link: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Full-Equal-and-Equitable-Partnerships-with-Families/The-Definition-A-Clear-Consensus>

Definition referenced in a live webinar: Mapp, K., Lancaster, D., Stock, E. (2021, March 16). Now more than ever: family engagement for student success with Dr. Karen Mapp [Webinar]. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/family-engagement-for-student-success-with-dr-karen-mapp>

4 Alvarez Gutierrez, L., Hernandez, L., Kim, T., Kuttner, P.J., Lopez, G.R., Mayer-Glenn, J., Niang, A. & Yanagui, A. (2020, October 6). Family-school relationships are the missing link in COVID-19 era education. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-family-school-relationships-are-the-missing-link-in-covid-19-era-education/2020/10>

5 Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence. The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Austin [Texas]: National Center for Family & Community: Connections with Schools. Link: <https://sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>

In the out-of-school time (OST) space, a RAND study found that family involvement is an important quality indicator of effective summer learning.⁶ Additionally, a recent RAND study of BellXcel found summer programs have great potential to provide teachers with valuable professional learning and increased skills,⁷ including strategies for building family connections. With the national shift to prioritize family engagement, the clear benefits for families, staff, and students, and the opportunity of summer learning as a way to bridge gaps, family engagement in summer programs is more critical than ever.

BellXcel Remote Model and Family Engagement Elements

To serve youth (called “scholars”) in 2020, BellXcel, a national non-profit that empowers partners to deliver evidence-based OST learning programs, quickly developed an innovative remote summer learning model called *BellXcel Remote*. Aware of the increased role of families in education, and a desire to reach families and scholars regardless of scheduling or technology constraints, BellXcel designed key elements for the *Remote* model. These elements included an online family resource portal, a comprehensive family guide, and professional development to staff to encourage more robust and consistent communication with families. The Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) released a research brief called [*Building Bridges During Challenging Times: How BellXcel Remote Summer Programs Kept Youth, Families and Staff Engaged in Learning During COVID-19*](#), which found that BellXcel’s remote partners’ programs bridged a gap between a disrupted 2019-20 school year and the 2020-21 school year, noting the efficacy of increased focus on flexible family engagement strategies.

Rooted in best practices in summer learning and focused on removing barriers to access, BellXcel, in partnership with Scholastic Education, integrated the following elements into their model:

- Modular and flexible sample schedules that could be condensed or expanded as needed
- A blend of instructional time with a teacher and independent work by students and families spanning Math, ELA, Reading Corner, social and emotional learning (SEL), physical wellness, and STEAM enrichment

- Extended learning kits enabling students to work independently at home while accessing teacher support
- Family engagement opportunities supported by a family guide, family resource portal, and teacher outreach
- Comprehensive teacher and administrator guides and professional development with specific units on family engagement strategies

To measure the impact of summer and understand the experience of stakeholders, BellXcel designs a comprehensive suite of evaluation tools. Programs are empowered to administer end-of-program surveys to staff, families, and scholars in the 4th grade and higher. Surveys include both scaled and open-ended questions and gather feedback about key elements of implementation, program satisfaction, program engagement and scholar growth in social-emotional skills. Programs are also provided with a quality self-reflection tool for leaders to complete. [BellXcel’s quality reflection tool](#) enables program leaders to gather feedback about their program on several indicators across six research-based domains. Results from these tools support the understanding of impact and enhance data-driven continuous improvement and growth.

To further understand family engagement in BellXcel’s partner programs, SCRI reviewed qualitative and quantitative data on participants’ experiences using end-of-program staff and family surveys, and the quality self-reflection tool. **SCRI discovered that remote summer programs using the BellXcel model established supportive and consistent relationships between staff and families which empowered families to support their children’s learning. Staff integrated high-quality family engagement strategies throughout the program which included frequent communication and meaningful outreach to support participants.**

Programs Established Strong, Consistent Family-Staff Relationships and Empowered Families as Partners in Learning

Families were consistently engaged in their child’s summer learning by supporting them in various activities and by having regular contact with staff. Majorities of surveyed families

⁶ McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., & Schwartz, H. L. (2011). Making summer count: How summer programs can boost children’s learning. Link: <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/making-summer-count-how-summer-programs-can-boost-childrens-learning.aspx>

⁷ Steiner, E.D., Stelitano, L., Bogart, A. & Meyers, S. (2021) The Promise of Summer as a Time for Teacher Professional Learning: Findings from a National Survey and Implications from the BellXcel Program. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Link: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA196-1.html.

worked with their child at least a few times a week on activities related to math and reading (84%), social-emotional learning (77%), and personal or physical health (74%). The BellXcel model provided families with flexible ways to engage in the program with new optional tools for families including a family guide and online portal. Over half of families used the paper family guide (59%) and online family portal (55%) during the program, and almost all (95%) of the families who used them found them easy to navigate. In future program cycles it will be important to understand the reasons that families do or do not access these tools and also review year-over-year trends about how much usage is typical for families.

A staff member said: "I love the idea that so many students, families, and teachers have built relationships within these groups that it feels much like a community, not like remote learning."

Eight in ten (83%) staff contacted at least half of families in an average program week and three-quarters (75%) of families said they talked with staff about their child's progress at least a few times during the program. While research does not indicate a firm benchmark on what is considered frequent, a majority of families hearing individually about their child's progress more than once in a short summer program and many families noting weekly emails are likely indicators of frequent communication.

A staff member noted the connection between family engagement and scholar success: *"Approximately two-thirds of our parents are helping scholars complete virtual lessons. This is remarkable for the kids in our program this summer. Behavior is excellent, and students are very excited to be attending."*

Families noted the materials were helpful: *"The written materials we received helped me to talk to my son about all of the changes we are going through as a result of the pandemic. He shared his concerns with me, and we began to use stress-reducing techniques and getting outside more often."*

While frequency of contact is important, the quality of outreach to build relationships is even more critical. Almost all (96%) families felt the program environment was a welcoming place for them to speak openly and three-quarters of staff (76%) felt the programs promoted caring, consistent relationships between families and staff. Families (97%) felt informed about

expectations for their child's attendance and participation in the program, were invited to attend program events (84%), knew who to contact with questions or concerns (97%), and felt the program responded to those questions and concerns (97%). These results are evidence of robust family engagement systems and relationships that helped facilitate learning and effective programs.

Staff Were Empowered to Facilitate High-Quality Family Engagement

Staff are essential to implementing flexible, meaningful, and consistent family engagement initiatives. Staff often serve as a connection between home and school: sharing information and learning from families about their children and how to meet the families' needs. Remote summer program staff were empowered with professional development (PD) and strong leadership to support family engagement systems. Upon finishing their PD, nine in ten (90%) staff felt prepared to implement family check-ins remotely. Almost all (99%) program leaders frequently supported the program's family engagement system, with nearly three-quarters doing so at least once a week (32%) or daily (41%). These findings indicate staff had the capacity, skillset, mindset, and buy-in needed for supporting family engagement in summer programs.

BellXcel's remote quality self-reflection tool allows programs to reflect on their performance in specific indicators of family engagement. Analysis of programs' quality reflection results and stakeholder surveys found that programs successfully met many quality indicators.

Staff connected with families before the start of the program and were aware of home-learning schedules and needs.

Programs showed strong uptake to reach out to families before the program starts. Nine in ten partners (94%) contacted some or all families in their program before launch, and eight in ten staff (82%) were able to communicate with most of the families before launch. Most programs (79%) said that staff was very aware of scholars' home-learning needs. This outreach helped establish a common understanding of the program expectations, goals, and flexibility for working with family schedules. Given summer's short program cycle, having families and youth prepared to engage quickly is crucial for high-quality programming. This pre-program communication can be an essential step in aligning with each other to form family-staff partnerships.

Programs' family engagement systems enabled strong and consistent two-way communication between staff and families.

All partners (**100%**) found that their program had somewhat or very effective systems to enable frequent communication with families. Surveys respondents confirmed that staff and family communication was consistent, with most families (**73%**) and staff (**67%**) saying they used email communication at least once a week to give or receive information between home and the program.

A staff member said: "I thoroughly enjoyed the two Zoom meetings I had with parents to answer questions, meet the scholars, and ensure they knew all the protocols for safe attendance in the program due to the Covid-19 transmission concerns. I also gave parents both my cell and email contact and sent regular text messages to all families to encourage communication."

A family shared: "Every single day things went smoothly. Also, I got an email from her teacher every day to let parents know how the day went. [She] is an awesome teacher, very patient and dedicated to her job."

Almost all partners (**97%**) said families were very aware of how to contact staff and when to anticipate a response. Survey responses indicated the same, with **97%** of families feeling they knew who to contact with questions or concerns and that the program responded to those questions and concerns. Staff indicated that addressing the families' questions and concerns was one of the most frequent topics when they spoke to families.

These results indicate a frequent and consistent communication pattern for most programs, staff, and families. Regular outreach increases the capacity for knowledge sharing between staff and families. It shows reciprocal and relational trust-building - when families feel safe to discuss questions and concerns, and the program addresses them to improve participants' experiences.

A family said: "All teachers were great and easy to contact." Another family said: "The [leadership] was also extremely great at communicating the necessary information for program success."

Teachers prioritized important topics with families and provided regular updates about scholars' academic progress, behavior, and participation.

Most partners (**95%**) said that teachers often provided regular updates to some or all families about their child's progress and participation in the program. Three-quarters (**75%**) of families said they talked with staff about their child's progress at least a few times during the program. When staff contacted families, they reported scholars' attendance, academic progress, engagement, and motivation were some of the most frequently discussed topics. Almost all partners (**98%**) said staff-family conversations were usually aligned with the program's focus. For families to be true partners in scholar learning, discussions should be meaningful so that valuable information can be shared to best support the scholars. The results above indicate that programs did this well for many families, but more nuanced data may need to be collected from families to understand ways to reach more of them.

A staff member noted a successful outreach to improve attendance: "A scholar missed the first few days. I contacted her parent via text and sent the Zoom link via email, and the scholar was in attendance every day."

A family noted: "He is a lot calmer now. I know [his teachers] gave me daily reports [on] what I can do to help him calm down and be more attentive. These individuals will hold a special place in my son's heart, and he cried when I told him this was his last week."

Remote Summer Learning Allowed for Unique and Flexible Engagement Activities

Programs and staff reached families with flexible and varied methods:

- One program leader said: "Given that our students are all at the middle school level, direct family communication is less common, but families are given information through a variety of means, including as-needed phone calls and a weekly family newsletter."

- Another program leader showed many different ways they reached families: *“The teachers and parents have been doing excellent with keeping in touch via Google Meets, Zooms, calls and texts. I also reach out to teachers and parents through email and texts on a regular basis.”*
- A staff member noted regular meetings with families: *“Each morning some of the parents took a moment to talk with me on Zoom and communicate with me either a concern or praise about the program.”*
- Another staff member said: *“Having virtual ‘Parent Socials’ once a week to inform parents of important dates and happenings has been extremely helpful.”*

Families engaged with the program in unique ways in the summer program:

- A staff member said the best part was: *“a student sharing projects they did with mom.”*
- One family noted: *“Me and my son were more connected by doing this program together on one table. There was a feeling of achievement every day of this program.”*
- A staff member shared: *“During a scholar’s birthday, we celebrated and danced with his mother and family; while quarantined!”*
- Another staff member said: *“Teaching a creative dance enrichment class brought great opportunities to have the whole family join in through remote learning.”*

A family member learned about their child by working with them on summer activities: *“It helped us determine my child’s learning style and how to keep them engaged. It showed us some weak points [...], and we will be working on [those] areas that need to be refreshed with them.”*

Conclusions & Recommendations

Many families took on intense new levels of responsibility in education when schools shifted quickly to at-home learning for millions of students. Schools immediately prioritized family engagement strategies and initiatives, and staff were asked to connect with and support families in new and unique ways. When done well, family engagement creates “a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children’s learning and development.”⁸ There is long-standing research on the benefits of family engagement for youth learning and school improvement and growing evidence that out-of-school time programs are important opportunities for staff to build their own capacity. This means that emphasizing family engagement in the summer is more crucial than ever before. SCRI collected and analyzed data from end-of-program staff and family surveys, and program quality self-reflection tool. This analysis revealed that BellXcel’s partners facilitated high-quality, frequent family engagement in their remote summer learning programs, creating solid relationships, empowering families to support their children in summer learning, and opening up opportunities for unique and flexible types of family engagement.

Recommendations

Focus on consistency and supportive relationship building with families.

Dr. Karen Mapp developed The Dual Capacity Building Framework, which outlines eight essential conditions for family engagement initiatives.⁹ One of the core conditions is relationship-building between the home and school. The framework says, “no meaningful family engagement can be established until relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school.”

Build staff capacity and skills for family engagement and consider the time needed for staff to implement strategies

For many families, engagement starts when a staff member contacts them, shares program details, or makes a connection between home and school. Programs should include meaningful professional development for staff on how to implement consistent, equitable, and measurable engagement strategies. Additionally, programs should create systems that are easy-to-implement for staff who take on many different roles in the program.

⁸ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Full, equal and equitable partnerships with families. Link: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Full-Equal-and-Equitable-Partnerships-with-Families/The-Definition-A-Clear-Consensus> Definition referenced in a live webinar: Mapp, K., Lancaster, D., Stock, E. (2021, March 16). Now more than ever: family engagement for student success with Dr. Karen Mapp [Webinar]. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/family-engagement-for-student-success-with-dr-karen-mapp>

⁹ Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships. SEDL. Link: <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>

Prioritize flexibility in meeting families' needs for engagement

BellXcel focused on meeting scholars and families where they are in terms of remote learning. Some families may have easy access to computers at home, while others may have only sporadic access or may not feel comfortable utilizing technology to support their child. For in-person learning, some families may have challenging schedules to attend in-person meetings where others may be able to come to the school often. Developing family engagement strategies for remote, and in-person learning should focus on flexibility, adaptability, and accommodating the needs of families.

Remain open-minded and forward-thinking about how family engagement may look

Every program, family, student, educator, and community has different needs for family engagement strategies. It is essential to ground family engagement in best practices while also confronting biases, refining older techniques to meet the moment, and considering the context of your program to effectively and equitably engage families. For example, if you are hosting monthly in-person family events but struggle with attendance you can ask: Have you gathered feedback about why families can't attend? Are the events still meeting the needs of families and your program or could you use a new initiative or strategy? Are families aware of the events and are staff encouraging attendance? Is there another format that may be more inclusive of all families? Questions like these can guide continuous improvement to make informed adjustments and to understand whether the engagement strategies meet the needs of your program and all families.

Consider families as true partners in learning and school improvement.

Many districts and community-based programs are leading efforts to engage families in new ways, with a focus on engaging those who were previously excluded from other initiatives.¹⁰ These new efforts aim to make families full partners, including empowering them as decision-makers and integrating them into the entire process of school improvement and learning.

Utilize survey and quality measurements to gather family feedback and monitor successful family engagement.

Often family engagement initiatives lack the critical element of family voice and input. While summer can be a challenging time and cycle to collect data, it is a vital element of continuous improvement. Analyzing this feedback can help staff understand what programs are doing successfully and where families see misalignment between their needs and the program's family engagement systems and increase your program's ability to understand nuances.

Conclusion

This moment of focus on family engagement could be a pivotal point in education. Research is clear that students, families, teachers, and schools benefit from integrated and robust family engagement systems. Thus, with a renewed push to engage families, schools can use this moment to build the capacity of educators to engage families, enhance youth learning and make meaningful improvements to their school. On top of other stressors in the pandemic, remote learning provided many challenges for families during 2020 and early 2021. However, using this as a learning experience has shown that families are ready to be actively engaged. Systems should focus on empowering families as partners in learning throughout the school year.

10 Prothero, A. (2021, February 17). Driving academic improvement by empowering parents. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leaders/2021/driving-academic-improvement-by-empowering-parents>