Family Partnership – Reducing the Distance During Covid-19

*The **coronavirus** crisis has pushed schooling on to remote platforms. It's an opportunity to rethink how **education** should work.*
(Education Nonprofit Leader)

Summary
The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way school staff and families think about student learning and the roles of teachers and families in education. With much learning happening outside of the school building, there is still much that can be done to reduce the distance between school and families. In these times, it can be helpful to remember, less can be more. Play, down time, and family time can be essential learning time.

Key Concepts:
Schools staff are working hard to support families and students, where they are at, in a distance-learning environment. This includes working with students on a variety of platforms, through activities, learning guides, asynchronous learning (i.e., learning at their own pace and time), and online connections. Many schools are also

providing food services, mental health services, and links to services for housing and financial needs.

Some administrators and school staff say it is more difficult to partner with families from a distance, while others report that partnership feels more natural as families are serving as the primary support for learning in the home. Families are able to see first hand their student working on learning. Relationships built during this period can benefit families and school staff well beyond Covid-19.

*The core family partnership **building blocks** can inform and strengthen our practices during Covid-19:*

1) **Establishing a mindset**: Partnership is possible online, over the phone, socially distanced, and in an asynchronous way. Families know their own children's strengths and can be a tremendous resource to their children. We must approach each family with the belief that they want the best for their child and that there are extended family members and parents with assets to contribute to your student's learning and your virtual classroom. (reference Karen Mapp and Michelle Brooks)

2) **Relationship building:** Relationships are at the core of our success. Key relationships include relationships between school staff and family, school staff and student, student and family.

Covid-19 offers new opportunities for school staff to connect with families that may feel safer, more personalized and more authentic than our customary practices. For some families, the resources schools are providing during this time include food, internet service, and devices help level the playing field.

Many schools are connecting one-on-one with families to better understand what supports families need, who else is a resource for their students, and to listen to family members' hopes and fears for their children. Some school staff during Covid-19 have used the opportunity to better understand family goals. Is their goal to help their child graduate? Is it for their student to be learning in the outdoors and with family? What are family and student priorities? How does this align and influence the family-school staff partnership?

Repetition is important in relationship-building. It may take repeated efforts and multiple means to connect and build trust with some families, particularly those who have not experienced positive relationship-building efforts from school staff before, or who build on their own negative memories or biases. Working consistently to understand and connect with families can help overcome these biases. (reference Zaretta)

3) **Culturally responsive and place-based education**: For many students, being in their own home provides a culturally safe environment where they can apply their learning to "sticky" and familiar concepts. Being outside the traditional classroom environment can

open up opportunities to explore place and culture more deeply. During Covid-19 some school districts are sending home learning kits that allow families to do activities while making dinner, sharing family stories, or exploring outside. Families can also use culturally responsive approaches to dealing with difficult situations such as social isolation.

4) **Building Skills and Confidence**: This distance-learning model is new terrain for most school staff, students and families. All are building skills and confidence in their new roles and relationships. Like any new skill, it takes practice and the more you do it the better you get. Parents and caregivers do not need special knowledge and do not need to take the place of teachers. Schools can help families understand that relationships are at the core of their student's success and that the family's main job is to be a warm and loving family member. With this relationship as the foundation, they can step into the "warm demander" role, setting expectations in a loving but firm way for their student.

Families already have experience helping their child work through challenges, and know their child's strengths and interests. Families can use this knowledge to provide great at-home support. School staff may also be more important than ever to families. They are a lifeline, a link to other students and human contact, a learning advisor, a link to resources, a coach for students, and meaningful partner to families. Some of these roles are familiar and some are new. The ways of providing support may look and feel very different. Comfort and expertise takes practice.

The Alaska Family Partnership Framework and formative work done by Dr. Karen Mapp and Joyce Epstein make clear that family partnership is born from the idea that **families feel that they belong to the school, and the school belongs to them**. This motivates families to take an active role in their child's learning and in turn has a positive impact on student outcomes. In, Covid-19, families can help to co-create, design, and provide input to school staff about the new shape of their student's learning environment.

5**) Links to Learning**: Effective family partnerships are linked to student learning. Distance learning offers real opportunity for families and school staff to be on the same page about what their students' learning objectives are. Remote schooling offers opportunities to apply and enhance learning through home-based and place-based activities. Even if a family member feels they cannot help with specific math, science, or other content, families report that it is helpful to understand the broader learning goals. When they understand what students are trying to learn, they can provide better support.

(in pull out box)
As a teacher or family member, it can be difficult to strike the right balance between encouragement and help. It can be hard to watch students struggle through work or content. On one end of the spectrum, some staff or family members may set such high expectations that it can feel like the relationship itself is no longer a priority. Zaretta Hammond discusses how school staff and family members seek to become warm

demanders. The warm demander values the relationship and supports students in challenging themselves.
https://resources.corwin.com/sites/default/files/13._figure_6.2_warm_demander_chart.pdf

6) **Co-regulation**: Families are experiencing Covid-related stress due to food insecurity, financial insecurity, new routines and structures, a lack of time and physical space from each other, and competing demands at home. These situations can cause tension or increase stress. At the same time, many families are unable to visit their grandparents or extended family, key sources of advice and support. Co-regulation – learning to support each other's emotional wellbeing through supportive interactions – is more important than ever.

School staff can provide co-regulation by helping students and families express and manage emotions, breaking down social isolation, and supporting families in navigating challenging moments. Co-regulation can mean helping families access key supports during this time, connectivity and access. It is also important to provide families with resources for developing emotional self-regulation and co-regulation skills.

Additional Considerations:
Initiating the connection: "Home visits" may become easier as phone and video-chat become the norm for communications. With school staff and families each in their own homes, there are natural opportunities to share a bit of oneself, and for each to be in a comfortable space. How can home visits help your family partnership efforts? What key skills are needed for successful home visits – skills for building relationships, building connections, and nurturing these relationships into natural and authentic partnerships? What questions and concerns need to be addressed? Are there opportunities for these conversations to be student-led?

Shared Vision: Do each of the partners have a clear idea of the growth and learning goals for their child? Do these include academic, career, social and emotional, and physical goals?

Key roles: The key participants are the same (student, family, instructors, and peers), but with new learning approaches each partner may be unclear about shifting expectations and roles. What will each partner focus on? How do you tap into each person's strengths and knowledge?

Learning objectives: Research shows that families who understand what students are working towards, will be more likely to provide the encouragement and support needed for learning. What information would be helpful for families to know as they support their student? What real-life applications are there of the content that can provide an opportunity for families to ask and explore content with students? What are the best ways to communicate learning objectives?

Key technologies: Some learning may include the internet (Zoom, Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Schoology, Google Classroom, ClassDojo, etc). See list below.

Key resources: Some learning may include worksheets, home exploration kits, and asynchronous content pre-loaded onto devices. Research shows that even with families dedicating equal amounts of family time toward learning, families that have more books, games, tools can help their students learn more effectively.

Quality improvements: This is new for almost everyone. It may be helpful for staff or teachers to keep a reflection log of what worked well and what could be better next time.
>   Family Log: keep a log of how this is working for each student or family.
>   Lesson Log: Track lesson approaches and their effectiveness.
>   Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: Note what worked for the majority of students, what supplements or supports worked for the next layer of students and families, and what fully personalized interventions are needed to reach the remaining students and families.

Key opportunities: Breaking down isolation and enhancing learning is important during these times. Learning happens in a school community. How do you create a space for families and students to learn, play together and get support from one another.

Using the right technologies and delivery: Like any class content or meeting, we choose the right approach for the right activity. Family partnership work is similar. Our choice of how we communicate (email, text, have one on one meetings, or group conversations) or what we say during these times can deeply impact our success. Ask lots of questions to find out the best way to communicate with families and what are the priorities of your families right now.

Tools and Strategies:
Relationship Building Examples
- Home visiting prompts
- Feedback from families on relationship building
- Covid Communication strategies

Visioning Tools and Examples:
- Shared visioning activity
- Student-led parent meetings

Building Confidence:
- Routines and shared expectations (family driven)
- Stories and solutions
  - o Families share that they are having to help their child get online and access some of the tools they need for activities. Do families need tutorials, information, tangible supplies to carry out the assignments. Do

the requests align with a families style of teaching and cultural ways of knowing.

Link to Learning
- Facebook live – weekly mini lesson (Jessica Solano)
- example lessons designed for student and family
- google site
- recording of zoom classroom

Place-based examples
- Alaska outdoor scavenger hunt
- Yakutat identification booklets

Co-regulation:
- There are a lot of resources on line for families to cope with Covid. These tools range from how to talk about Covid to daily relaxation strategies each day to fun activities to access online.
  - Example Mat-Su School District Online Body and Anxiety Reduction Workshops

  - Understanding Social and Emotional Domains
  https://www.rootsofaction.com/explore/
  (take something from chapter)

Signs of Success and Growth

- Families feel that school staff understand competing demands within the household.
- Families know how they can support their child and communicate with school staff.
- Students, key family members and school staff understand their roles in learning and supporting each student.
- Families feel linked to learning, learning objectives, and learning strategies.
- Staff feel confident building lessons that can incorporate family interests and areas of expertise.
- Students and families do not feel "burnt out" on technology.
- Families and school staff have new appreciation for the roles each plays in educating their student.
- Families and school staff believe they have joint responsibility for their student's education.
- Students, families, and staff feel they are growing in their skills and confidence to teach and learn under new protocols and systems.

Reflection Questions:

For each building block, several reflection questions are suggested.

Mindset
- How do you approach partnership with families during Covid-19?
- What potential benefits of Covid-19 can you identify for your students and families?
- How can you maximize partnership opportunities?
- What are your beliefs about families' roles in education during Covid-19?

Relationships
- Where were your relationships prior to Covid-19? Where would you like them to be after Covid-19?
- Do you know what methods of communication are available and preferred for your families and students?
- Who else is a supportive adult for your students (caregivers, grandparents, aunts/uncles)?
- Do some family members have more stable phone numbers or connectivity than others? How does this inform the relationship-building plan?
- If you are having a hard time reaching out to families or getting a response, are there other families, organizations, or staff that might have a better connection?
- Who will be the most effective contacting the family at first? On-going?
- How do you set up conversations that allow you to learn from families and co-create the direction of the conversation? How do you build trust with one another?
- What have you learned about the hopes, dreams, and challenges for your families' children? Who can help address these hopes and challenges?
- What non-academic supports can you provide families (connectivity, devices, stress management and well-being resources)?
- What questions work best when making connections with families?
- What are you learning through Covid-19 about building relationships with families?

Culturally Responsive and Place-Based Approaches
- What Alaska resources can your lessons build on that are available to virtually all students?
- What social networks and extended family members can students include in their lessons?
- What suggested activities can be done on a walk, bicycle ride, or with organizational partners in the community?
- What interests, chores, hobbies or activities does the family pursue together (subsistence, cooking, building, cleaning, reading, crafts, movies, visiting with family members)? How can these be applied to learning?

Links to Learning

- What online and offline examples are your providing for families to support learning?
  How do you create opportunities for families to engage in content? What additional resources would support families to help with learning?
- What opportunities are there for families to make decisions about learning and provide feedback about how learning is working for their student and family?
- What can families do to model learning strategies and ask students to teach them about what they are learning?

Building Skills and Confidence

- What daily routines can support learning? What does this look like for each family?
- What questions can families ask to help students reflect on their learning?
- How can families connect with each other or other peers to stay connected and learn together?
- What questions and conversation prompts have been helpful to build confidence of families?
- What tools help you listen effectively and keep track of ideas shared?

Co-regulation
- What are you doing to take care of yourself during Covid-19?
- What routines can help you to manage stress and emotions during Covid-19?
- Who are your go-to people for support and connection? How are you connecting with them?
- What tools can you offer families?
- What tools can families offer each other and you?
- How can you help establish a common language about emotional self-care and co-regulation?

Overarching considerations for creating a shared vision with families:
- How do families share their priorities for their child and family during this time?
- Are there any areas that they are excited for and concerned about during this time?
- What priorities and structures are the same, and what is changing for families?