

We the Media

Family Engagement during the Pandemic

The pandemic has challenged our definitions of school: teachers teaching in new ways, students learning differently, and parents by necessity more engaged in their children's day-to-day education. At NASBE's annual conference last October, National Teacher of the Year Tabatha Rosproy compared this moment to a camper trying to stuff a tent back into its bag: It's nearly impossible to fit it in the same way it came out. I feel this way about parent engagement. For better or worse, parents have a more intimate view of public education than they once did, and it is unlikely they will stop caring once the pandemic subsides. In other words, parents will not be stuffed back in the bag.

How can state leaders harness this more informed parent base to identify better ways of educating children? It starts with facilitating meaningful connections between parents, educators, and school communities and providing them tools and strategies to support student learning.

Expectations. Even though parents are more engaged, they do not necessarily understand fully what their children ought to know and be able to do or how to help them meet those grade-level standards. Last fall, Seek Common Ground and Student Achievement Partners launched a set of guides to help parents and caregivers make sense of what should be happening. The guides outline the knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate in literacy and math at each level, plus strategies parents can use to support that learning and talk with teachers.

Progress. The pandemic hindered the normal progression of learning, but parents can help children catch up if they have an accurate picture of what their children know and where they need help.

Teachers use formative testing to make such determinations, but this information may not reach parents. According to a Learning Heroes survey, parents still have an inflated view of their children's ability, with 92 percent believing their children are at or above grade level in reading and math. Only 37 percent are.

This hit home at the first parent-teacher Zoom conference with my daughter's teachers. Her teacher reported she was "below grade level" on reading. I knew she was stumbling a little, but it was still a surprise. My husband asked, "How is she doing compared to her peers?" He was trying to understand whether our daughter's delay was unusual given the circumstances: Was she on track before? What could we do?

Emotional Needs. Parents are the first to admit they are not teachers, but even being a facilitator of learning can be overwhelming. Parents need to address their children's social-emotional learning too. Learning Heroes' Windy Lopez-Aflitto recently noted that even being disconnected from a favorite lunch lady or other support staff can affect learning. Rekindling school relationships can motivate students and build their confidence. A virtual lunch with my daughter's teacher made all difference for her last spring, and all I had to do was ask.

State boards should seize every opportunity to help schools strengthen bonds with families. By nurturing relationships and setting clear expectations, schools will give new life to state policies that strive to give all children an excellent education. ■



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